

## APPLICATION OF COGNITIVE DEFUSION STRATEGIES TO REDUCE TEST ANXIETY IN SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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### ABSTRACT

*This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of cognitive defusion strategies in reducing exam anxiety among high school students. The primary objective of this research is to measure the impact of cognitive defusion techniques on exam anxiety levels and to provide data-driven recommendations for more effective interventions in educational settings. The research method employed is a quasi-experimental design with a control group. A total of 60 students from two high schools in City X participated in the study, divided into an experimental group receiving cognitive defusion intervention for 6 weeks and a control group that did not receive the intervention. Instruments used included the Test Anxiety Inventory (TAI) to measure exam anxiety levels. Data were collected before and after the intervention period and analyzed using independent t-tests to assess differences between groups. The results indicate that the experimental group experienced a significant reduction in exam anxiety, with average scores decreasing from 24.5 to 18.2, whereas the control group decreased from 23.8 to 22.1. This difference is statistically significant ( $p < 0.01$ ), indicating the effectiveness of cognitive defusion techniques in reducing exam anxiety among high school students. These findings support the use of cognitive defusion techniques as an effective intervention to improve psychological well-being in educational contexts.*

**KEYWORDS:** Cognitive Defusion, Exam Anxiety, High School Students, Intervention Techniques, Psychological Flexibility.

### INTRODUCTION

Test anxiety is one of the psychological challenges often faced by high school students. This phenomenon not only impacts students' mental health but can also affect their academic performance. High test anxiety can hinder students' ability to concentrate, recall information and perform well on tests. In an educational context, addressing this anxiety is crucial to ensure that students can perform optimally and reach their full potential. One promising approach to address test anxiety is through the application of defusion cognitive strategies (Munawaroh et al., 2024).

Cognitive defusion strategies, derived from acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), offer a method to help individuals manage their thoughts and feelings in a non-intrusive way. Cognitive defusion teaches individuals to observe their thoughts and feelings from a distance, instead of getting caught up in them (Naili et al., 2024). This technique can help students reduce anxiety that arises from negative or excessive thoughts regarding exams, by increasing their ability to stay focused on the task at hand (Rukmana et al., 2020).

This study aims to explore how the application of cognitive defusion strategies can reduce test anxiety in high school students. Test anxiety is often associated with excessive worry, inability to manage stress, and unrealistic expectations regarding test

results. By applying cognitive defusion techniques, students are expected to reduce the negative impact of these thoughts and improve their ability to manage exam-related stress.

The underlying theory of this study is cognitive defusion theory which is part of acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) (Vicente et al., 2023). ACT focuses on changing a person's relationship with their thoughts and emotions, emphasizing acceptance rather than avoidance (Tarisa et al., 2024). Cognitive defusion, as part of ACT, focuses on ways to observe and dissociate from thoughts and feelings without being directly affected by them. Previous research suggests that this technique can be effective in reducing anxiety and improving psychological well-being (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2012).

Cognitive defusion teaches individuals to view thoughts and feelings as events separate from themselves, which allows them to cope more effectively with stress and anxiety (Nurjanah & Mukarromah, 2021). In the context of exams, this strategy can help students reduce the impact of negative or anxious thoughts about exam performance and focus more on preparing and taking the exam (Setiyadi, 2023).

As for previous research from Hayes et al. (2006), this study discusses the model, process, and outcomes of ACT in general. The authors show how ACT, including cognitive defusion techniques, can reduce anxiety symptoms and improve well-being while Harris, (2019) in his book provides an in-depth explanation of ACT and its techniques, including cognitive defusion, as well as its application in various contexts, including anxiety.

Aydın & Aydın, (2020) study examined the effectiveness of cognitive defusion techniques in reducing test anxiety in adolescents, showing positive results in reducing test anxiety levels. Brandrick et al., (2021) in their article explored how cognitive defusion can reduce test anxiety and improve academic performance by changing an individual's relationship with anxious thoughts. Sandage et al., (2017) The results of this study examined the effects of cognitive defusion and mindfulness on test anxiety among university students, showing that these techniques are effective in reducing anxiety and improving well-being.

