

**Fostering Emotional Adjustment among Nigerian
Adolescents with Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy**

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This study examined the efficacy of Albert Ellis' Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) in fostering emotional adjustment among Nigerian adolescents. Fifty senior secondary school students were randomly selected and divided equally into experimental and control groups. The experimental group was treated with REBT twice a week for six weeks. The result indicated that REBT effectively reduced the levels of anxiety and stress of the adolescents. Although the experimental group's level of depression dropped, the reduction was not statistically significant. Implications for counselling the Nigerian adolescents includes using the REBT principles to draw up a treatment programme for treating identified maladjusted adolescents within the classroom and using it to manage the classroom climate in order to facilitate the teaching/learning process.

Rational-Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) as developed by Albert Ellis is the application of reason and logic to psychotherapy. It is a rational problem solving approach, which Ellis directed to personal behaviour problems. Ellis was convinced that irrational neurotic early learning persisted in human memory rather than being extinguished if they were not reinforced. He therefore decided to teach his clients to change their aberrant thinking styles and give rational explanation to their behavioural problems (Ellis, 1962).

Anxiety, depression and stress are emotional adjustment problems that affect the adolescents and the society, which this study focuses on. The emotionally maladjusted adolescent is an unhappy adolescent. And his problems certainly demand attention if for no other reason at least on humanitarian grounds. Since the dividing line between the emotionally maladjusted adolescent and juvenile delinquent adolescent could be a very tenuous one, the former may be considered as unidentified delinquent. Since both the maladjusted adolescent and the juvenile delinquent are societal problems there is the need to assist them out of their problems and make them socially accepted members of the society. This study aims at using a clinical technique like Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy to assist emotionally disadvantaged adolescents to develop adaptive behaviour within and outside the classroom.

Literature Review

Counselling belongs to a special domain of psychology in applied setting. In Nigeria and most developing countries of the world, it is relatively a new discipline. Counselling is a part of guidance. And guidance is a helping process which aims at assisting persons to understand themselves and their world, solve their problems and adjust to life both emotionally and physically. Counselling is the pivot of the guidance programme. It is meant to effectively change human behaviour so that the recipients may live self-satisfying and productive lives (Shertzer & Stone, 1976). Thus the reason why counselling programmes are being organized in Nigerian schools is to help students to understand themselves and their world so as to become adjusted and self-directed individuals. The foundations of counselling therefore are human growth and development. According to Peck (1981) there is, however, a general lack of interest in the education of emotionally disturbed children. The reasons are because of the tendency to refer them to clinicians for psychotherapeutic treatment and more recently, the tendency to apply 'special education' to emotional disturbance in children. But what, or who are emotionally disturbed adolescents? Generally, definitions of emotionally disturbed adolescents have pivoted on the following considerations: hyperactivity, withdrawn behaviour, failure to achieve at a level reasonably commensurate with ability, resentment, learning difficulties, aggressiveness, lack of concentration and inability to relate with others satisfactorily (Gearheart, 1974; Peck, 1981; Adima, 1989).

Other definitions are based on social, cultural and clinical education factors. Thus when we experience something, which makes a lasting impression on us, the feeling we evoke is emotion. Emotions are relatively brief and they are evoked in response to re-creation of an event that embarrassed us in the past and in remembering such event, we are embarrassed again. The nature of the emotion depends on the nature of the stimulus. This ranges from the ecstasy people feel when they fall in love, through the joy people feel during wedding to the grief people feel at funeral (Calson, 1993).

Ellis' (1962) basic assumptions about human nature are that:

1. Man is uniquely rational, as well as irrational. When he is thinking and behaving rationally, he is effective, happy and competent. In other words, Ellis believes that man has the capabilities to adjust to life situations. Thus when man wants to be effective, happy and competent, he must think and behave rationally. If on the hand, he is ineffective, unhappy

and incompetent, it means he is thinking and behaving irrationally. It is however, not true that things always go the way Ellis proposed.

