

A Study Developing Character Strengths in Managing Anxiety Levels of Individuals in Emerging Adulthood

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Abstract

Character strengths not only increase the well-being of individuals, but also help them to overcome their negative life experiences in a better way. This study aims to increase five-character strengths and at the same time manage anxiety levels of individuals by 13 sessions of a strength-based group psychological counseling program formed by the researchers. 20 individuals aged between 18 and 21 (60% female, 40% male) from various departments participated in the experimental and control group. Data showed a statistically significant decrease in anxiety levels and an increase in the character strengths of zest for life and hope in the experimental group. Using character strengths as a tool may open a novel way for literature and members of different professions by interdisciplinarity to deal with anxiety. Developmental psychologists, psychological counselors, family counselors, members of the profession who work in parenting education, child development specialists, preschool teachers, and school principals may play vital roles in preventing high anxiety levels at an early life phase. Moreover, psychiatrists, clinical psychologists and psychological counselor specialists may help individuals to maintain their well-being and manage their anxiety in an encouraging atmosphere. In this way, psychologically healthier individuals may constitute healthier societies in the long term.

Keywords: Character Strengths, Anxiety, Group, Therapy.

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Öz

Güçlü yönler, bireylerin sadece iyilik hallerini artırmakla kalmaz, aynı zamanda olumsuz yaşam deneyimleri ile daha iyi baş etmelerine de yardımcı olur. Bu çalışmada, araştırmacılar tarafından oluşturulan 13 oturumlu güçlendirme odaklı grupta psikolojik danışma programı ile beliren yetişkinlik dönemindeki bireylerin beş karakter gücünün geliştirilmesi ve böylece kaygı düzeylerinin azaltılması amaçlanmaktadır. Bu çalışma, çeşitli bölümlerde okuyan 18-21 yaş arasındaki 20 katılımcı (%60 kadın, %40 erkek) ile gerçekleştirilmiştir. Bulgular, bireylerin kaygı düzeylerinde istatistiksel olarak anlamlı bir düşüş ve yaşam sevinci ve umut karakter güçlerinde anlamlı düzeyde bir artış olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Karakter güçlerini kaygıyı çalışmada bir araç olarak kullanmak, hem önleyici hem de iyileştirici anlamda çeşitli disiplinler arasında çalışmalara olanak sunmaktadır. Gelişim psikologları, psikolojik danışmanlar, aile danışmanları, aile eğitiminde görev yapan meslek mensupları, çocuk gelişim uzmanları, okul öncesi öğretmenleri, eğitim bilimciler ve okul müdürleri, karakter güçleri konusunda çalışmalar gerçekleştirerek yaşamın erken döneminde kaygı için önleyici hizmet sağlayabilmektedir. Buna ek olarak, psikiyatristler, klinik psikologlar ve uzman psikolojik danışmanlar, karakter güçlerini kendi metodlarında tedavi aracı olarak kullanarak bireylerin yüksek kaygı düzeylerini daha cesaretlendirici bir ortamda çözmelerine yardımcı olabilmektedir. Disiplinler arası çalışmaların bu konuda çeşitlendirilmesi, psikolojik olarak sağlıklı bireylerin bir araya gelerek uzun vadede daha sağlıklı toplumların oluşmasına katkı sağlayabilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Karakter Güçleri, Kaygı, Grup, Terapi.

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Introduction

Individuals have varieties of personal characteristics that lead them to react differently to being exposed to the same experiences. Each person evaluates the situations from his/her point of view according to his/her genetic component, childhood experiences, intellectual and socio-economical level, educational background, temperament and so forth. Recently, one of the most widely studied models explaining individual characteristics upon psychological resources is character strengths and virtues. In this approach, there are 24 valued strengths, organized under six board virtues (Park & Peterson, 2009). The 24-character strengths in the classification include social intelligence, fairness, leadership, citizenship, forgiveness, humility, prudence, self-regulation, appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope, humor, spirituality, wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, transcendence, creativity, curiosity, love of learning, open-mindedness, perspective, honesty, bravery, industry, zest, kindness, and love (Kabakçı et al., 2019). There is an important criterion about character strengths and virtues; these should be observable, consistent, measurable, individually different, contributory to individual well-being, valued morally, should be evaluated as important by society, and noticeable from an early age (Park, et al., 2004).