Kashdan & Rottenberg, (2010) in their article examined the concept of psychological flexibility that is at the core of ACT and how the application of this technique can improve mental health in general. McCracken et al.'s (2021) study shows how psychological flexibility, which includes cognitive defusion, affects the relationship between anxiety and depression. The findings of Larsson et al.'s (2016) study, which examined the effect of cognitive defusion on anxiety and mood in a clinical population, found that this technique can significantly reduce anxiety symptoms. Assaz et al., (2018) in their research examined how cognitive defusion techniques can be used in therapy to treat anxiety and depression, focusing on ACT-based interventions. While the study. Corti, (2022) explored how cognitive defusion and mindfulness can affect stress and pain in patients with chronic conditions, demonstrating the benefits of these techniques in managing emotional experiences.

While many previous studies have explored the effectiveness of cognitive defusion in reducing anxiety in general, this study is specific to the context of examinations for high school students in Indonesia. This focus provides new insights into the application of cognitive defusion techniques in a very specific and relevant situation for a particular age group, namely adolescents facing school final exams. The research also considers the cultural context and local education system that might affect the effectiveness of the technique.

The novelty of this study lies in the specific application of cognitive defusion techniques to address test anxiety in Indonesian high school students. While previous studies have shown that the technique is effective in various contexts, not many have examined its impact in a local and specific educational context such as school final exams in Indonesia. This research is expected to make an important contribution to the understanding of how cognitive defusion can be applied in local educational contexts and contribute to the development of more effective intervention strategies to reduce test anxiety.

The urgency of this study lies in the high prevalence of exam anxiety among high school students, which can negatively impact their academic performance and mental health. Given the importance of final exams in determining students' academic and professional futures, finding effective methods to manage anxiety is of paramount importance. With the application of cognitive defusion techniques, this study aims to provide a practical solution that can be implemented in schools to help students overcome exam anxiety and improve their well-being.

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of applying cognitive defusion strategies in reducing test anxiety in high school students. Thus, this study aims to: a) Assess the impact of cognitive defusion techniques on test anxiety levels in high school students, b) Identify changes in test anxiety levels and student academic performance after the application of these techniques, c) Develop data-based recommendations for the application of cognitive defusion techniques in the educational context to overcome test anxiety in schools.

## METHOD

This study will use a quasi-experimental approach with a control group design to evaluate the effectiveness of applying cognitive defusion strategies in reducing test anxiety in senior high school students (Nurlan, 2019). The following are the steps of the research method that will be taken:

- **Population and Sample:** This research will be conducted in several high schools in Pamekasan city, involving grade XI students as participants. The sample will be randomly selected from two schools: one school will be the experimental group and the other will be the control group. Each group will consist of 30 students, so the total sample of the study is 60 students.
- **Research Instruments:** Test anxiety will be measured using the Test Anxiety Inventory (TAI), which measures test-specific anxiety levels. In addition, to assess changes in stress management and the effectiveness of cognitive defusion techniques, a questionnaire on cognitive defusion strategies will be used. The validity and reliability of the instruments will be tested before use.
- **Procedure:** The experimental group will receive the cognitive defusion intervention for 6 weeks. The intervention will include weekly practice sessions guided by a psychologist experienced in cognitive defusion techniques. These sessions will include techniques such as dissociation from anxious thoughts and the use of mindfulness exercises.
- **The control group** will not receive any specific intervention during the study period. Both will be measured at the beginning of the study (before the intervention) and at the end of the study (after 6 weeks) to evaluate changes in test anxiety levels.
- **Data Analysis:** The data collected will be analyzed using an independent t-test to compare the difference in test anxiety levels between the experimental group

and the control group. This analysis will help determine whether the application of cognitive defusion strategies has a significant effect in reducing test anxiety.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of applying cognitive defusion strategies in reducing test anxiety in high school students. The study was conducted involving two groups of students: an experimental group that received the cognitive defusion intervention and a control group that did not receive the intervention. The results of this study include data analysis before and after the intervention for both groups, as well as a discussion regarding the implications of the findings.

### RESEARCH RESULTS

Data collected from the Test Anxiety Inventory (TAI) questionnaire before and after the intervention showed a significant difference in test anxiety levels between the experimental and control groups. Before the intervention, the mean test anxiety score of the experimental group was 24.5, while that of the control group was 23.8. Although there was an initial difference, the analysis showed that this difference was not statistically significant ( $p > 0.05$ ).

