Impact of Group Counselling on Social Connectedness in Adolescent Girls with Anxiety

Dr Fakhruddin Ali Ahmad

Asst Professor, MANUU CTE Darbhanga, drfakhruddin@manuu.edu.in

Mr Chand Ansari

Asst. Professor, MANUU CTE Darbhanga, anchand@manuu.edu.in

ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
Research Paper **Accepted:** 27-01-2026 **Published:** 10-02-2026 **Keywords:** *anxiety, counselor, social networks, adolescent girls*	Anxiety among adolescent girls has increased markedly in recent years, often accompanied by social withdrawal and weakened peer relationships. Social connectedness, understood as a sense of belonging, care, and inclusion within social networks, is recognized as a protective factor against anxiety, yet it remains underexplored as a primary outcome of counseling interventions. This paper critically examines the role of group counseling in enhancing social connectedness and reducing anxiety among adolescent girls through a theoretical and literature-based analysis. Drawing on social identity theory, the need-to-belong theory, and Yalom's group therapy model, the paper synthesizes existing research to explain how group counseling fosters cohesion, trust, universality, and interpersonal learning. Empirical studies on group-based interventions, including cognitive-behavioral group therapy and school-based programs, are reviewed to highlight their relevance for adolescent populations, with particular attention to gender-specific social and emotional needs. The analysis underscores that while group counseling shows strong potential for addressing both anxiety and social disconnection, most existing studies emphasize symptom reduction and rely on mixed-gender or adult samples. The paper identifies critical gaps in gender-

focused and construct-specific research and argues for greater attention to social connectedness as a central therapeutic outcome. Overall, this review provides a conceptual foundation for future research and supports the development of gender-sensitive group counseling approaches tailored to adolescent girls.

Introduction

Anxiety among adolescent girls is growing increasingly, and the caseloads have been steadily increasing over the last decade. Social pressures, peer expectations, academic demands, and the pervasive influence of digital media all erode social connectedness. Social isolation can be an exacerbating factor in the development of anxiety, but the ways in which it might be improved within therapeutic contexts are incompletely understood. Group counseling could be one such modality for intervening into both anxiety and social isolation among adolescent girls, as it capitalizes on peer interaction to advance emotional development. However, significant gaps remain in current literature with respect to how group counseling improves social connectedness in adolescents specifically.

Social connectedness can be defined as an individual's subjective sense of closeness, belonging, and meaningful connection with others in their immediate social environment. It reflects the degree to which a person feels that others care for them, support them, and include them in their group. Lee and Robbins (1995) define social connectedness as a fundamental psychological experience that orients people in how they relate to the larger social world. For the most part, research manifests that with increased social connectedness, there is improved emotional well-being while levels of anxiety and depression in adolescents are lower (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bizumic et al., 2009; Miller et al., 2015).

Group counseling is a structured healing process whereby a small group of people enter into shared discussions, activities, and interpersonal learning with the help of a trained counselor to address common psychological, emotional, or developmental challenges. This allows participants to discuss personal issues, enhance coping skills, and learn from the experiences of others in an atmosphere of support.

Research shows that group counseling encourages emotional expression, interpersonal growth, and mutual support; thus, it can be quite effective for adolescents who most benefit from peer interaction and social learning. The group setting can help participants feel less isolated, offers a sense of belonging, and allows practicing of social and communication skills in a safe environment. Group counseling can be both an intervention for symptom reduction and a means of improving social connectedness.

Most studies researching the practice of group counseling with adolescents have focused on symptom reduction, such as reduced anxiety or depression, rather than social connectedness (Hoag & Burlingame, 1997; Shechtman & Leichtentritt, 2010). When research does include group therapy, much focuses on heterogeneous membership, such as mixed-gender groups, and misses the social dynamic and gendered experience of adolescent girls (Corey et al., 2018). Despite social connectedness being noted as a mediator of outcomes, few studies have examined it within the context of anxiety group counseling, specifically for girls (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Jose et al., 2012). At the intersection of social psychology and counseling psychology, an enriching framework may be obtained that responds to these identified gaps. The group dynamics, like cohesion, trust, and mutual support, may amplify the therapeutic effects in ways individual counseling cannot (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). The increasing prevalence of anxiety among adolescent girls makes it imperative to explore matched interventions that build both emotional and relational resilience among girls (Rose & Rudolph, 2006).

