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The Effects of Group Counseling with Gestalt Therapy in Reducing Depression, Anxiety and Stress among Traumatized People

Nizar ALI¹, Yagmur CERKEZ²

Abstract

The current study aimed to explore the effects of group counseling with Gestalt therapy in reducing psychological disorders such as depression, anxiety and stress among Yezidi Women who have fled the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. It also aimed to investigate the impact of Gestalt group psychotherapy in reducing the flashbacks of the traumatic events in Yezidi women who have been traumatized and experienced traumatic events which will help them to forget about their past experience and start a new life. The participants of the study consisted of (15) women from the age group (14-24) who were selected from Bersiv Camp2 located in Zakho city in North Iraq. Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale were used to reveal the levels of depression, anxiety and stress. The data was analyzed using independent sample t-test to examine the mean difference between the pretest and posttest of the level of depression, anxiety, and stress among the participants. The findings of this study indicated that these traumatized women suffered from depression, anxiety and stress. However, after undertaking group counseling with gestalt therapy techniques during two months, their levels of depression, anxiety and stress have been reduced. The differences were put to test and found to be significant. The researcher specified a number of recommendations and suggestions for further studies that will be of help for psychotherapists, psychologists and counselors to design psychological programs and strategies to control psychological disorders among traumatized people; especially women who have experienced traumatic events.

Keywords: group counseling, gestalt therapy, depression, anxiety, stress, traumatized people, social interaction, social support.

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Introduction

After the emergence of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, some northern towns and villages of Iraq were attacked Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) militias. As a result, 50,000 Yezidis evacuated their town and villages to seek for a safe haven. Yezidism is an ancient minority religion; its followers mainly reside in eastern north of Iraq. They firmly believe in God and Peacock angel and have nearly similar beliefs as Zoroastrians. Yezidism is a closed religion and other people cannot embrace their religion for cultural reasons. However, they were despised by ISIS because ISIS clerics defined them as worshippers of devil. The estimated number of Yezidis in the modern times goes about 100 thousands to almost half a million. They also live in different parts of Russia, Europe, and Middle East. After ISIS invaded Sinjar and other surrounding town and villages, many Yezidi women were captured by ISIS members and they were used as slaves for their masculine desires. ISIS members believe that those who are not Muslims can be used as their property and slaves. It is believed by them that anyone who fights for the Islamic state can own multiple Yezidi women as slaves and use them for sex as ISIS members believed that they are given by Allah to them as gifts. While the case with male captives was different, anyone who was aged 14 or older was immediately killed. They targeted at women. Ali (2015: 10-11) describes the brutal scene of how Yezidi women were dealt with by ISIS. They constructed a market for selling and buying women as goods, price tags were given to them, virginity and breasts were done on them, and young beautiful women would get better prices.

Throughout life, people become victims of different traumatic events. The events can be resulted from verbal abuse to sexual assaults which are generally common with women. The victims normally react similarly to these different traumatic events. There is an immediate reaction which psychologically known as dissociation by the victims of the traumatic events in which they experience numb feelings for a period of time. The sufferers feel alienation, outcast, and unresponsive to the outside world. As a result from this stress disorder, victims repeatedly suffer from nightmares and recurrences of the traumatic event. Gleitman, *et al* (2004) label these reactions as so intense and disturbing to the extent that the victims think that they are living the events again. According to the definition of depression, depressed people suffer from extreme sadness, they don't enjoy interesting activities they used to enjoy, and they lose the ability to do their daily activities. Based on the World's Health Organization (WHO), in 2017, there are many psychological symptoms that people with depression experience such as losing energy and appetite, disrupted sleep, not concentrating well, they cannot decide in time, tiredness, feelings guilty and worthless, and having suicidal thoughts.

When a person experiences a series of traumatic events like rape, war, or abuse, it will lead them to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This is considered a normal response to abnormal events by normal people. Anyone can be

distressed from the events that cause PTSD as they are extraordinary and happen suddenly. Additionally, our abilities to respond effectively can be decreased by these traumatic events. The effects of stress can be shown on one's awareness through causing fear of the unpleasant memories of the past traumatic events. Schiraldi (2009) indicates that people can suffer from stress by intrusive recollections which are abstract thoughts or images. These stressful and unstoppable intrusions are uncontrolled by the people who suffer them. The victims show various distressing symptoms. Among these symptoms, there are fear, vulnerability, feeling sad, disgusted, or guilty, and rage. Intrusions can break in people by mere triggers like when something makes people think about traumatic events.