2. Emotional or psychological disturbance – neurotic behaviour – is a product of irrational and illogical thinking. Thought and emotion are the same; emotion accompanies thinking and it is biased, projected and highly personalised thinking. Ellis however missed the point when he concluded that thought and emotion are co-extensive; and that emotion always accompanies thinking in a biased and projected form. If this is true, no thinking will be rational. This certainly contradicts Ellis' first assumption, which declared man as both rational and irrational depending on his form of thinking.

3. Irrational thinking originates in the early illogical learning that the individual was exposed to by his parents and his culture. It is true that some irrational thinking could originate from early illogical learning that the individual was exposed to by either his parents or culture; however, not all illogical and irrational thoughts arise in this way.

4. Since human beings are verbal animals, the phrases and sentences that we keep telling ourselves frequently are or become our thoughts and emotions. Thus any human being who gets disturbed is telling himself a chain of false sentences. Here again Ellis went too far in his assumption. Internalised sentences could sometimes lead to emotion; but not all emotions are the end products of self-talk.

5. Continuing state of emotional disturbance is as a result of self-verbalisations, not by external circumstances or event, but by the perceptions and attitudes towards these events that are incorporated in the internalised sentences about them. This fifth assumption is similar to that of Epictetus that people are disturbed not because of events but because of their attitudes towards these events.

6. Negative and self-defeating thoughts and emotions must thus be attacked by reorganised thoughts so that thinking becomes logical and rational rather than irrational and illogical. This assumption places a great responsibility on the therapist. He is required to apply reason, logic, suggestion, teaching, confrontation, indoctrination, de-indoctrination, persuasion and prescription of behaviour to show the client what his irrational philosophies are and the need to change his thinking. Thus unlike Carl Rogers' Client Centred Therapy, Ellis' RET is authoritarian, directional and brainwashing.

In spite of these shortcomings inherent in his assumptions, Ellis wittingly or unwittingly decided to prove to his clients that emotional problems of maladjustment stem from illogical and irrational thoughts. He

believes firmly that by maximising one's intellectual power, one can free oneself of emotional disturbances. In effect, if the principles outlined in REBT are applied to adolescents' emotional maladjustment, it may be possible to effectively foster emotional adjustment among them.

Adima traces the problem of emotional adjustment in adolescents to the following factors, namely, brain injury, negative environmental influence, poor academic performance, parental deprivation, loose or strict upbringing, unfavourable school condition, adult negative influence and excessive use of psychoactive drugs (cf. also Adomeh, 1997).

On the effectiveness of counselling, Filani (1984) reported his successful use of Rational-Emotive Therapy in the treatment of a client with depressive illness. The client, according to Filani (1984) had multiple problems ranging from headache, chest and body pains to dreadful dreams. Although previous medical examinations detected no abnormality in her, valium 5mgm and multivite tablets were recommended for her use. The therapist discovered that her problem began when she lost her son the previous year. After having four treatment sessions with her for a period of four weeks, she reported that she was no longer depressed.

Although studies abound on the effectiveness of counselling (Morakinyo, 1986; Adomeh, 1997; Aluede & Maliki, 1999) its overall importance is still questionable. This point is illustrated well in an analogy put forward by Willems (1973). Aspirin, Willem says, relieves a person of headaches. But the absence of aspirin we know does not cause headache. Similarly, while counselling could help to foster emotional adjustment among adolescents, it does not necessarily imply that emotional maladjustment among adolescents is caused by misguided treatment or absence of treatment. It is therefore imperative to stress the need to avoid the circular argument that unexplained behaviour changes occur as a result of faulty behavioural or counselling procedures (Nwabuoku, 1980).

In pursuit of the aforementioned objective, the study sought to establish the efficacy of Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy in fostering emotional adjustment among Nigerian adolescents. The major research question of this study therefore was, how effective is Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy in fostering emotional adjustment among adolescents? In order to adequately address this core question, the following sub-questions have been raised in this study:

1. Is there difference in the level of anxiety between research participants in the experimental group and those in the control group?

