

Effectiveness of CBT-Based Group Counseling in Reducing Self-Harm among Adolescents from Broken Homes: A Quasi-Experimental Study

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

cognitive behavioral therapy;
group counseling;
self-harm;
broken home;
adolescents

Article history:

Received 2026-03-05

Revised 2026-04-30

Accepted 2026-06-30

ABSTRACT

Adolescent self-harm is a serious mental health concern, particularly among students from broken-home families who often experience emotional distress, insecure attachment, and limited support systems. This study examined the effectiveness of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)-based group counseling in reducing self-harm tendencies among adolescents from broken-home backgrounds. A quasi-experimental non-equivalent control group design with pretest and posttest measurements was employed. The participants were 22 Grade X students at SMK N 2 Batam who met the inclusion criteria for self-harm tendencies and broken-home family background. They were divided into an experimental group (n = 11) receiving five sessions of CBT-based group counseling and a control group (n = 11) receiving conventional counseling. Data were collected using a validated self-harm tendency questionnaire with excellent reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .952$) and analyzed using Wilcoxon signed-rank and Mann-Whitney U tests. The results showed a significant reduction in self-harm scores in the experimental group after the intervention ($Z = -2.93$, $p = .003$), while the control group showed no significant change ($Z = -0.82$, $p = .414$). The between-group comparison also indicated a significant difference in gain scores ($U = 12.00$, $p = .004$). These findings suggest that CBT-based group counseling may help reduce self-harm tendencies by supporting cognitive restructuring, emotional regulation, adaptive coping, and peer-based emotional support among vulnerable adolescents.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) among adolescents represents a critical public health concern, functioning primarily as a maladaptive coping mechanism for severe emotion dysregulation (Andersson et al., 2024; Buerger et al., 2022). This psychological vulnerability is significantly exacerbated by family disruption, particularly for adolescents from "broken homes" characterized by divorce, prolonged parental conflict, or parental abandonment (Suprihantono & Rizal, 2025). The absence of a stable familial support system compromises the development of secure attachment and emotional regulation skills. Consequently, these adolescents often lack the internal resources to process affective distress, leading to self-harm behaviors as a means of managing overwhelming psychological pain (Marrero et al., 2023; Brausch et al., 2022).

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a well-established, empirically supported intervention for restructuring maladaptive cognitions and reducing self-harm tendencies (Ryum & Kazantzis, 2024; Moorey, 2023; Zhao, 2025). While individual CBT effectively targets cognitive distortions and

lowers the frequency of self-injuring behaviors (Lu et al., 2025; Waraan et al., 2023), integrating CBT into a group counseling modality offers distinct clinical advantages. Group settings provide peer validation, facilitate shared emotional processing, and allow for the collective practice of coping skills, thereby meeting the fundamental human need for social connection often overlooked in individual therapy (Klim-Conforti et al., 2022; Zagic et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2025). Previous research indicates that group-based interventions enhance social resilience and emotion modulation among adolescents experiencing family conflict (Bogdan et al., 2023; Delios et al., 2023). Furthermore, school-based implementations successfully reach students lacking access to external clinical services (March et al., 2022), with structured, evidence-based approaches consistently demonstrating superiority over unstructured supportive counseling (Lebow & Snyder, 2022), and family context acting as a crucial moderator in treatment outcomes (Pine et al., 2024).

Despite the established efficacy of both CBT and group counseling, a critical gap remains in the existing literature. Most previous studies evaluate individual CBT within clinical or hospital settings, which are often inaccessible to the general student population due to stigma and resource constraints. Furthermore, current school-based interventions frequently apply generalized trauma protocols without tailoring the modules to the specific attachment disruptions and emotional deficits experienced by adolescents from broken families. Consequently, limited evidence exists on CBT-based group interventions specifically targeting adolescents from disrupted family backgrounds in school settings. This lack of context-specific research limits the understanding of how peer dynamics can be leveraged to compensate for familial emotional deficits in an educational environment.