In 2008, Ergun *et al* conducted a study to show the difference between psychological responses of two groups. The two groups were internally displaced and non-displaced Turkish Cypriots. The results showed that internally displaced Turkish Cypriots who experienced brutal events like losing family members, being captured, or murdered had higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress. Non-displaced participants showed a lower rate of the levels of posttraumatic stress (IDPs) than internally displaced people at 20%. Based on relevant data from BSI subscales, the levels of depression in IDPs is significantly higher than non-displaced people which are similar to the data of somatization subscale. It is revealed that the effect of war-related traumatic events affect negatively in raising the levels of depression, more sufferings, having negative thoughts about their future in IDPs, while non-displaced people do not show such high levels of psychological disorders.

Mujeeb & Zubair (2012) led an important study on the rate of depression in Pakistani women who were displaced due to internal armed conflicts; the results showed that there is a significant difference between the levels of depression in women in comparison to men. Their study concluded that there is a double-edged statistical association between the levels PTSD and displacement in which displacement is negatively related to resilience and positively to depression, anxiety, and stress. A similar research was carried out by Roberts *et al.* (2009) in northern Uganda where are of people were displaced. The results of their study revealed that women had higher level of depression than men as women were more exposed to torture, rape, killing, kidnapping, and sexually abused.

Moreover, studies on displaced teenagers had same results as in adults; for instance, Mels *et al.* (2010) state that adolescents in eastern Congo who were affected by war related events showed to be more violent and stressed than those teenagers who were not displaced after they returned to their places. Their study illustrated different mental health outcomes that despite of the traumatic events that adolescents had been through, there is a chance for adolescents to show more resilient outcomes when they are put in better socio-living conditions. There have been a number of studies to investigate to what extent social support and traumatic events could affect mental health outcomes. Traumatic experiences and social support can essentially have deep impact on the post-trauma outcomes in

an individual. To add more, their study determined that any social support whether by professionals or family members can be vitally important to empower people's abilities to overcome traumatic thoughts and outcomes after experiencing terrible traumatic events. The social support crucially helps to decrease negative outcomes. It also positively contributes to personal growth in post-trauma phase (Rieck *et al.*, 2005).

A study has been carried out in Darfur which focused on mental health problems. 430 internally displaced people who were placed of Fasher and Nyala town participated in the study. According to the results, 72% of the participants were dissatisfied with the living conditions as post-traumatic stress disorder were spread at (54%), while general distress (70%) among IDPs. Physical symptoms were shown more in women than in men. The marital status as a component showed different data. Based on data of Hamid & Musa (2010) stated that there were prominent signs of anxiety, distress, and social dysfunction in married participants. Conversely, unmarried participants reported to have a better ability to avoid these psychological disorders. Therefore, it can be stated that there is a strong connection between traumatic events and psychological disorders. This connection is considered the positive correlation between psychological disorders and experiencing traumatic events (Smith & Yule, 2000).

Several epidemiological researches have shown a nexus between traumatic experience and psychological factors (Brownell, 2016; Cohen, 2003; Leung & Khor, 2017; Singla *et al.* 2018). Depression, anxiety, and stress are thought to be the most common psychological conditions. According to Ellegaard & Pedersen (2012), depression, anxiety, and stress are the consequences of a traumatized event. Thus, individual psychological intervention is suggested as the primary treatment, while medical treatment is secondary. Meanwhile, Gatchel *et al.* (2007) observed that different theories have been developed to provide explanation on the consequence of traumatized event have not been comprehensive. However, Imes *et al.* (2002) reported that in the of explaining the depression, anxiety, and stress, "Gestalt therapy" has the potential, and in using the therapy, what is most important for the traumatized people is for them to be understood. Individual psychotherapy was suggested with a view to understand the people's subjective experience, since everyone have different experience. The effectiveness of psychological intervention through Gestalt therapy was demonstrated in the study of Hoffman *et al.* (2007), while it corroborates the study of Bretz, Heekerens, & Schmitz (1994) who reported that Gestalt therapy is an effective psychotherapeutic form of therapy and not inferior to other psychotherapy methods. Meanwhile, Leung & Khor (2017) posits that people with anxiety have lower self-efficacy.

