



Research Paper: The Effectiveness of Group Poetry Therapy on Improving Positive and Negative Symptoms in Chronic Schizophrenia Patients



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Abstract

Poetry therapy, a form of creative art therapy, utilizes poetry and other stimulating forms of literature to achieve therapeutic goals and promote personal growth. Research has shown the effectiveness of positive and negative symptom control and treatment in schizophrenia, highlighting the need for non-pharmacological interventions. Poetry therapy has emerged as one such intervention in this domain. Therefore, the present study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of group poetry therapy on positive and negative symptoms in patients with schizophrenia. This quasi-experimental study employed a pretest-posttest design with a control group. The statistical population of the study were hospitalized patients in treatment and rehabilitation centers in Ardabil city. Using cluster random sampling, 22 participants were selected and randomly assigned to the experimental and control groups. The experimental group received eleven sessions of group poetry therapy, while the control group did not receive any intervention. Data were collected using the Positive and Negative Syndrome Scale (PANSS) and analyzed through one-way analysis of covariance. The results indicated that, after accounting for the pretest effect, the mean of posttest scores of the experimental group participants were lower than those of the control group in positive and negative symptoms ($P < 0.05$), confirming the effectiveness of group poetry therapy intervention. This study demonstrated that group poetry therapy is an effective non-pharmacological treatment for individuals with chronic schizophrenia and can be implemented by clinical professionals in treatment centers.

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1. Introduction

Schizophrenia is a term that was first introduced by Eugen Bleuler in 1911. It is a symbolic representation of profound behavioral and personality disorders (Strunoiu et al., 2019). Psychiatric disorders refer to a significant category of psychological disorders characterized by a common feature of patients' disconnection from reality, including profound disturbances in thinking, emotional expression, perception, and emotions (World Health Organization, 2016). These disorders often impair various functional domains such as family, social, occupational, and educational ones (Sadok & Sadok, 2011).

Currently, approximately 450 million people worldwide suffer from various mental disorders (Bonner et al., 2012). The annual incidence of schizophrenia is estimated to be between 0.2% to 2 per 10,000 individuals, with a lifetime prevalence of 0.1% to 1.9% (Choi et al., 2016). In a nationwide study of the epidemiology of psychiatric disorders in Iran, the prevalence of psychotic disorders was reported to be 0.49%, and the prevalence of schizophrenia was reported to be 0.1% (Fallahikhoshknab et al., 2016). Therefore, the World Health Organization considers these disorders as major global health problems in the 21st century (Almond et al., 2004).

Recurrence of symptoms or multiple relapses and hospitalization in treatment centers are significant characteristic of psychiatric disorders, imposing considerable medical and non-medical costs on the patient, their family, and society (Halder & Mahato, 2015). Schizophrenia is a major mental disorder that leads to impairments in

emotional, cognitive, and social domains (Akbari & Saeidi, 2017). The symptoms of the disease along with cognitive impairments lead to serious disability. In fact, cognitive disorders are early indicators of the disease and particularly predictive of treatment outcomes (Khanmohammadi et al., 2022). Cognitive impairments are particularly common in schizophrenia and can be diagnosed in the early stages, even before starting pharmacological treatment, and remain throughout the course of the illness (Fathi Azar, 2022). Among individuals with schizophrenia, problems in working and long-term memory, attention, executive function, and processing speed occur. In an unusual subgroup, individuals may be largely silent, exhibit abnormal and strange motor behavior, or display undue anxiety, all of which are indicative of hebephrenia (Lesh et al., 2011 CS).

This disorder is characterized by symptoms such as delusions, hallucinations, disorganized speech and behavior, as well as negative symptoms such as cognitive and emotional impairments, and if not treated, at least two of these symptoms must have actively affected a large part of the person's daily life for at least one month. Furthermore, the overall pattern of symptoms related to the disorder should continue for at least six months to confirm the differential diagnosis of this disorder from other psychiatric disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2013/2015). Schizophrenia is often described in terms of positive and negative symptoms (Simas, 2002). The most significant factor contributing to functional decline and disruption in the lives of individuals with schizophrenia is the presence of negative