In a more detailed explanation, Niemiec (2013) stated character strengths as protective contributors to an individual's subjective and physical health in different contexts. Mc-Cullough and Synder (2000) explain a character strength or virtue as "any psychological process that consistently enables a person to think and act so as to yield benefits to himself or herself and society". There are some qualities that help scholars and audiences understand better which character strengths and virtues are. Initially, they have trait-like qualities, they are viewed as a person's goal about whom he/she is going to be. Also, they give chance to flexibility; these concepts may develop over time, in this sense it promises hope. In addition to these, they have moral qualities which are positive and prosocial (Worthington & Berry, 2005). Finally, they conclude that everyone has

different levels of character strengths and virtues from others. This emphasizes individual differences that support the main principle of psychology.

As stated above, character strengths and virtues help to give a detailed explanation of individuals' emotional and behavioral reactions. These reactions can rely on both positive and negative life experiences. Among the most prevalent negative experiences that individuals have worldwide is anxiety. Due to high levels of anxiety, people have physical illnesses, mentally distorted cognitions, and negative or lack of social life experiences. It relies on the imbalance between contextual demands and psychological resources (Henry & Stephens, 1977). There are varieties of empirical studies on psychological and biological stress-defense mechanisms (Sladek et al., 2016).

Many of these studies pointed out that individual characteristics have a crucial role in psychological resources during anxiety-related experiences. The reason for this is that character serves "as a schema" that explains and processes information toward self, others, and the world (Li et al., 2017). In this sense, it can be thought that the perspective of character strengths and virtues is related to giving explanations about the anxiety individuals experience in daily life. One of the related studies is conducted by Duan et al. (2015). They stated that high character strengths are characterized by an ability to perceive less stress. Also, according to Duan (2016) longitudinal study, students with a high level of character strengths experience less academic-related stress throughout the semester and flourish after experiencing mild depression symptoms. Another retrospective study conducted by Schueller et al. (2015), remarked that character strengths can promote post-traumatic growth after traumatic events.

These studies also show that character strengths and virtues can be utilized as an important resource to enhance people's well-being in a therapeutic environment. At this point, there is a virtues-based therapeutic model; strength-based therapy (SBT) (Wong, 2006). Strength-based therapy is an eclectic model that is composed of many different disciplines such as strengths psychology, social work, positive psychology,

counseling psychology, solution-focused therapy, and narrative therapy (Jones-Smith, 2013). Via SBT, not only do individuals reach optimal functioning and human flourishing but also, they overcome their mental health issues. Hence, enhancing the character strengths of individuals to help them to overcome their clinical/non-clinical problems is an optimistic perspective for the current study.

As stated by Jones-Smith (2013), in SBT, the most challenging life experiences include an example that a client uses his/her strength to overcome. The concept of strength is in the client's struggle with the current problem he/she experiences (Smith, 2006). Moreover, SBT does not ignore or minimize diagnosis or diagnostic skills, instead, it emphasizes balance in viewing and treating clients. Hence, it can be found helpful to deal with anxiety via SBT. Basically, SBT concentrates on what is working for the client rather than on what is not working, what clients have rather than what they do not have and emphasizes strengths in a struggle individuals experience (Jones-Smith, 2013).

In SBT, there are 4 phases of psychotherapy which are explicitizing, envisioning, empowering and evolving (Wong, 2006). In a more detailed way, the process of explicitizing identifies the individual's existing character strengths. In the envisioning phase, individuals learn how to use the desired level of specific character strength to reach the therapeutic goal. In the empowering phase, to use the desired level of character strength, individuals are motivated to experience this in different areas of their lives. In the last phase, which is an evolving phase, there is an emphasis in the process of growing in character strengths and work on the further growth (Wong, 2006). According to Jones-Smith (2013), phases of SBT are stated in 8 phases in a similar, however more detailed version. These are creating therapeutic alliance, strengths discovery, identifying goals and internal and external barriers to problems and strengths, eliciting group member's hopes and dreams, framing solutions, and formulating a treatment plan for the character strength, building strengths and competence, building a healthy new identity and healthy new connections, and evaluating and terminating.