It is believed that traumatized events have implications on the mental health of the people experienced it, and as such gestalt approach was suggested (Cohen, 2003). According to Spagnuolo Lobb (2013), "gestalt therapy is a humanistic, phenomenological, and experimental approach". From the paradoxical theory of change in the gestalt approach, it is postulates that "change is only possible when

people have full awareness and truly become who they are, and do not attempt to become what they are not” (Beisser, 1972). Strumpfel & Goldman (2002) observed that the main idea of this approach is to maintain contact with self and the environment. In addition, Spagnuolo Lobb (2013) stated that gestalt approach aims to assist traumatized people to regain their spontaneity and their fullest being in the contact. In view of these, traumatized people will continue to have certain degree of depression, anxiety, and stress from the traumatized event if there is no intervention, therefore, owing to the effectiveness of Gestalt therapy, there is need to investigate its effectiveness in the case of Yezidi women in Iraq who are traumatized and needs intervention but have not been studied. Therefore, this study will fill the gap by investigating the effectiveness of Gestalt therapy as an intervention to reduce depression, anxiety, and stress among Yezidi traumatized women.

Literature review

Gestalt therapy

There are many methods of psychological therapy that work on groups; Gestalt therapy can be considered the best therapy for a group framework. Gestalt approach is considered to be an approach under the canopy of “humanistic approach” (Unubol & Tapaloglu, 2020). It was developed by Perls, Perls, and Goodman in 1940s (Gaines *et al.* 1979). In consideration of the basis on which the approach is anchored, it can be understood that it is designed by numerous theories and opinions such as “humanist approach”, “existential approach”, “phenomenological approach”, “holistic view field”, and, “theory and Far Eastern philosophy” (Unubol & Tapaloglu, 2020). The focus of Gestalt therapy is on the present time and adopts the “now and now” approach. In other words, the main concepts addressed through the application of Gestalt are concepts like “awareness”, “communication”, “forms of communication, and “personal responsibility” (Akkoyun, 2001: 85-89). According to Akkoyun (2001: 85-89), awareness is a kind of experience that is considered to be a nexus between the present reality and the individual’s own being (Houston, 2003; Joyce & Sills, 2018; Latner, 1983). Akkoyun (2001) stated that it also includes the aggregation of knowledge about communicating with other people, responsibility for election, self-acceptance, insight, and preconscious. According to Seligman & Reichenberg (2015), gestalt therapy can be effectively employed for addressing various disorders like emotional disturbance, adjustment disorders, anxiety disorders, personality traits disorders, and artificial disorders.

Another significant concept in Gestalt approach is communication and communication styles (Unubol & Topaloglu, 2020). Unubol & Topaloglu (2020) stated that these concepts provide explanation on how individuals communicate and they adapt to or differ from their needs and environments. Communication

in the sense is seen as a means of life for growth (Yorgun & Voltan-Acar, 2014); also essential for survival and change (Voltan-Acar, 2004). Latner (1983) posits that communication according to gestalt approach implies contact the self and surroundings without losing their personality (Latner, 1983). The ways of contacting is what Unubol & Topaloglu (2020) considered to be communication style. In reference to the principle of Gestalt approach, there available six contact style which are: desensitization, retroflection, confluence, introjection, deflection, and projection. Awareness about communication styles is very important because it assist individual to understand their resistance and unfinished business, and in every change and growth, contact is an inevitable part (Akkoyun, 2001:85-89).

The focus of Gestalt therapy turns around direct experience and actions. It doesn't merely concentrate on theoretical talking about conflicts or feelings. Any future concerns that cause anxiety in people can be ratified in the present. This therapy helps members to know more about their stressors. The group members make a coral shift to taking actions than mere talking. To raise awareness within the group members, Gestalt therapy intensifies their present experiences through practicing some interventions. During the therapy, the therapeutic group members can enhance the work of the individual who is the focal point through the above mentioned techniques. The leader of the group can link other members of the group to the problem for the purpose of exploring it. The significance of the intrapersonal processes in a group psychotherapy format falls on the beliefs and assumptions of the individuals and their internal systems which include (awareness, behavior, biogenetics, and past and present sociocultural systems). The essence of the intrapersonal process is the interaction of the individuals through role-playing the rules and the norms of the group as a whole. A dynamic and complex group climate can be created through constantly changing and evolving phenomenological processes. Corey (2009) asserts that the group therapist must provide a flow of information on the multi-processes and focus on the most relevant process that creates different opportunities for group members to learn, raise awareness, know about personal growth, and understand change.