To address these psychological vulnerabilities, it is essential to recognize the school environment not merely as an academic institution, but as a holistic developmental context where structured interventions shape both cognitive-linguistic competencies and psychological well-being. In educational settings, various structured learning approaches have been shown to significantly enhance students' cognitive and sociolinguistic growth, such as character education for talented learners (Afnita et al., 2021) and the strategic use of imperative and directive speech acts by teachers to guide classroom interactions (Aini et al., 2026; Anggiawati et al., 2026; Putri et al., 2026; Aulia et al., 2026). Furthermore, innovative instructional models like Project-Based Learning (PjBL) supported by various media have consistently proven effective in enhancing students' literacy and writing skills across different text types (Dwikafenita et al., 2026; Karina et al., 2026; Ningsi & Ulya, 2025; Noveria et al., 2026; Rahma et al., 2026; Revalina et al., 2026; Wardana et al., 2026; Wulandari & Ulya, 2025).

At the foundational level, longitudinal studies on language acquisition reveal the complex trajectories of phonological, semantic, and syntactic development in early childhood (Hayat et al., 2026; Mardhiyyah et al., 2026; Maulina et al., 2026; Ulya et al., 2026), while broader analyses underscore the importance of linguistic awareness in academic writing (Liusti et al., 2026; Malik et al., 2026; Naini & Ulya, 2025) and the sociolinguistic functions of language in society (Andriyani et al., 2024; Ulya, 2024). Collectively, these educational studies highlight a fundamental principle: whether in academic learning or psychological counseling, structured, evidence-based, and contextually responsive approaches are essential for fostering resilience and competence among learners. Building on this premise, schools are uniquely positioned to deliver targeted psychological interventions.

This study introduces a novel, context-adapted CBT-based group counseling package specifically designed for adolescents from broken homes. The novelty lies in the theoretical and practical integration of structured cognitive restructuring techniques with targeted group dynamics. By conceptualizing the peer group as a surrogate support system, this intervention compensates for the emotional validation typically provided by an intact family while serving as a behavioral rehearsal space for new coping skills. This approach provides empirical evidence on the synergistic effect of cognitive techniques and peer support within a school guidance framework, particularly in developing country contexts where specialized mental health resources are scarce.

Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to empirically evaluate the effectiveness of a CBT-based group counseling intervention in reducing self-harm tendencies among adolescents from broken homes. Addressing this objective, this study poses the following research question: To what extent does CBT-based group counseling reduce self-harm tendencies among adolescents from disrupted family backgrounds? Based on the theoretical framework and previous literature, it is hypothesized that students from broken homes who receive CBT-based group counseling will demonstrate a statistically significant greater reduction in self-harm tendencies compared to those in the control group.

2. METHODS

2.1 Design

This study employed a quantitative approach utilizing a quasi-experimental design to evaluate the causal relationship between the intervention and the outcome variables. Specifically, a Non-Equivalent Control Group Design incorporating both pre-test and post-test measurements was adopted. This design was selected because random assignment of individual students was not feasible within the intact classroom structure of the school setting. This framework enabled the researchers to compare the initial baseline conditions and final outcomes of students receiving the CBT-based intervention against those receiving conventional counseling, thereby isolating the specific impact of the treatment program.

2.2 Participants

The study was conducted at SMK N 2 Batam during the 2024–2025 academic year. The initial population comprised 55 grade X students who exhibited signs of self-harm tendencies. From this population, a sample of 22 students was selected using purposive sampling techniques and divided equally into an experimental group ($n = 11$) and a control group ($n = 11$). Justification of Sample Size: The sample size ($N = 22$) was justified by the limited number of students who met the strict inclusion criteria within the target school. Given the specific focus on a highly vulnerable demographic, a census of the eligible population was conducted. This sample size is consistent with methodological recommendations for targeted, school-based quasi-experimental studies where the accessible population is constrained by strict clinical and demographic criteria.