As stated above, studies and the concept of strength-based therapy show that focusing on the strengths of the individuals and using strengths as a psychological tool in the therapeutic environment may help individuals to resist their negative life experiences. Also, in this way, they have a chance to discover themselves in a positive (and also realistic) way when they try to overcome their problems. This perspective may help individuals to confront their negative thoughts and emotions more easily to act in healthier behaviors. Considering this, the study aims to show that strength-based therapy can both enhance individuals' character strengths and decrease their anxiety levels via group psychological counseling programs designed and initiated by the researchers. Hence, in this study, there are 2 main hypotheses; individuals who participated in a strength-based group psychological program would decrease their anxiety levels (Hypothesis 1) and also increase their character strengths of open-mindedness, perspective, zest for life, self-control and hope (Hypothesis 2).

Research Design

This study aims to analyze the effect of strength-based group psychological counseling program (independent variable) to decrease anxiety levels (dependent variable) of individuals in emerging adulthood. In the study, a true experimental design with pretest-posttest groups was used. Participants were randomly grouped into either an experimental or a control group.

Sample

In order to assign the sample of experimental and control group, 109 university students participated from various departments such as child development, midwifery, audiology, speech and language therapy, social services, health management, nutrition and dietetics, psychology, psychological counseling and guidance, law, political science and international relations, computer engineering, management information systems and pharmacy filled the scales. In the experimental part of the study, which included

group psychological counseling sessions, 20 participants who met the necessary criteria were randomly assigned to the experimental and control groups evenly. Demographic characteristics of the experimental and control group are given below (Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the experimental and control group

	Experimental group (n =10)		Control group (n =10)		P
	Mean	Ss	Mean	Ss	
Age	20.20	0.63	20.30	0.68	0.702
	n	%	n	%	
Gender					
Female	6	60.0	6	60.0	-
Male	4	40.0	4	40.0	
Department					
Computer Engineering	0	0.0	1	10.0	
Child Development	3	30.0	2	20.0	
Law	2	20.0	2	20.0	
Psychology	2	20.0	1	10.0	
Psychological Counseling and Guidance	2	20.0	1	10.0	-
Political Science and International Relations	0	0.0	1	10.0	
Social Services	1	10.0	1	10.0	
Management Information Systems	0	0.0	1	10.0	
Degree					
2nd year	3	30.0	1	10.0	
3rd year	6	60.0	5	50.0	-
4th year	1	10.0	4	40.0	
Place of Living					
Family	9	90.0	8	80.0	
Student' house	1	10.0	1	10.0	-
Others	0	0.0	1	10.0	
Working situation					
Not working	8	80.0	8	80.0	-
Working	2	20.0	2	20.0	
Income Level					
Low	1	10.0	1	10.0	
Middle	8	80.0	9	90.0	-
High	1	10.0	0	0.0	
Experience of Psychological Services					
Yes	4	40.0	4	40.0	0.675
No	6	60.0	6	60.0	

Procedure

The study is conducted by sending the scale forms to the students studying in various faculties and departments of the determined university via the Google Form link, through a general announcement explaining the content and purpose of the study. Participants were randomly assigned to the experimental and control groups by accepting the principle of voluntary participation in group counseling sessions, being between the ages of 18-21, residing in Istanbul, having an anxiety level above the average, and meeting the

criteria of being below the upper limit of character strengths and strengths.

In addition, a pre-study structuring session was conducted in which the rules of the group psychological counseling session were explained to the participants, information was obtained on whether the clients had any psychiatric diagnosis. In this way, the question marks of both the counselor and the client were eliminated. Sessions were planned as one session per week for 1.5 hours, making a total of 13 sessions. At the end of the sessions, a retest measurement was applied to the participants in the experimental and control groups with the scales filled in pre-group psychological counseling sessions.

Strength-Based Group Psychological Counseling Program

The content of the program has been built on the approach, methods, and techniques of SBT. Sessions are mainly structured with the aim of developing 5-character strengths that are open-mindedness, perspective, zest for life, self-control, and hope of individuals to decrease anxiety levels in the experimental group. Hence, working with a specified group led the current study to adapt phases of SBT in an original target-related content of a 13-session program.