2. Is there difference in the level of depression between research participants in the experimental group and those in the control group?
3. Is there difference in the level of stress between research participants in the experimental group and those in the control group?

Method Of Study

The experimental design adopted for this study is the Post-test-only Control Group Design. The systematic random sampling method was used to select twenty-five adolescents each into the experimental and control groups. Subjects in the experimental group were treated with REBT twice a week for six weeks with each session lasting one hour. The instrument used for the study was the Odeunmi (19991) Anxiety, Depression and Stress scales in his Psychological test for counselling and health management, which has a concurrent validity of 0.50 at $P < .01$ level of significance.

Results

The results of the study indicated that the first hypothesis, which states that there was no significant difference in the level of anxiety between research participants in the experimental group and those in the control group, was rejected ($t = 2.92, P < 0.05$). From the inspection of the means, it was discovered that the experimental group ($M = 49.9, SD = 13.7$) had a lower level of anxiety when compared with that of the control group ($M = 46.4, SD = 6.16$).

The results of the study indicated that the second hypothesis, which states that there was no significant difference in the level of depression between research participants in the experimental group and those in the control group, was accepted ($t = 0.56, P < 0.05$). From the inspection of the means, it was discovered that the experimental group ($M = 46, SD = 6.16$) had a similar level of depression when compared with that of the control group ($M = 45.6, SD = 6.92$).

The results of the study indicated that the third hypothesis, which states that there was no significant difference in the level of stress between research participants in the experimental group and those in the control group, was rejected ($t = 2.26, P < 0.05$). From the inspection of the means, it was discovered that the experimental group ($M = 48.2, SD = 12.6$) had a lower level of stress when compared with that of the control group ($M = 45.6, SD = 5.28$).

Discussion Of Results

The finding of this study indicated that there was a significant difference in the level of anxiety between research participants in the experimental group when compared with those in the control group. In

effect, the counselling method, namely, Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) employed in the present study proved effective in reducing level of anxiety. The reason why the treated subjects improved significantly on their level of anxiety can be explained with the argument that anxiety, as adolescents' emotional adjustment problem is amenable to psychological treatment. Moreover, REBT assumes that man is uniquely rational, as well as irrational. When he is thinking and behaving rationally, he is effective, happy and competent. The REBT package in this study was used to make the subjects know this and they were made to incorporate this assumption into their thinking system. Since they accepted that their level of anxiety could be reduced when they think logically and rationally, it is not surprising therefore that treated subjects have lower level of anxiety than subjects in the control group.

This result supports the view that adolescents' emotional adjustment problems can be solved psychologically. This present finding also corroborated the result of earlier studies on efficacy of counselling in treating clients with emotional problems (Nwabuoku, 1980; Adomeh, 1997). As indicated by the present study's result, counselling is certainly superior to non-treatment condition as far as reduction of level of anxiety among treated adolescents is concerned. Studies already cited which support the effectiveness of psychotherapy in reducing the level of anxiety, are further supported by the result of this study. The efficacy of counselling in fostering emotional adjustment among treated subjects is one of the basic reasons the use of psychological tests is popular in counselling. The stand of the present researcher therefore is in support of the aforementioned researchers' position that less severe anxiety could be modified through psychotherapy.

The second finding indicated that no significant difference was found in the level of depression between research participants in the experimental group and those in the control group. On the basis of this finding, the claim of Ellis that REBT produces better results when applied to clients' emotional behaviour problems (Palmer, Dryden, Ellis and Yapp 1995) does not appear to be supported here. The result of this present study does not suggest the superiority of a treatment condition over a no treatment situation. The assertion of Eysenck (1952, 1955, 1960; 1961) cited by Nwabuoku (1980) and Adomeh (1997) over the years that counselling is not superior to a situation where there is no treatment can be revisited here. Although more evidence has been found by researchers in the field of counselling pointing to the efficacy of psychotherapy (Filani,

1984; Morakinyo, 1986 and Adomeh, 1997) the result of the present study dealing on the reduction of level of depression via REBT calls for caution. Since it is impossible to resolve the debate philosophically, it is advisable to adopt any of the several positions that have been vigorously advocated in this connection.