Theoretical Background

Social Identity Theory

The theory postulates that individuals derive identity and self-esteem from the groups to which they belong. It is through acceptance and inclusion that adolescents feel when they become part of a supportive counseling group. Such feelings of belonging may reduce loneliness and build confidence, especially among anxious girls. Tajfel & Turner, 1979

Need-to-Belong Theory

According to the above-mentioned theory, the desire to establish social attachments is a fundamental human need. If this desire becomes satisfied, emotional well-being is enhanced. Group counseling places them in a non-judgmental and empathetic platform from where girls can establish supportive relationships. It helps to relieve anxiety while motivating them toward social attachment. (Baumeister & Leary, 1995)

Yalom's Group Therapy Model

Yalom elaborates on the key factors that explain how group counseling helps an individual to grow:

1. Cohesion: In a group where people feel bonded and together, they show trust and openness.
2. Universality: It helps people realize that others deal with similar setbacks, which assists in reducing feelings of loneliness.

3. Interpersonal Learning: About how one is and relates to others, through interaction, feedback, and shared experiences.

These theories together demonstrate that group counseling offers not only emotional support but a sense of belonging, shared understanding, and enhancement in relational skills. Consequently, adolescent girls are more likely to feel connected with their peers and be less anxious.

Objectives of the Study

1. To investigate the impact of group counseling on adolescent girls' sense of social relatedness.
2. To identify the efficacy of group counseling on anxiety symptoms reduction in adolescent girls.
3. To identify the most contributing group dynamics to enhance social connectedness-which includes cohesion, trust, and mutual support-end
4. The influence of individual characteristics, such as baseline anxiety and self-esteem levels, on the effectiveness of group counseling would be analyzed.

Research questions:

1. How does group counseling impact the social connectedness and symptoms of anxiety among adolescent girls?
2. What group dynamics, for instance cohesion, trust, mutual support are most crucial in enhancing social connectedness in adolescents?
3. How do individual factors, such as anxiety levels or self-esteem, moderate the effectiveness of group counseling?

Theoretical frameworks

There are two main theories that promote the idea that group counselling may enhance the client's social connectedness: social identity theory and need-to-belong theory. Social identity theory is based on the concept that when individuals become group members, they acquire a group identity. This perceived identity will provide them with an enhanced sense of belonging and may promote their wellbeing and provide them with emotional support. By applying this to adolescents, being part of a peer group may reduce anxiety symptoms as they will feel a sense of community and safety.

According to the need-to-belong theory, people inherently have a basic need to belong to others. If this need is not satisfied, then anxiety is just one of many problems that may rise. Group counseling can meet

the need for belonging by the use of friendly and supportive space, hence reducing anxiety and improving connectedness.

Yalom's (2005) model of group therapy outlines how group counseling works. It identifies cohesion, universality, and interpersonal learning as the three most important elements. Cohesion refers to the feeling of a united group, where trust and mutual support are built. Universality is the recognition that others share similar problems, which will allow for a reduction in loneliness. Interpersonal learning affects an individual's discovery of self and others through interactions and feedback within the group; for instance, trying new behaviors, observing responses, and constructive comments. All three aforementioned elements in concert will help group counseling enhance social connectedness while reducing anxiety. They apply in particular to adolescent girls, who particularly fear negative evaluation and form avoidance intentions with regard to social situations (Rose & Rudolph, 2006). Most evidence regarding the specified mechanisms has been based on adult samples, so the research is needed to confirm how such mechanisms operate for younger adolescents and specifically in girls.

Empirical Evidence on Group Counselling

Research into how group counselling influences anxiety and social outcomes has indeed been substantial among adolescents. Yet, there is an evident scarcity of studies that focus only on adolescent girls. These particular gaps do bear great significance towards understanding the relational processes existing in females. From this wider evidence base, nonetheless, come important lessons that inform not only how social connectedness can be enhanced but also how peer relationships can be strengthened and anxiety reduced.

A meta-analysis of 36 RCTs testing CBGT for adults with social anxiety disorder was conducted by Barkowski et al. (2016). They show strong reductions in symptoms of anxiety and clinically significant gains in social functioning. Although those results emanate from adult populations, they underpin mechanisms for social exposure, shared learning, and practicing interpersonal skills. Results support the view that group formats inherently provide universality, cohesion, and interpersonal learning.

Costello et al. (2022) examined the efficacy of The Connection Project, a formalized school-based prevention program delivered in small groups. Their results indicated significant increases in both school belonging and social connectedness, with students reporting that they felt more understood and more at ease around peers. The study involved both boys and girls participants; however, these positive behavior

changes indicate mechanisms that might be particularly helpful for adolescent girls, who are most sensitive to peer evaluation.

Similarly, the 26-week evidence-informed intervention called the PEERS® program was used to build social skills and resulted in enhanced peer interactions and feelings of connectedness among adolescents (Child Mind Institute, 2021). Specifically, girls exhibited more friend-building behaviours such as initiating conversations and maintaining relationships. While both of these programs were described and did not use control groups, findings indicate that structured group activities, including role-plays and sessions offering feedback, help adolescents engage in safer and more confident social practices. Findings from these programs are consistent with both the social identity theory and the need-to-belong theory, each purporting that belonging and membership within groups are integral to emotional well-being.