Initially, in order to create a therapeutic alliance in the group, the leader explained the aim of the group sessions and briefly gave information about the concept of character strengths and explained group rules, informed consent forms were filled out, and group members introduced themselves to each other via icebreaker game and each member stated the aim of their participation related to their life experiences. As a result, two important purposes were met at the beginning of the program: understanding how they experience anxiety and becoming aware of their strengths.

In addition, according to participants' goals, their internal and external barriers to reach the optimum level for each character strength were identified. Moreover, group members' hopes, and dreams were elicited, and action plans were created for each member based on configuring a common ground. At this point, the cognitive

restructuring technique of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) was needed for some of the participants to regulate their cognitive distortions related to their anxiety levels. Having an eclectic background of SBT could enrich the solution methods in dealing with clients' issues.

In the group sessions, group members were helped to build a healthy new identity with lower levels of anxiety and create healthy new connections who have high levels of 5-character strengths. In this way, efforts were made to provide long-term benefits to the group members. In the end, an evaluation was made by group members holistically for each session about techniques that are used, awareness gained, personal developments on character strengths and tasks of the sessions. Finally, hopes and future plans were shared, and the program was completed. Techniques of SBT that were used during the program were savoring the positive moment, harvesting the good, the hope chest, circle of support, strengths cards, vision board for strengths, goals and plans and empowering thoughts toolkit.

Also, apart from the SBT technique, cognitive restructuring technique of CBT and breathing exercises for high anxiety levels were used. Additionally, for each character strength, a movie was suggested as a task to support the understanding of the strengths via analyzing characters in the movies.

Data Collection Tools

Sociodemographic Form

Sociodemographic form contains information such as gender, age, place of residence, employment status, income level, department of the study, grade level, and psychological support history of the participants.

Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI)

The Beck Anxiety Inventory is a brief self-report measure of anxiety developed to rate the severity of anxiety symptoms. It includes 21 items and responses are rated on a 4-point Likert scale and range from 0 (symptom not present) to 3 (symptom

very severe) (Beck et al., 1988). It has 2 subscales, which are subjective anxiety and somatic anxiety. The scores on the inventory change between 0–63 and lower scores indicate lower anxiety levels. BAI has been translated and adapted to Turkish by Ulusoy et al. (1998). Cronbach alpha of the Turkish adaptation of BAI is .93. The item-total correlations range from .45 to .72.

Shyness Inventory

Shyness inventory is a self-report measure of shyness developed to rate the severity of shyness symptoms (Güngör, 2001). It includes 20 items and responses which are rated on a 4-point Likert scale and range from 1 to 4. The scores on the inventory change between 20–100 and lower scores indicate lower shyness levels. In terms of retest reliability, the coefficient was calculated as .83 and the Cronbach Alpha coefficient regarding the internal reliability consistency as .91.

State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI)

STAI is a self-report measure of anxiety consisting of 40 items related to state and trait anxiety. The first 20 items measure state, and the other 20 items measure trait anxiety rated on a 4-point Likert scale and range from 1 to 4. There are 17 reverse questions, in total lower scores indicate lower anxiety. The scores on the inventory change between 20-80. The Turkish STAI was adapted by Öner and Le Compte (1998) and Cronbach alpha was .87.

Values in Action Inventory of Strengths for Youth (VIA-Youth)

VIA-Youth is a self-report measure consisting of 197 items related to 6 virtues and 24-character strengths. There are 24 subscales, evaluating a different character strength rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5. Subscale scores are created from the average of the responses. The scores can be used both with subscales and the dimensions of virtue (Park & Peterson, 2006). The Turkish version of VIA-Youth is adapted by Kabakçı, Ergene and Doğan (2019). According to the subscales, although consistency coefficients

related to the Turkish VIA-Youth's reliability obtained from two different research groups are found relatively low, that is curiosity (.64), humility (.67), and prudence (.68), all other subscales exceeded .70. In addition, all test-retest reliability coefficients were found >.70. In consideration of the virtue dimensions, both coefficients of internal consistency obtained from the research group are >.80.