symptoms. These symptoms represent a loss of normal emotional responses or other thought processes that are typically present in healthy individuals but are impaired and distorted in individuals with schizophrenia (Berkovitch et al., 2018). Although in the early 21st century, with remarkable scientific advancements in the neurochemical sciences, it is expected that therapeutic efforts for schizophrenia would lean towards pharmacological treatments, non-pharmacological approaches and various forms of psychotherapeutic methods are still in the field for schizophrenia treatment. Modern approaches such as art therapy have gained a special place in the field of therapy in recent decades. Meanwhile, some of these methods, such as music and painting, have gained more popularity, especially in our country. However, the use of other methods, such as poetry, has not yet found their real place. Poetry therapy is a creative art that utilizes poetry and other stimulating forms of literature for therapeutic goals and personal growth, and its various forms are suggested with each approach. On the other hand, poetry therapy can be used as a new and appealing approach to connect deeply with the literary heritage of people in countries, addressing a wide range of psychological disturbances. Poetry therapy is a therapeutic approach in which poetry is used for personal growth and emotional well-being (Mohammadian et al., 2010). It aims to develop accuracy and understanding, self and other awareness, creativity, self-expression, self-confidence, enhancement of individual and interpersonal skills, emotional catharsis and tension release, finding new meanings through positive new ideas and information,

and increasing coping with stress. Nowadays, psychiatrists claim that the use of classical poetry in psychotherapy has positive results (Mazza, 2003).

So far, poetry therapy has been used in cognitive-based psychotherapy to address conflicts and internal struggles (Cheryl, 2009). The therapeutic characteristics of poetry include state of regression, sublimation, richness of insight and clarity of perception, providing a state of ambivalence with vague and scattered feelings, and the discharge and elimination of tension (Farvardin, 2019). In fact the term “poetry therapy” includes short stories, novels, anecdotes, tales, plays, articles, and films (Fallahikhoshknab et al., 2016). Poetry therapy is referred to as a cost-effective form of therapy that requires no tools or equipment and can be easily implemented in any setting. To conduct poetry therapy, only paper, some stationary, and a small room are needed. However, the presence of a professional therapist is essential. Compared to medical treatments, poetry therapy does not require expensive pharmaceutical products with side effects (Fallahikhoshknab et al., 2016).

Poetry therapy has been used as a means to explore human conditions since the human language evolved (Collins et al., 2007). Ancient Greeks were among the first humans who intuitively realized the significance of words and emotions in poetry and therapy. In Aristotle’s works, the role of catharsis in emotional therapy has been discussed. Today, emotional catharsis is considered an important aspect of psychotherapy and a therapeutic factor in group therapy, and it is considered a major component of mental

show. The identification of emotions as a principle in emotional catharsis is a crucial point in using poetry in the therapeutic setting. Existentialists believe that poetry can help clients grasp the meaning of life and other states of mind that manifest themselves in the present moment (Mazza, 2003).

Given that poetry therapy can have an impact on positive symptoms such as disorganized speech and negative symptoms like poverty of speech, social withdrawal, and superficial emotion, and also considering that previous studies have demonstrated its effectiveness on elderly, (Mohammadian et al., 2010), depression of students (Gillispie, 2003) education and entertainment for mental patients (Rahbar, 2012), the objective of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of group poetry therapy as a non-pharmacological treatment on individuals with schizophrenia spectrum.

1. Method

The present study was a quasi-experimental pre-test post-test design with a control group. The statistical population of the study consisted of all patients diagnosed with schizophrenia in 2019 in Ardabil's maintenance and rehabilitation centers. Cluster random sampling was used following the entry criteria. The entry criteria included a minimum level of literacy and willingness and consent to participate in the study. Their illness was under control and they were receiving medication. From among the rehabilitation centers in Ardabil, Daralshafa Institute was selected, and then 22 patients out of 50 chronic mental patients of the

institute were randomly chosen, 11 for the experimental group and 11 for the control group. In this study, the Positive and Negative Syndrome Scale (PANSS) and the Berkeley Expressivity Questionnaire were used. Poetry therapy sessions were conducted for the experimental group every week for 11 sessions, one and a half hours each session. The data were analyzed through the analysis of covariance using version 22 of SPSS software.

1.1. Instruments

The Positive and Negative Syndrome Scale (PANSS): This scale was developed by Kay et al in 1987 to measure the severity of positive and negative symptoms in patients with schizophrenia and assess the symptoms and dimensions of schizophrenia disorder. The scale consists of 30 questions or phrases with 7 options, 12 of which are taken from the Brief Psychiatric Rating Scale and 12 other are extracted from the Schedule for the Deficit Syndrome with the definition of PANSS. The scoring is based on a 7-point Likert Scale (1 to 7) with a minimum score of 30 and a maximum of 210. In Iran, Bakshipour and Dezhkam (2014) have standardized this questionnaire, and its reliability has been estimated as 0.88 for positive symptoms, 0.87 for negative symptoms, and 0.87 for the overall test. Furthermore, the validity of the questionnaire has been reported to be high when compared with other measurement tools that assess related constructs. A summary of treatment sessions is presented in table 1.