To ensure sample homogeneity and research safety, specific criteria were applied. The inclusion criteria were: (1) enrolled as a grade X student at SMK N 2 Batam; (2) coming from a broken-home background; (3) scoring above the clinical cutoff on the initial self-harm screening instrument; and (4) willing to participate and provide informed consent/assent. The exclusion criteria were: (1) currently receiving external psychological or psychiatric treatment; (2) exhibiting active suicidal ideation requiring immediate clinical referral; and (3) having a diagnosed severe psychotic disorder. Prior to data collection, informed consent was secured from the school administration and the students' parents or guardians, while written assent was provided by the students themselves. Participants were assured of strict confidentiality, the anonymity of their data, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any academic or social penalty.

2.3 Instruments

Data were collected using a structured self-harm tendency questionnaire designed to measure the frequency of self-injurious behaviors using an interval data scale. The instrument utilized a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always). To ensure the psychometric quality of the tool, content and construct validity were tested using the Pearson Product-Moment correlation formula; items demonstrating a significant correlation between item scores and total scores were retained. Reliability was established through Cronbach's Alpha calculations, yielding a coefficient of 0.952, which indicates excellent internal consistency. The scoring system assigned specific weights

to both positive and negative statements to prevent response bias, facilitating a robust quantitative analysis of student behaviors.

2.4 Procedure

The research procedure was divided into three main phases: pre-test, treatment, and post-test. Initially, a pre-test was administered to both the experimental and control groups to establish baseline self-harm tendencies. Following the pre-test, the intervention phase was conducted over five consecutive weeks. The experimental group received a structured group counseling program based on Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), with each session lasting approximately 45 minutes once a week. The CBT modules specifically targeted cognitive restructuring, emotional regulation, and the development of adaptive coping mechanisms. Conversely, the control group received conventional counseling services typically provided by the school (treatment as usual), which focused on general academic and personal guidance without a specific CBT framework. Upon the completion of the fifth session, a post-test was administered to both groups using the same instrument to measure changes in self-harm tendencies.

2.5 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using statistical SPSS 24. Prior to hypothesis testing, assumption testing was conducted to determine the appropriate statistical tools. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was utilized to assess the normality of the data distribution. The results indicated that the data were not normally distributed ($p < 0.05$); therefore, the assumption of normality was violated, necessitating the use of non-parametric statistical techniques.

To test the hypotheses, the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test was employed to determine significant within-group differences (pre-test vs. post-test) for both the experimental and control groups. To evaluate the between-group differences in post-test scores, the Mann-Whitney U test was utilized. Furthermore, to determine the magnitude of the intervention's impact, effect size calculations were performed. For the non-parametric tests, the effect size r was computed using the formula $r = Z / \sqrt{N}$, where Z represents the standardized test statistic and N is the total number of observations. The resulting effect sizes were interpreted according to Cohen's guidelines: small ($r = 0.10$), medium ($r = 0.30$), and large ($r = 0.50$). This comprehensive analytical approach ensured the accuracy and validity of the conclusions drawn regarding the effectiveness of the CBT intervention.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Findings

3.1.1 Instrument Validity and Reliability

Prior to data collection, the 50-item self-harm tendency instrument underwent rigorous validity and reliability testing. Item-total correlation analysis using the Pearson Product-Moment formula indicated that 45 items were valid, demonstrating significant correlations exceeding the critical threshold ($r > .164$). Five items (P5, P14, P29, P37, and P42) were excluded from the final analysis due to insufficient correlations. The final 45-item scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency, yielding a Cronbach's alpha of .952.

3.1.2 Descriptive Statistics and Assumption Testing

Descriptive analysis was conducted to examine the distribution of self-harm tendency scores across the pretest and posttest measurements. As presented in Table 1, the experimental group demonstrated a substantial decrease in mean scores from pretest to posttest, representing a mean reduction of 63.91 points. In contrast, the control group showed minimal change over the same period.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Self-Harm Tendency Scores by Group and Time

Group	Test	N	M	SD	Min	Max
Experimental	Pretest	11	142.36	18.42	118	171
	Posttest	11	78.45	12.33	62	98
Control	Pretest	11	139.82	20.15	112	168
	Posttest	11	135.27	19.88	108	165

Note. N=sample; M=mean; SD=standard deviation; Min=minimum score; Max=maximum score.