Depression, Anxiety, Stress and Gestalt group therapy

Roubal (2007) stated that traditional medicine considers depression and its symptoms to be a disease, and a malfunction that requires fixing. In reference to psychiatric diagnosis, a depressed person suffers low mood, reduction of energy and activities, decrease in the ability to feel pleasure, lack of concentration, and often tiredness (Roubal, 2007). Meanwhile, from Gestalt perspective, Perls, Hefferlin, & Goodman (1990) stated that symptoms are considered to be a product of a creative self and display human uniqueness. Greenberg, Watson, & Goldman (1998) observed that Gestalt therapy focuses more on the generating process specificity of depression, which did not perceive the symptoms to be a discrete item, but as a narrowed spectrum of functions. The second units of Gestalt

diagnosis is the therapist awareness. The curious observation of therapist is on what is happening to him/herself in contact with a depressed client. Roubal (2007) posits that the manner at which Gestalt therapy created a diagnosis has merit that it acknowledges the inevitably subjective point of view of the diagnosed client.

Cohen (2003) observed that Gestalt therapy is a treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder" (PTSD) that offers "phenomenology and I-Thou dialogue" as an effective therapeutic units from strategic perspective; from the tactical perspective, it offers special mechanism for surfacing previous trauma-related conflicts and provide solution to them presently; and from a theoretical perspective, Gestalt is posited as a treatment of choice for this syndrome. One of the most effective therapies in psychology is Group Psychotherapy. This psychotherapy helps members of the group to relieve their stress, anxiety, and depression in a similarly social circle to share their feelings and symptoms in which helps them to develop their mental and interpersonal health (Yalom & Laszcz, 2005). The American Group Psychotherapy Association published Practice Guidelines in 2007 in which they dictate that there is rich diversity in group psychotherapy in terms of problems, race, ethnicity, age, ego strength ... etc. It has been recommended by AGPA that the psychotherapists who lead the group psychotherapy must facilitate to put together members who can unite and motivate each other to overcome their psychological disorders. One of the best characteristics of Gestalt psychotherapy is that it, when practiced according to phenomenologically, flexibility, and sensitivity, suits a culturally diverse context group as it is always compatible with the client's background (Frew & Spiegler, 2013).

Feder and Frew (2008) report that there was a practice of hot seat, interpersonal, and group system approaches by 54% of the psychotherapists who used Gestalt psychotherapy. Earley (2000) adds more explanations about the Gestalt's interpersonal approaches and says that the focus of these approaches is on the access that the clients have to their unuttered feelings and unfinished gestalts. The focus is also on the present time, while the focus is on the previous two levels in the group-as-a whole approach. A study was conducted by Sisson and Carpenter (1977) to provide counseling for married couples. This study examined the efficiency of combining Transactional Analysis with Gestalt therapy. Two target groups participated in these studies which were 12 control-groups and six married couples. The change of the level of the self-esteem of the participants was assessed by administering a pre/post measure on the Tennessee Self Concept Scale. According to the results, self-acceptance in relationship to other or to family members was highly significant. Married couples can benefits from this combination approach as well.

Leung & Khor (2017) observed that even though the community of gestalt therapy strongly advocates for empirical evidence, yet studies on the approach are still limited (Roubal *et al.* 2016). While four-session gestalt group was conducted for students' awareness of their reactivity in coping with anxiety by Serok (1991), similar study by O'Leary *et al.* (2003) launched a six-session gestalt group.

Meanwhile, empirical study by Leung *et al.* (2013) demonstrates that participant's anxiety levels were significantly reduced after the session with gestalt therapist. Though, Leung & Khor (2017) observed some deficiency with those studies methodology as the study stated that the samples in the studies of O'Leary *et al.* (2003) and Serok (1991) are deficient in samples, while the study of Leung *et al.* (2013) was criticized owing to the absence of comparison group. Meanwhile, Tyson & Range has a contrary opinion on the effectiveness of gestalt therapy. The study opined that anxiety level of people reduced over time, even without having a gestalt therapy session. In view of this mixed findings, it becomes imperative to employ the approach to investigate its effectiveness on the Yediz women that are going through post-trauma expression which has the consequences of depression, anxiety, and stress.