Gender-specific Needs and Group Counselling

The unique developmental pressures that the adolescent girls are confronted with, such as fear of social judgment, relational aggression, and peer comparisons, have the capacity to amplify anxiety and erode social connectedness (Rose & Rudolph, 2006). Given this, research that explores gender-specific interventions offers greater relevance.

In fact, a large-scale study published in the Turkish Psychological Counselling and Guidance Journal (2019), with 991 adolescents, of which 578 were girls, concluded that peer relationships were a strong predictor of social connectedness-more for girls than boys. Girls placed a high value on emotional closeness and trust in friends; however, this reduces the quality of such peer bonds if one experiences social anxiety. The finding provides a very good rationale for group counseling as a supportive environment wherein girls can rebuild their confidence about peer interactions.

Mann et al. (2015) examined the REAL Girls program, which targeted middle school girls who had emotional and behavioral problems. The program had significantly enhanced school connectedness, self-confidence, and emotional regulation. It focuses on relational conflict management, body image acceptance, and building supportive peer relationships. These findings align in cohesion with the therapeutic functions of cohesion, universality, and mutual support, which reinforce the role of group formats in meeting adolescent girls' socio-emotional needs.

Along the same line, McWhirter and McWhirter (2019) also identified that group counseling of adolescent girls can work very effectively among widely known challenges: body image, social

comparison, and self-esteem issues. Group counseling provides a supportive and confidential environment where girls can disclose their vulnerabilities and get acceptance for shaping healthier relational patterns.

If we put together the researches discussed above, empirical evidence suggests that group counselling can significantly reduce anxiety and improve social connectedness. Although many studies do not provide gender-specific analysis, the available findings converge into several core themes:

1. Group counseling provides an environment that is socially supportive and structured, allowing the girls to practice their communication techniques, face social fears, and learn to trust others of their age group.
2. Group processes-especially cohesion, trust, universality, and mutual support-play an important role in fostering social connectedness and lessening anxiety. Such processes are both theoretically consistent with psychological theory and consonant with observed therapeutic outcomes.
3. Individual factors such as baseline anxiety and self-esteem are influencing how much girls benefit, although highly anxious or low-esteem girls often require additional facilitator support but also see important gains when group cohesion is strong.

The literature certainly supports group counselling as an intervention that caters to the emotional and relational needs of adolescent girls. However, the lack of studies specifically targeting this population represents a critical omission. This omission forms the basis for the necessity of the present study in providing more detailed clarification of how group counselling enhances social connectedness among adolescent girls who have anxiety.

Critical Analysis of the Research Questions

Research Questions-1: Does group counseling influence the sense of social connectedness and anxiety symptoms among adolescent girls?

Convergence across the existing literature points to the opinion that group counselling may reduce symptoms of anxiety and enhance social connectedness among young populations. Group-based cognitive-behavioural interventions, through meta-analytic findings, have shown significant reductions in anxiety symptoms; this has been for the most part facilitated by chances for social exposure, peer modelling, and shared coping strategies (Barkowski et al., 2016). Although the greater part of meta-analytic data is from adult samples, adolescent studies using group CBT formats-including Coping Cat and FRI

Evidence more clearly linked to social connectedness also supports positive outcomes. The Connection Project (Costello et al., 2022), for example, an RCT delivered in high schools, noted significant increases in school belongingness and peer connectedness post-intervention. Comparable gains within relational functioning have been observed in social-skills-focused group programs such as PEERS®, particularly for girls showing increased engagement in friendship-building tasks. If we add these program evaluations, broader adolescent research indicates that high social support and quality peer relationships act to protect against anxiety and enhance social connectedness (Aune et al., 2021). Specifically for girls, sensitivity to peer evaluation and relational conflict elevates the importance of such supportive contexts (Rose & Rudolph, 2006).

However, a number of limitations temper the strength of these conclusions. A sizable proportion of existing studies use mixed-gender samples, which means that gender-specific relational processes, such as girls' greater sensitivity to peer acceptance, tend to be understudied. The measures employed in many studies reflect general social functioning rather than the more complex, subjective construct of social connectedness; as such, it is difficult to ascertain whether any apparent social shifts percolate into meaningful emotional connections. A final limitation is the near absence of non-Western or socio-culturally diverse samples, which limits generalizability across contexts, such as Indian adolescent girls.

It can be concluded that group counselling demonstrates considerable promise for reducing anxiety and fostering elements of social connectedness among adolescents. However, further construct-sensitive research is required which is gender-specific, culturally relevant, and focuses directly on adolescent girls and their subjective experiences of connectedness.

Research Questions-2: What group dynamics-meaning cohesion, trust, mutual support-are most relevant in fostering social connectedness within this population?