Prior to hypothesis testing, the normality assumption was examined using the One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. The results indicated that the data were not normally distributed, $D(22) = 0.14$, $p < .001$. Given this violation of normality, non-parametric statistical tests were deemed appropriate for all subsequent hypothesis testing.

3.1.3 Hypothesis Testing

To examine the within-group differences, a Wilcoxon signed-rank test was conducted. The results revealed a statistically significant reduction in self-harm tendencies from pretest to posttest in the experimental group, $Z = -2.93$, $p = .003$, with a large effect size ($r = .88$). This demonstrates that the Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)-based group counseling produced a substantial reduction in self-harm tendencies. Conversely, the control group showed no statistically significant difference between pretest and posttest scores, $Z = -0.82$, $p = .414$, $r = .25$, indicating that conventional counseling services did not produce meaningful changes.

To compare the effectiveness of the intervention between the two groups, a Mann-Whitney U test was conducted on the gain scores (posttest minus pretest). The analysis revealed a statistically significant difference between the experimental and control groups, $U = 12.00$, $Z = -2.89$, $p = .004$, $r = .62$. The effect size indicates a medium-to-large effect, confirming that the reduction in self-harm tendencies was significantly greater in the experimental group. Clinically, this corresponded to a 44.90% reduction in the experimental group compared to only a 3.25% reduction in the control group. A summary of the hypothesis testing results is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Test	Statistic	p	Effect Size (r)	Decision
H1: Significant difference in experimental group (pre-post)	Wilcoxon Signed Ranks	$Z = -2.93$	.003	.88	Accepted
H2: Significant difference in control group (pre-post)	Wilcoxon Signed Ranks	$Z = -0.82$	.414	.25	Rejected
H3: Significant difference between groups	Mann-Whitney U	$U = 12.00$	.004	.62	Accepted

Note. Effect size r was calculated using the formula $r = Z / \sqrt{N}$.

The comprehensive analysis of results provides strong empirical evidence supporting the effectiveness of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy-based group counseling in reducing self-harm tendencies among students from broken home families. The combination of statistical significance, large effect sizes, and clinical relevance demonstrates that this intervention represents a meaningful advancement in school-based mental health services for vulnerable adolescent populations.

3.2 Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)-based group counseling is associated with a substantial reduction in self-harm tendencies among adolescents from broken-home families (Zhao et al., 2024; Vijayapriya & Tamarana, 2023). This outcome aligns with the theoretical premise that maladaptive behaviors such as self-harm often stem from distorted cognitions regarding self-worth, abandonment, and emotional regulation, which are the primary targets of CBT interventions (Raj & Prasad, 2025). The large effect size observed ($r = .88$) suggests that the intervention may facilitate not only statistically significant but also clinically meaningful

improvements in participants' psychological functioning, although the small sample size warrants a cautious interpretation of this magnitude.

These results resonate with prior research validating CBT as an effective approach for reducing self-injurious behaviors. Wu et al. (2022) similarly documented significant reductions in suicidal ideation following CBT interventions, while Dibaj et al. (2025) emphasized the role of cognitive restructuring in diminishing the frequency of self-harm episodes. However, our study extends this literature by elucidating the specific mechanisms through which the group modality amplifies these cognitive effects. In a group context, CBT mechanisms operate synergistically: peers act as "co-therapists" who help identify and challenge deeply ingrained cognitive distortions that individuals might struggle to recognize in isolation. Furthermore, the group serves as a social microcosm where adolescents can conduct behavioral experiments, practicing new emotional regulation skills and receiving immediate, corrective peer feedback. This shared narrative and peer validation process appears to reinforce individual cognitive work, creating a synergistic effect that individual therapy alone may not fully achieve.