The current study

The statement of the problem of the current study was that traumatic events cause psychological disorder; therefore, it is a fact that displaced people are prone to suffer stress that is resulted from escaping. Due to nonstop wars in Middle East, especially in Iraq, a lot of people were displaced from their town and villages. ISIS, the terrorist group, attacked the city of Sinjar and many surrounding towns and villages; as a result, a lot of families evacuated their city in search for a safe haven. During the escape process, many Yezidi women and girls could not make it to escape and they were captured by ISIS members. Furthermore, Yezidi women and girls were exposed to unbearable and extreme torture, used as sex tools, raped by ISIS members, bought and sold, and injured during the traumatic events that happened to them. However, a number of Yezidi women and girls, under unbelievably difficult circumstances, after 2016, fled ISIS and reached North Iraq. They live in different refugee camps. The main objectives of this study was to investigate Gestalt therapy's effect in group counseling to reduce depression, anxiety, and stress among a group of Yezidi women who have been through traumatic events and fled ISIS. Furthermore, the study hypothesized on three different phases that a significant difference can be spotted in the levels of depression, anxiety, and stress between the pretest and posttest. The hypotheses are as follows:

H1: There is significance mean difference between pretest and posttest of depression among the traumatized Yediz women.

H2: There is significance mean difference between pretest and posttest of anxiety among the traumatized Yediz women.

H3: There is significance mean difference between pretest and posttest of stress among the traumatized Yediz women.

Methodology

Participants

Yezidi women at the Bersiv Camp in Zakho city were invited to participate in the present study. The recruitment form was examined to remove those women that above the required age for the study. A sample of participants consists of (15) women who have been escaped from ISIS hands were selected. The participants were openly recruited via talking to the camp management and seek for their permission to talk to the women after explaining the content and purpose of the research. Subsequent to the discussion with the management, 25 women signified their intention to participate in the session by filling the recruitment form and the pre-group questionnaire, and were reduced to 15 after excluding those that are not within the age cohort required.

Procedure

The type of the current research is mixed method that involves qualitative and quantitative research approaches (experiments and questionnaires). Before applying the questionnaires among the participants of the study, ethical approval was obtained from the university's research ethics committee and the camp management. Thereafter, informed consent was given to the participant, and each participant had a code to fill the form. Moreover, secrets of all the participants are kept confidential. The research period was (two months) during peer week there were two sessions and each session lasted an hour. During the period, gestalt group was conducted for the participants.

Measures

This study employed validates Depression, anxiety, and stress scales (DASS). The scales are originally in English language and participants of the study were Yezidi women who speak Arabic language and from different culture. Therefore, to verify the validity of the scale the researcher has given the DASS scale to ten experts in psychology for the validity of the scale. The Arabic version of the scales has been validated. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated as 0.90 for depression, 0.91 for anxiety, and 0.91 for stress. Then, for the Arabic reliability of the scale, research instrument was conducted on the participants of the study. Arabic version reliability scores the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated 0.86 for depression, 0.88 for anxiety, and 0.88 for stress. The Cronbach alpa value for all the scales is consistent with the recommended threshold of 0.8 for an acceptable reliability for a questionnaire scale (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995).

Data analysis

Descriptive statistic was used to explain the background information of the participants. To examine the effectiveness of the gestalt approach to the group, the difference between the pretest and posttest was determine for each of depression, anxiety and stress with the use of independent sample *t*-tests. This method of analysis will enable the researcher to make an inference from the hypothesis investigating the effectiveness of gestalt approach to reduce depression, anxiety, and stress among Yezidi women.

*Sessions and activities of the group therapy**Table1. Gestalt Session and activities*

Session number	Topic of session
First session	The researcher welcomed and thanked the participants for their participation, then introduced them to each other. The informed consent was given to them which was made in accordance with all the ethic codes of the American Counseling Association. Then, the participants were informed about attendance policy and responsibilities. After the informed consent was signed, the instrument of Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale was used to collect data as a pretest.
Second session	In this session, the researcher explained the (Symptoms of Depression, Anxiety and Stress). Then, the participants discussed or shared their feelings and emotions in the group as encouraged by the researcher. At the end of the session, an exercise was given to them on how to deal with the above-mentioned symptoms.
Third session	The session started with a small discussion concerning the exercise which was given to them in the previous session. The topic for today's session was (How to deal with Life Circumstance), and the homework was a set of instruction on how to be an active participant in the social environment.
Fourth session	This session's topic was (Psychological Awareness) which was comprehensively explained by the researcher after the homework's discussion. The session ended with self-awareness techniques as homework.
Fifth session	The participants shared their homework in the group. A story was the main topic of today's session. The story is named (Unfinished Business) which is a significant story in Gestalt Therapy. This is followed by homework as usual.