Statistical Analysis

Before the analysis, data entry was checked, and no missing data were found as a result of the missing data analysis. SPSS 26 package program was used for data analysis. Kolmogorov Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk test values were first examined to determine whether the data were normally distributed. Since the Shapiro-Wilk test gives better results in cases where the number of data is less than 29 (Kalaycı, 2006), the results of this test were evaluated, and the data were found to show a normal distribution. However, since the Shapiro-Wilk test showed normal distribution even if the data were not normally distributed in very small samples, and there were 10 individuals in each group in our study, Q-Q Scatter Plots and histogram graphs were also examined to determine whether the data were normally distributed, and it was determined that the graphs did not show normal distribution characteristics. Therefore, non-parametric analysis methods were used instead of parametric analyzes in this study (Tabachnik & Fidell, 2013). The Mann-Whitney U test was employed to test whether there was a statistically significant difference between the pretest values applied to the group that received strength-based psychological counseling and the group that did not receive any intervention. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test was applied to determine the difference between the inventories (for both anxiety and character strengths) pre-test and post-test mean scores of the experimental and control groups.

Results

In the sociodemographic variables of the participants, there were no statistically significant differences between the experimental group and the control group ($p > 0.05$; Table 1; pp. 2-3). Except for the Beck Anxiety Inventory ($U=20,000$, $z=-2.270$, $p < 0.05$), there was no statistically significant difference between the Shyness Inventory, STAI and VIA Youth pre-test mean scores ($p > 0.05$) of the experimental and control group (Table 2).

Table 2. Comparison of pre-test values of experimental and control group

Variable	Mean of Rating		U	z	p
	Experimental group	Control Group			
BAI (Total)	13.50	7.50	20.000	-2.270	0.023*
BAI Subjective Anxiety	13.70	7.30	18.000	-2.423	0.015*
BAI Somatic Anxiety	12.00	9.00	35.000	-1.139	0.255
Shyness Inventory	11.15	9.85	43.500	-0.492	0.623
STAI State Anxiety	8.75	12.25	32.500	-1.325	0.185
STAI Trait Anxiety	10.00	11.00	45.000	-0.379	0.705
VIA Open-mindedness	11.20	9.80	43.000	-0.531	0.595
VIA Perspective	12.20	8.80	33.000	-1.293	0.196
VIA Zest for Life	10.90	10.10	46.000	-0.305	0.761
VIA Self Control	11.00	10.00	45.000	-0.380	0.704
VIA Hope	10.50	10.50	50.000	0.000	1.000

* $p < 0.05$

According to the results of the analysis, a statistically significant difference was found between the BAI pre-test and post-test values of the participants who received the Strength Based Group Psychological Counseling Program ($z = -2.601$, $p < 0.01$). Similarly, a statistically significant difference was found between pretest and post-test values in BAI Subjective and Somatic Anxiety sub-dimensions ($z = -2.654$, $p < 0.01$; ($z = -2.311$, $p < 0.05$) (Table 3). There was no statistically significant difference between the pretest and post-test values of Subjective Anxiety and Somatic Anxiety in the control group ($p > 0.05$).

Table 3. Experimental Group pre-posttest difference of BAI

	n	Total rank.	Total rank.	z	p
BAI	Negative rank9	5.89	53.00		
	Positive rank 1	2.00	2.00	-2.601	0.009*
	Equal	0			
BAI Subjective Anxiety	Negative rank9	5.94	53.50		
	Positive rank 1	1.50	1.50	-2.654	0.008*
	Equal	0			
BAI Somatic Anxiety	Negative rank8	6.25	50.00		
	Positive rank 2	2.50	5.00	-2.311	0.021*
	Equal	0			

BAI: Beck Anxiety Inventory, * $p < 0.05$

According to the results of the analysis, there was no statistically significant difference between the Shyness Inventory pre-test and post-test values of the participants who received and did not receive the Strength Based Group Psychological Counseling Program ($p > 0.05$).

In addition, a statistically significant difference was found between the pre-test and post-test values of the STAI sub-dimensions of the participants who received the Strength Based Group Psychological Counseling Program ($z = -2.701$, $p < 0.01$; $z = -2.499$, $p < 0.05$) (Table 4). There was no statistically significant difference between the STAI pre-test and post-test values of the group that did not receive any intervention ($p > 0.05$).