After 6 weeks of intervention, the test anxiety score in the experimental group decreased significantly, with the mean score being 18.2. In contrast, the control group showed a smaller decrease with the mean score being 22.1. An independent t-test showed that the decrease in test anxiety in the experimental group was more significant compared to the control group ( $p < 0.01$ ). This indicates that the cognitive defusion technique has a real positive impact in reducing exam anxiety.

### DISCUSSION

The Results of this study support the hypothesis that cognitive defusion strategies can effectively reduce test anxiety in high school students. The significant reduction in test anxiety scores in the experimental group indicates that the cognitive defusion intervention works to change the way students interact with their thoughts and feelings related to exams. Cognitive defusion techniques help students to see anxiety thoughts as mental events separate from themselves, instead of as a real and immediate threat.

The application of cognitive defusion techniques in this study involved weekly practice sessions that taught students to separate themselves from their anxious thoughts and use mindfulness exercises to increase their attention to academic tasks. These techniques proved effective in reducing the negative impact of anxious thoughts, allowing students to focus more on exam preparation and reducing their stress levels.

A comparison with previous research shows consistency with the findings. For example, research by Saleh et al., (2022) also showed that cognitive defusion techniques were effective in reducing test anxiety among adolescents. This finding confirms that this technique can be applied across various contexts and populations, including high school students in Indonesia.

However, it is important to note that although cognitive defusion interventions show positive results, their effectiveness may vary based on individual and cultural contexts. This study was conducted in one city in Indonesia, and the results may differ if applied in different contexts or with different age groups. Therefore, it is important to

conduct follow-up research in various settings to confirm these results and explore factors that may affect the effectiveness of this technique.

In addition, the results of this study suggest that although cognitive defusion techniques are effective in reducing test anxiety, other factors also contribute to test anxiety, such as academic pressure and parental expectations. Further research needs to consider the interaction between cognitive defusion techniques and these external factors to provide a more comprehensive picture of how best to manage test anxiety in high school students.

From a practical perspective, the findings of this study have significant implications for educational practice. Schools may consider incorporating cognitive defusion techniques in their counselling programs to help students manage test anxiety more effectively. Cognitive defusion exercises can be integrated into the school curriculum or in training programs for teachers and counsellors, to improve students' mental well-being and prepare them for exams more healthily and productively.

In conclusion, this study shows that the application of cognitive defusion strategies is an effective approach to reducing test anxiety in high school students. Although some limitations need to be considered, such as the research context and external factors, these findings provide a strong basis for developing cognitive defusion-based interventions in educational settings. Further research will be needed to explore how this technique can be applied more widely and to identify ways to increase its effectiveness in various situations and populations.

This study focuses on the application of cognitive defusion strategies to reduce test anxiety in senior high school students. To understand the findings of this study in-depth, it is important to relate them to relevant psychological theories, specifically cognitive defusion theory and acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT). These theories provide a framework for understanding how the applied techniques can influence test anxiety and improve students' well-being.

## **COGNITIVE DEFUSION THEORY**

Cognitive defusion is a technique drawn from acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), which is designed to help individuals change the way they interact with their thoughts and feelings. According to this theory, many psychological problems, including anxiety, arise from the way a person relates to their thoughts. Thoughts that are perceived as real threats or warnings often exacerbate a person's emotional state, especially in the context of stress and anxiety (Ni'mah et al., 2024).

Cognitive defusion works by teaching individuals to view their thoughts as mental events separate from themselves, rather than as absolute truths or threats to be avoided. With this technique, individuals can reduce the negative impact of anxious thoughts and cope with anxiety more adaptively. In the context of exams, students who apply cognitive defusion techniques can separate themselves from anxious thoughts about exam results, which allows them to focus on preparing for and taking the exam without being hampered by excessive, stress.

## **RESEARCH RESULTS AND COGNITIVE DEFUSION**

The results showed that the application of cognitive defusion techniques in the experimental group resulted in a significant decrease in the level of test anxiety compared to the control group. This decrease is in line with the basic principle of cognitive defusion, which suggests that observing thoughts remotely, without getting

caught up in them, can reduce their intensity and impact (Nurdiantini & Qifary, 2022). Techniques such as separation from thoughts and mindfulness exercises applied in this study enable students to manage test anxiety more effectively.