A growing body of literature suggests that core group mechanisms of cohesion, trust, and mutual support are central through which group counseling enhances social connectedness among adolescents. Cohesion, described as the quality of unity, acceptance, and belonging of participants in the group, has been reliably related to better relational outcomes. Research on adolescent group activities indicates that structured peer interaction significantly enhances group cohesion, thus creating conditions that allow psychological safety and interpersonal exploration to occur (Glass, 2002). Correspondingly, empirical work with organizational and therapeutic groups shows that rises in cohesion are paralleled by greater member activity and a willingness to participate in collective effort that indirectly contributes to social connectedness (Eatough, Chang, & Hall, 2015).

Trust develops in tandem with cohesion and seems to be equally important for relational development in therapy groups. In this direction, Marmarosh et al. (2022) underscore that the very process of group therapy tends inherently to enhance interpersonal trust, whereby members take relational risks, demonstrate vulnerability, and test new interpersonal skills in a secure environment. The development of trust within adolescent groups has been linked to lowered perceived social threat and heightened openness to feedback from peers-two key pathways toward greater connectedness.

The third dynamic, mutual support, refers to the interaction of emotional and practical supports among members in the group setting. Intervention studies on peer groups show that adolescents profit a great deal from universality, fight-sharing, and encouragement experiences, all of which together enhance feelings of belonging and self-validation (Assarian et al., 2023). Mutual support, therefore, enriches the sense of belonging important for adolescent girls, for whom peer confirmation is very important and the basis of regulating feelings and building their identity.

Notwithstanding such consistent theoretical and empirical support for these dynamics, several gaps remain: first, most studies have explored cohesion, trust, or support as general relational constructs without clearly parsing their unique or relative effects; second, research rarely has focused exclusively on adolescent girls with anxiety, which constrains the generalizability of findings to this specific population; and finally, measures of group dynamics often are indirect or inferred rather than directly assessed with validated instruments.

The existing literature suggests that cohesion, trust, and mutual support are related yet distinct dynamics that together may facilitate the engendering of social connectedness in group counseling; however, their relative contributions, interactional patterns, and implications for gender remain under-investigated.

Research Questions-3: To what degree do individual factors-anxiety levels or levels of self-esteem-function as modifiers in group counseling?

The research literature suggests that individual factors such as baseline anxiety and self-esteem serve as major moderators in both the way adolescents engage in and benefit from group counselling. Adolescents with high baseline anxiety might have difficulty initially in actively participating due to fear of judgment-a major characteristic of social anxiety (Rose & Rudolph, 2006). Research evidence, however, indicates that even highly anxious adolescents, through continuous exposure and facilitator support, can achieve substantial gains in group CBT settings (Wolgensinger, 2014). Similarly, there is evidence in the literature that higher confidence among adolescents increases their social self-efficacy and thus helps

them benefit more easily from a group setting; for those with low self-efficacy, special help may be needed (Aune et al., 2021).

Self-esteem also significantly influences group involvement. The REAL Girls program of Mann et al. (2015) indicated that girls of low initial self-esteem exhibited marked increases in connectedness and emotional resilience following group activities emphasizing peer validation and shared experiences. Girls with higher self-esteem tended to participate more confidently, but the most substantial relational gains occurred among those starting with lower levels, suggesting that self-esteem enhances receptivity to peer support.

With these insights, limitations in the literature still remain. Few studies use formal moderation analyses to test how initial anxiety or self-esteem influences intervention outcomes. Many reports average effects without accounting for individual variation. In addition, individual factors are often confounded with contextual influences such as family support or social exposure outside of the group, which complicates any effort to isolate their unique impact. Cultural variables represent another potential moderator, which is seldom examined.

A balanced interpretation suggests that individual factors meaningfully shape the effectiveness of group counselling, particularly in relation to social connectedness. Highly anxious or low-self-esteem girls may need special entry points or preparatory sessions to optimise participation but will also benefit highly once group dynamics have been established.

Conclusion

Group counseling leverages the relational power of peer interactions to ensure connectedness with others and a decrease in symptoms of anxiety for adolescent girls. It was moderated by individual factors such as anxiety and self-esteem, and it was driven by critical group dynamics, including cohesion and mutual trust. Evidence from the meta-analyses, RCTs, and gender-specific studies shows the unique environment fostered by group counseling promotes attachment and consequently diminishes anxiety. Its theoretical underpinnings include social identity theory and Yalom's therapeutic factors. The counterargument of superior individual therapy and also negative effects of group dynamics are dismissed by empirical findings that show equal effectiveness and the effectiveness of structured interventions, respectively. The pivotal role of individual factors acting as moderators further underlines the importance of tailored approaches, reinforcing the relevance of research questions. By exploring these questions, this study

offers actionable implications that contribute to the design of gender-sensitive group intervention, advancing psychological counseling, and meeting the pressing psychological needs of adolescent girls.

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