Table 1

Summary of Poetry Therapy (Khodabakhshi Koolae et al., 2015)

Sessions	Session Descriptions
First Session	Explaining the group rules to patients (such as the need to listen to the speaking members, confidentiality, not interrupting the speaker, mutual respect, and regular attendance), describing the therapeutic process, and requesting them to express their emotions and verbalize whatever comes to their mind without considering its value.
Sessions two to six	Reading poems with content of complaint, anger, resentment, love, and lamentation about the beloved or the passage of time to discharge negative emotions, discussing delusional beliefs, potential hallucinations, and suppressed inner turmoil.
Sessions seven to eight	Reading humorous poems for patients in order to encourage them to change their perspective and outlook on life from a humorous point of view and find a way to cope with life's issues through something other than negativity, excessive seriousness, emotional suppression, or negative emotional expression.
Sessions nine to eleven	Reading motivational and hopeful poems, such as Sohrab Sepehri's "The Sound of Water's Footsteps," with the aim of instilling a sense of hope in life, accepting difficulties, and enjoying life under any circumstances, highlights the value of living simply because of being alive. At the end of the eleventh session, a summary of the previous sessions, the lessons learned from the poems and the therapeutic process, each patient's perception of others in the group, and the importance of continuing to derive pleasure from poetry even after the completion of these sessions (whether in a group or individually) were discussed.

2. Results

In the present study, in terms of educational level of the participants, the experimental group consisted of 4.45% elementary school, 3.27% middle school, and 3.37% diploma, while the control group consisted of 4.36% elementary school, 2.18% middle school, and 4.45% diploma. In terms of economic status, the experimental group had 1.9% good, 3.27% average, and 6.63% poor economic status, whereas the control group had 2.18% good, 3.27% average, and 5.54% poor economic status. Regarding the duration of

illness, in the experimental group, 2.18% were under 10 years, 3.27% were between 10-20 years, and 5.54% were above 20 years with schizophrenia, while in the control group, 3.27% were under 10 years, 4.45% were between 10-20 years, and 3.27% were above 20 years with schizophrenia. [Table 2](#) presents the mean and standard deviation of positive, negative, and general symptoms components for both the experimental and control groups in the pre-test and post-test phase.

Table 2

Mean and standard deviation of positive, negative, and general symptoms components in the experimental and control groups at pre-test and post-test stages.

Variable	Test	Control group		Experimental group	
		Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
Positive Symptoms	Pre-test	56.90	13.30	61.27	17.91
	Post-test	54.72	12.64	39.72	11.23
Negative Symptoms	Pre-test	33.54	7.01	23.18	7.35
	Post-test	30.81	8.58	15.27	4.19

Table 2 shows the mean and standard deviation of positive, negative, and overall symptom components for the experimental and control groups in the pre-test and post-

test. As observed, the scores of the participants in the experimental group show a significant reduction in all three components during the post-test stage.

Table 3

Results of covariance analysis of post-test scores of positive, negative, and general symptoms with pre-test control.

Components	Homogeneity of Variance (Levene's test)		The effect of pre-test		The main effect of the group		
	F	Sig	F	Sig	F	Sig	η^2
	Positive Symptoms	53.66	0.001	53.97	0.001	53.35	0.001
Negative Symptoms	50.34	0.001	88.92	0.001	11.76	0.002	0.337

($p < 0.05$)

Since the number of participants in both groups was equal, there was no issue in using parametric analysis of covariance. The analysis of covariance test indicated a significant reduction in positive and negative symptoms among the experimental group,

but this change was not significant in the control group (Table 3).