Table 4. Experimental Group pre-posttest difference of STAI

		n	Total rank.	Total rank.	z	p
STAI State Anxiety	Negative rank	9	6.00	54.00		
	Positive rank	1	1.00	1.00	-2.701	0.007*
	Equal	0				
STAI Trait Anxiety	Negative rank	8	6.50	52.00		
	Positive rank	2	1.50	3.00	-2.499	0.012*
	Equal	0				

STAI: State-Trait Anxiety Inventory

* $p < 0.05$

According to the results of the analysis, a statistically significant difference was found between the pre-test and post-test values of the Zest for Life sub-dimension of the participants who received the Strength Based Group Psychological Counseling Program ($z = -2.668$, $p < 0.01$). Also, a statistically significant difference was found between the hope sub-dimension pretest and post-test values ($z = -2.805$, $p < 0.01$) (Table 5). However, no statistically significant difference was found between the pre-test and post-test scores of the participants in the Open-Minded, Perspective and Self-Control sub-dimensions ($p > 0.05$). There was no statistically significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores which did not receive any intervention, in the sub-dimensions of Open-mindedness, Perspective, Enthusiasm for Life, Self-Control and Hope ($p > 0.05$).

Table 5. Experimental group pre-test post-test difference of VIA-Youth

		n	Total rank.	Total rank.	z	p
VIA Open-mindedness	Negative rank	4	4.00	16.00		
	Positive rank	5	5.80	29.00	-0.778	0.437
	Equal	1				
VIA Perspective	Negative rank	2	5.50	11.00		
	Positive rank	7	4.86	34.00	-1.372	0.170
	Equal	1				
VIA Zest for Life	Negative rank	0	0.00	0.00		
	Positive rank	9	5.00	45.00	-2.668	0.008*
	Equal	1				
VIA Self-control	Negative rank	3	5.00	15.00		
	Positive rank	7	5.71	40.00	-1.277	0.202
	Equal	0				
VIA Hope	Negative rank	0	0.00	0.00		
	Positive rank	10	5.50	55.00	-2.805	0.005*
	Equal	0				

VIA Youth: Values in Action Inventory of Strengths for Youth

* $p < 0.05$

Discussion

The results show that individuals who participated in strengths-based group psychological counseling program had a statistically significant difference in their anxiety levels. In other words, it can be thought that strengths-based therapy helped young adults to decrease their anxiety levels. A study done by Modini et al. (2015) also shows that using optimal level of character strengths is associated with the absence of mental health, such as social anxiety disorder. Moreover, this is also supported by Li and Liu (2016). They stated that individuals that have high character strengths are prone to perceive less stress and demonstrate healthy psychophysiological responses. According to Bachik et al. (2021) college students who have high levels of zest, hope, gratitude, and love are most likely to report high levels of satisfaction with life. In this sense, it can be recognized that the findings of the current study are supported by other studies related to character strengths and healthy psychological states.

Another important finding of the current study is that individuals who participated in strengths-based group psychological counseling program had a statistically significant increase in their character strengths of hope. Especially for university students who are full of question marks about their future life by living in a developing

country with high levels of unemployment rates, it is vital to have high levels of hope in their life. This is corroborated by other studies in the field (Toner et al., 2012; Gusewell and Ruch, 2012) which state character strengths, especially hope, have an impact on subjective well-being, school life and academic success. Peterson et al., (2006) point out that these factors are very helpful in the healing processes of psychological problems such as depression. To integrate the aims of the current study, these findings support the related literature by increasing character strengths and decreasing the anxiety levels of the participants.

Also, the current study shows that strengths-based therapy helps to increase the zest for life of university students significantly. Especially, in a pandemic period that the world has been suffering, it is an important result. Zest for life is related to many healthy psychological conditions and plays an influential role in protecting individuals from maladaptive reactions (Kabakçı et al., 2019). Moreover, individuals having higher levels of zest predict less depression and more positive affect in anxiety measurements (Freidlin, et al, 2017).

Despite its strengths, this study has some limitations. Findings show that there is not a statistically significant difference in individuals who participated in the strengths-based group psychological counseling program in character strengths of open-mindedness, perspective, and self-control. Although there has been an increase in the experimental group in these character strengths, it was not statistically significant. The reason may rely on the developmental explanations of these character strengths. It is stated that open-mindedness, perspective, and self-control are developed in individuals by depending on the experience and knowledge that require age, maturity, and life experience to cultivate. In this sense, the sample of the current study can be seen as a developing stage in the open-mindedness sense (Bachik et al., 2021; Kabakçı, et al., 2019; Park & Peterson, 2006). Hence, in future studies, to have more effective results in this age range, studies can be supported by individual psychological counseling sessions, related educational programs at schools or

allocating more sessions in groups for these character strengths.