Another result of this study indicated a significant difference in the level of stress between research participants in the experimental and control groups. The implication of this is that REBT as a counselling method is effective in reducing the level of stress among treated subjects. The significant difference in the level of stress between the treated and non-treated adolescents can be explained by the fact that stress is a well-known health problem. Sometimes stressful situations lead to psychosomatic as well as gastrointestinal reactions such as peptic ulcer. Lack of concentration and low academic achievement could result from stress. The adolescent that had been told that his academic performance could improve if he or she is less stressful would generally embrace any coping means of doing so. The counselling strategy employed in this study was presented to the treated subjects as such coping means.

Moreover, the subjects of study were aware of their situational demands and the need to acquire effective adjustment skills as basic requirements for full human functioning. They were also aware that adherence to the demands of adjustment would enable them to adapt to their environment. Such demands require that they make a choice which would lead them to a rewarding future thus they preferred making a choice by applying REBT strategy to stressful situations. The result is a reduction in level of stress in their lives. The finding thus attests to that of Palmer (1992) who found that the application of RET's A-B-C-D-E paradigm and relaxation techniques to stressful situations proved effective stress management strategies.

Implications for counselling the Nigerian adolescents

The effectiveness of the counselling orientation employed in this study has far reaching implication for guidance and counselling in our educational setting. In this study, the Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) has been found to be useable and effective in treating adolescents' emotional adjustment problems. With those findings, Guidance Counsellors now have a handy technique for treating identified adolescents' emotional adjustment problems. Using this technique in treating adolescents' emotional adjustment problems would save a lot of time on the part of the School Counsellor.

The effectiveness of REBT found in this study in respect of reduction of levels of anxiety and stress among treated adolescents is a step forward in psychological research in our school system. Practicing Counsellors in Nigeria can continue in this area in their own ways so that they can either confirm the findings of this study or reject them.

The emotionally maladjusted teenagers are according to Adima (1989) found almost in every classroom; yet the school curriculum does not make special or adequate provision for their training. The School Counsellor can use the principles of REBT outlined in this study to draw up a treatment programme for such adolescents when identified.

In schools, especially in the developing nations of the world, where neither Guidance Counsellors nor Para-counsellors are not available, the classroom teacher whose aim is the effective management of the classroom climate in order to facilitate the teaching/learning process can adopt REBT as a counselling method for such a purpose. Researches have indicated that not all disturbing students require prolong psychological treatment (Adima, 1989; Gearheart, 1974). What the student might require at the on set might just be the teacher's attention or reassurance. The teacher can easily do that through the use of REBT.

Since there is a dearth of Guidance Counsellors in many schools in the developing world, knowledge of the efficacy of REBT in fostering emotional adjustment among teenagers has counselling implication for the students. The students can easily use the counselling orientation employed in this study even in the absence of Counsellors. Teaching the students to use REBT as a counselling method was an implied goal in this study. This goal was achieved through assignment of home works to members of the experimental group during the fieldwork. At the end it proved to be very useful.

Although Ellis' Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) as a counselling technique is highly philosophical, it is possible to use it to foster emotional adjustment among Nigerian adolescents. What is required of the therapist is to apply reason, logic, teaching, persuasion, suggestion, confrontation and if necessary, prescription, indoctrination and de-indoctrination so that the client can understand why he must change his irrational thinking which is the source of his problem. Although this task is an enormous one for the therapist, the result is equally great, as the adolescent would be effective, happy, rational and competent.

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