3. Conclusion

The results of this research showed that group poetry therapy can reduce the positive

and negative symptoms of chronic schizophrenia patients. These findings were consistent with the following studies:

Faraji et al. (2013) demonstrated in their research that group poetry therapy is effective in enhancing cognitive status in the elderly. So, in the control group, an improvement in cognitive status was observed after the implementation of poetry therapy techniques, whereas no significant change was observed in the pre- and post-intervention assessments in the control group. Mohammadian et al. (2010) indicated that group poetry therapy is effective in improving depression in students. Asayesh et al. (2011) showed in their study that group poetry reading is effective in improving social behaviors in schizophrenic patients, reducing aggressive behaviors, general social dysfunction, and overall behavioral problems compared to pre-intervention scores. Gillispie (2003) suggested that the principles and techniques of poetry therapy, particularly instructive poems, are effective in the education of adults with mental illness.

To elaborate the findings more, it can be noted that poetry, like the pressure within a volcano, releases internal pressures and prevents an earthquake from occurring. When emotions such as anger and depression cannot be expressed, they may give rise to symptoms of illness. The process of reading and writing poetry can be seen as an acceptable outlet for pouring out psychological forces that have the potential to explode, thus restoring physiological and psychological balance (Ghamari Givi et al., 2010). Therefore, poetry therapy generally reduces symptoms as a whole.

Poetry and literature are basically everything that has engage language and serve as a catalyst used by the poet-therapist to evoke reactions in individuals and groups. In fact, poetry, like the lava of a volcano releases internal pressures and prevents an earthquake from occurring. When emotions such as anger and depression cannot be expressed, symptoms of illness may emerge. The process of reading and writing poetry can be considered as an acceptable outlet for the release of psychological forces that have the potential to explode. Consequently, it restores physiological and psychological balance (Khodabakhshi Koolae et al., 2015).

On the other hand, poetry therapy deals with the expression of words. Negative symptoms, like poverty of speech, decrease through the expression found in poetry. Superficial emotions, with the expression of feelings and their externalization, and also receiving empathy from other group members, diminish. In a space where emotions are expressed and understood by others, there is no reason for superficial emotions to exist.

Achieving the goals of poetry therapy in individuals with schizophrenia creates a sense of purpose and coherence in life, awareness of values, acceptance, and significance, which are essential components of meaning in life. Poetry therapy sessions evoke feelings of hope, vitality, dynamism, and ultimately a search for meaning. Thus, due to the lack of available research that examines the effects of group poetry therapy on participants' sense of meaning, we turn to studies that focus on the concept of meaning and meaning-centered interventions in

reducing psychological disorders in the elderly and improving mental health by reducing depression, anxiety, etc.

On the other hand, poetry therapy deals with the expression of words. The poverty of words, which is considered as a negative symptom, is reduced through the expression in poems. Superficial emotions are diminished when feelings are expressed and externalized, and when empathy from others in the group is received. In an environment where emotions are expressed and understood by others, there is no reason for superficial emotions to exist.

Tamura (2001), a cognitive linguistics psychologist who explores language difficulties, assumes that poetry serves as the foundation for solving cognitive disorders. He argues that this approach stabilizes linguistic therapy for schizophrenia, which in turn resolves fundamental cognitive impairments. Since poetry is closely connected to speech and language, it can be effective in resolving cognitive problems. Furthermore, when psychological points are not taught through normal conversations during therapy sessions, but rather in the form of shared poetry, the patients perceive themselves facing a powerful collective cultural process (Mohammadian et al., 2010). In such circumstances, they have to accept certain mistakes in their thinking and beliefs. For example, when patients expressed their delusional and incorrect thoughts during sessions, they were challenged by certain poems and subsequent feedback from other individuals. In an empathetic atmosphere, patients realized that in some instances, they held irrational thoughts. Sometimes, poetry reading triggered paranoia and pessimism in

these patients, and others challenged them through their feedback. As a result, in the final sessions, almost every patient gained a relative insight into their delusions and cognitive mistakes, leading to changes in their self-awareness.

This study is conducted only on male patients. Also lack of control over the duration of patients' hospitalization in centers, age heterogeneity among patients, and the absence of follow-up after intervention are among the limitations of this study. It is suggested that in future research, these factors be controlled, and these techniques be tested on female patients and other mood and psychiatric disorders.

4. Conclusion

Poetry therapy sessions can help participants grasp the meaning of life. It also provides an opportunity for members to explore self-awareness, understanding, and emotional release, while strengthening their sense of meaning. Joyful activities such as poetry therapy sessions help individuals with schizophrenia being purposeful in their life, serve as strong support for emotional stability, and ultimately ensure their mental and physical well-being. These sessions contribute to the development of insight, hope, and improved quality of life.

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Conflicts of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest among the authors.

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