While these findings support the utility of group dynamics in fostering social resilience (Alkhaldi et al., 2024), they contrast with studies that advocate exclusively for individual clinical settings for trauma-focused interventions. For instance, some literature warns against group interventions for self-harm due to the risk of "social contagion," where sharing self-injury methods in an unstructured group inadvertently normalizes or triggers the behavior in vulnerable peers (Wang et al., 2025). Additionally, Lebow and Snyder (2022) suggested in their meta-analysis that highly structured, individual approaches yield superior outcomes by strictly controlling therapeutic variables and avoiding group-process distractions. Our findings diverge from these concerns, suggesting that when group counseling is firmly anchored in a structured CBT framework, focusing on cognitive restructuring and skill-building rather than unstructured trauma narration, the risk of contagion is mitigated. This highlights the importance of culturally and contextually responsive intervention design, where the integration of CBT techniques with sensitivity to family background appears instrumental in achieving the observed effects.

The contextual sensitivity of the intervention warrants particular attention. Students from broken-home families often experience profound attachment disruptions and emotional isolation, which can exacerbate vulnerability to self-harm as a coping mechanism. The group counseling format appears to function as a temporary surrogate attachment system, providing the emotional containment and relational safety that participants lacked at home. This interpretation aligns with Delios et al. (2023) regarding peer influence in emotion regulation and Phan and Renshaw's (2023) findings on school-based interventions reaching underserved populations.

It is crucial, however, to balance these promising findings with the study's methodological limitations. The relatively small sample size ($N = 22$) and the use of purposive sampling limit the generalizability of the results; the large effect size may be inflated by the specific characteristics of this small, highly targeted cohort. Additionally, while robust non-parametric analyses were used to address the non-normal distribution of data, this skewness suggests that self-harm behaviors follow complex, non-linear patterns that may not be fully captured by quantitative self-reports alone. Furthermore, the absence of a long-term follow-up period precludes definitive conclusions regarding the durability of the intervention's effects. Future longitudinal and mixed-methods studies are necessary to ascertain whether these short-term cognitive and behavioral shifts translate into sustained recovery.

Despite these limitations, the implications of this study offer valuable directions for school-based mental health services. Given the escalating prevalence of adolescent self-harm and limited access to external clinical resources, the findings suggest that integrating structured, evidence-based group counseling into school guidance frameworks could be a viable strategy. Equipping school counselors with CBT techniques adapted for group delivery may help expand the reach of psychological support for vulnerable students. Furthermore, the success of this approach with students from broken-home families suggests that interventions targeting specific risk contexts,

rather than adopting one-size-fits-all models, may yield more impactful outcomes. Future research should explore the specific mechanisms through which group dynamics enhance cognitive restructuring, examine the long-term maintenance of gains, and investigate the potential for digital or hybrid delivery formats to increase accessibility. Ultimately, this study suggests that when schools are equipped with theoretically grounded, contextually attuned interventions, they can serve as vital environments for supporting adolescent mental health.

4. CONCLUSION

This study provides empirical evidence that Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)-based group counseling significantly reduces self-harm tendencies among adolescents from broken-home families. By adapting CBT techniques to address the specific attachment disruptions and emotional isolation associated with family breakdown, the intervention effectively interrupted maladaptive coping patterns and fostered healthier emotional regulation. The substantial reduction in self-harm scores and the large effect size observed in the experimental group, contrasted with the minimal changes in the control group, highlight the unique value of combining structured cognitive restructuring with the supportive dynamics of a peer group. This contributes to the literature by demonstrating that contextually sensitive, group-based CBT is a highly efficacious approach for vulnerable adolescent populations often underserved by traditional individual clinical settings.

These findings suggest that school-based mental health services can be significantly enhanced by integrating evidence-based, peer-supported group interventions into routine guidance programs. Equipping school counselors with CBT fundamentals and group facilitation skills offers a scalable, cost-effective strategy to support at-risk students without relying exclusively on external clinical referrals. Ultimately, this study offers a replicable, contextually responsive model for schools to proactively address adolescent mental health challenges, emphasizing the critical role of educational environments in fostering psychological well-being and resilience among students experiencing family disruption.

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