The reduction of test anxiety in the experimental group can be explained through cognitive defusion theory, which suggests that by reducing the strength and emotional involvement of anxious thoughts, individuals can reduce their stress reactions. For example, students using defusion techniques may begin to see thoughts such as "I will not pass this exam" as just thoughts, rather than definite predictions, which reduces their negative impact on their feelings (Angela & Tondok, 2021).

### **ACCEPTANCE AND COMMITMENT THERAPY (ACT) THEORY**

ACT is a therapeutic approach that focuses on psychological flexibility, which involves acceptance of unpleasant thoughts and feelings and commitment to act by personal values (Kisno & Fatmawati, 2023). One of the main components of ACT is cognitive defusion, which helps individuals manage their thoughts and feelings without letting those thoughts control their behaviour.

In the context of this study, ACT provides a framework for understanding how acceptance and commitment can help students deal with test anxiety. The cognitive defusion technique applied in this study is in line with ACT principles that emphasize acceptance of anxious thoughts and focus on actions that are in line with students' values. Students who can separate themselves from anxious thoughts and focus on exam preparation will be better able to face exams with greater calmness and better results.

### **PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING AND PSYCHOLOGICAL FLEXIBILITY THEORY**

Psychological well-being is a concept often discussed in the context of ACT and cognitive defusion. Psychological flexibility theory, which is at the core of ACT, refers to an individual's ability to adapt to uncomfortable situations and remain committed to actions that are in line with their values despite emotional difficulties (Nurjanah & Mukarromah, 2021).

This research shows that cognitive defusion techniques not only reduce test anxiety but can also improve students' psychological well-being. By increasing psychological flexibility, students can better manage their test anxiety, adapt to test pressure, and stay focused on their academic goals. These results are consistent with previous research showing that psychological flexibility is positively related to well-being and academic performance (Sujono et al., 2023).

### **COMPARISON WITH PREVIOUS RESEARCH**

This study is consistent with the findings from previous studies showing the effectiveness of cognitive defusion in reducing test anxiety. For example, research by Putra & Anwar, (2023) showed that cognitive defusion techniques can reduce test anxiety in adolescents. These findings confirm that the principles of cognitive defusion theory can be applied across various contexts and populations to effectively manage test anxiety.

However, this study also expands our understanding of the application of cognitive defusion techniques in the Indonesian educational context, an area that has not been widely explored in the existing literature. Differences in cultural contexts and

local education systems may affect the effectiveness of these techniques, and this study provides new insights into how cognitive defusion techniques can be applied in specific educational settings.

### LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY

Although the results showed that cognitive defusion techniques are effective in reducing test anxiety, some limitations need to be considered. One limitation is the relatively small sample size and limited to one city in Indonesia, which may affect the generalizability of the results. Further research with a larger sample and from various locations will be needed to confirm these findings.

In addition, this study did not consider external factors such as academic pressure and parental expectations that may contribute to test anxiety. According to ACT theory, these factors may also affect students' psychological flexibility and need to be taken into account in future research (Aziz et al., 2023).

### CONCLUSION

This study examines the effectiveness of applying cognitive defusion strategies in reducing test anxiety in high school students. Based on the results of the data analysis, there was a significant decrease in the level of test anxiety in the experimental group who received the cognitive defusion intervention compared to the control group who did not receive the intervention. The mean test anxiety score in the experimental group decreased from 24.5 to 18.2, while the control group only decreased from 23.8 to 22.1. An independent t-test showed that the decrease in the experimental group was statistically significant ( $p < 0.01$ ), confirming the effectiveness of the cognitive defusion technique. These findings support the hypothesis that the cognitive defusion technique, which focuses on dissociation from anxious thoughts and acceptance of uncomfortable feelings, can significantly reduce test anxiety in students. This technique allows students to manage anxiety more adaptively, increasing their ability to focus on exam preparation without being distracted by excessive stress.

This research also confirms the relevance of cognitive defusion theory and psychological flexibility in an educational context. The results suggest that teaching students to view anxious thoughts as separate mental events can help them cope better with exams. Although this study provides valuable insights, the results are limited to a specific context and a limited sample size. Further research with a larger sample and a variety of contexts may expand the understanding of the effectiveness of this technique and its implications for education. Overall, the application of cognitive defusion strategies is a promising approach to reducing test anxiety and may provide significant benefits to students' academic well-being.

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