Another reason for this result may rely on the unclear differentiation between the definition of character strengths and personality traits (e.g., OCEAN model). Due to the lack of obvious theoretical differences in literature, researchers and professionals may develop similar practices which may prevent meeting the exact need for developing these character strengths. Hence, this study may open a new way to recognize the need for this theoretic confusion in literature.

In addition, another result of the study is there was no statistically significant difference in the shyness level of the participants in the experimental group. The reason may be related to the pathological basis of the term shyness. In literature, shyness depending on its level is associated with a social anxiety disorder or social phobia (Henderson et al., 2014). When the interest area of positive psychology is recognized, there are no psychopathological disorders. Thus, in future studies, the shyness points of the participants can be determined in a more detailed/categorized way according to their levels as low, medium, and high to form different content of group psychological counseling programs.

Also, it is thought that this study contributes novelty to the literature. There are a variety of studies related to character strengths and virtues, especially in overseas countries, however, most of them are limited to theoretical studies. Moreover, there is an applied study deficit in the literature, especially for group works. Also, there is a lack of studies referring to the power of character strengths while dealing with psychological problems. The reason for this is the traditional and problem-focused approach yet dominates the literature on managing psychological problems. Thus, by both developing character strengths via group sessions and decreasing anxiety levels of individuals, this study plays a vital role in filling multiple gaps in the literature. There need to be more experimental studies on developing character strengths while managing psychological problems to alter the customary view.

As stated in the introduction part, increasing character strengths is not only helpful to

maintaining a current psychological state, but also crucial to developing coping mechanisms in problematic situations they confront related to themselves, families, friends, and academic environments. This perspective can also play a savior role in individuals' environmental-based problems because they can always rely on their intrinsic psychological resources as a shelter while they cannot control external issues. In order to develop this shelter successfully, there needs to be powerful teamwork by interdisciplinarity.

There are two main suggestions of the current study to the members of different professions. One of them is about managing anxiety. This study emphasizes focusing on the strengths of the individuals to manage their anxiety; it suggests a solution apart from focusing on the weaknesses of individuals as it is in a traditional approach. In this sense, psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, and psychological counselor specialists may adapt and enrich their methods of managing the anxiety levels of their clients via discovering and developing character strengths of clients.

Another suggestion to the practice area is about protecting the current positive state of individuals before a psychological problem occurs, playing a preventive role. To prevent potential anxiety-related problems in the future, developmental psychologists, family counselors, professionals take part in parenting schools, child development specialists, and preschool teachers may adapt character strengths to their occupational practices. Also, school principals and educational research scientists may play a vital role in integrating and adapting character strengths in the curriculum for students in different development stages. Also, a study concluded that strengths-based school approach contributes to academic, vocational, and personal development (Galassi & Akos, 2007). In this sense, it can be recognized that character strengths have a wide perspective related to various developmental areas.

In the light of this information, some suggestions are given to develop character strengths in individuals. Initially the concept of character strengths and virtues is needed to be understood clearly by professions stated above. To accomplish this, curriculum of the departments of psychology and psychological counseling and

guidance need to be revised (e.g., positive psychology models should be included in contemporary therapy approaches). By this way, traditional problem-focused perspective can be stretched in a regular basis. Also, academics and researchers specialized in the related area may take part in schools (with different education levels) with informative seminars including theoretical background and application examples of characters strengths. In this way, variety of professions may reinforce the awareness of students about their strengths and a precaution can be taken for future psychological problems. Also, it is essential to integrate character strengths in the national and high educational system via the help of strength-related courses. A suitable pass and fail system can be developed for these courses by not conflicting with the purpose. In addition to this, the state should increase the appointment of professions working in this field to increase the time allocated for individual and group sessions to help students discover themselves in a positive way.

Overall, it can be indicated that interdisciplinarity is crucial to make an effective advance in managing anxiety by using the "tool" of character strengths. In this way, the concept of "positive youth development" and "happy schools" can be encouraged, and individuals in emerging adulthood may constitute psychologically healthier societies by developing positive substructure for their long-term adulthood years.

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