Sixth session	After the participants were given the chance to share their homework. A small discussion was initiated after the presentation of the session's topic which was (Self-confidence), followed by self-confidence building techniques as homework.
Seventh session	As usual, homework was shared. Then the rest of the session was occupied with deep dialogues among the participants and the researcher concerning different aspects of their lives with (Dialogic Relationship) as the main theme. This is followed by homework as usual.
Eighth session	After the end of homework collection, the researcher introduced (Hot-seat) which is a Gestalt therapy technique. The participants took turns sitting on the seat. This was ended with homework.
Ninth session	The main topic of this session was (Nothing Exists Outside the Now). The aim of introducing this topic was to help the participants realize that past and future have no realities of their own and all that matters is the present moment. This topic was elaborately discussed among the participants with the guidance of the instructor.
Tenth session	The researcher reviewed what has been learned during group counseling, distributed the questionnaire as post-test and finally expressed appreciation and thanked the participants for their kind contribution.

Results

The significance of mean difference between pretest and posttest of depression among the Yezidi women as hypothesized was first examined and the result summarized and presented in Table 2. The result as presented in Table 2 shows that pretest has a value of 51.33 which according to Hamilton (1960) falls under extremely depressed level that requires clinical trial. However, the mean value for the posttest (2.73) reveals a normal depression level. There obvious difference between the value but in order to test its significance, the calculated value as presented in the table is greater than the critical value which implies the significant mean difference between the two session. With the p-value (<0.01), we accept hypothesis 1 and conclude that the mean difference between the pretest and posttest on depression among the women. The significance of the mean difference is an indication of the effectiveness of the gestalt therapy that was applied and reflects in the mean value of posttest.

Table 2. Independent sample t-test between pretest and posttest according to the level of depression

Depression	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Calculated	Critical	Sig.
Pretest	15	51.33	11.381	3.416	2.145	0.001
Posttest	15	2.73	2.154			

The examination of the mean difference between pretest and posttest for level of anxiety as hypothesized in hypothesis 2 is presented in Table 3. The result illustrates a 47.67 mean value for pretest level of anxiety which according to Zung (1971) reveal a moderate level of anxiety, while the posttest mean value shows a value of 1.53 which indicate a normal level of anxiety. According to the presented information in the table the standard deviation of pretest is (11.381) and posttest is (2.154). The examination of a significant difference between the two session, the calculated t-value (3.416) and critical t-value (3.415) were examined together with the p-value (<0.01). Therefore, this study accept hypothesis 2 and conclude that there is a significance difference between pretest and posttest of anxiety level which means that, the techniques of gestalt group therapy of this study had a positive role in reducing the level of depression among participants of the study.

Table 3. Independent sample t-test between pretest and posttest according to the level of anxiety

Anxiety	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Calculated	Critical	Sig.
Pretest	15	47.67	2.820	3.416	3.415	0.001
Posttest	15	1.53	0.915			

The result presented in *Table 4* shows the mean value for the pretest and posttest for stress level. The pretest score has a mean value of 2.820 and posttest score is 0.915. According to Foa *et al.* (1993), the total score for level of stress scale can range from 0-36 with higher score indicating higher severity of post-traumatic stress disorder. Though, the mean value are different, but to test its significance, the calculated t-value (37.166) and critical t-value (2.145) were examined which in addition shows a p-value (<0.01). This shows that there is a significant mean difference between the level of stress before applying the gestalt approach and after applying gestalt approach. Therefore, this study support hypothesis 3 and conclude gestalt therapy is effective in reducing level of stress. In addition, it is clear that, the level of anxiety is decreased. Gestalt therapy sees that anxiety is the fear of one's own daring. It is the conflict that arises when people are caught between their interest in something and their fear of it, and as such it was addressed during the sessions and shows in the results.

Table 4. Independent sample t-test between pretest and posttest according to the level of stress

Stress	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Calculated	Critical	Sig.
Pretest	15	49.80	4.663	37.166	2.145	0.000
Posttest	15	2.67	2.024			

In summary, the results presented in *Table 2*, *3*, and *Table 4* shows there are significant differences between scores of pretest and posttest related to depression, anxiety, and stress. The three hypotheses were supported. According to the findings, the level of depression, anxiety, and stress are reduced after the group therapy period. The techniques of gestalt therapy had a fundamental role in this counseling process for instance, one of the mains goals of gestalt therapy is to increase awareness, which will stimulate the participants to grow, mature, be self-responsible and move toward autonomy and self-actualization.

Discussion

The current study investigated Gestalt therapy's effect in group counseling to decrease the levels of depression, anxiety, and stress which are known as psychological disorder. The aim of the study was to perform a psychological experiment as a pretest and a posttest on a group of Yezidi women who fled ISIS to check the levels of depression, anxiety, and stress. It also aimed to put the participants of the study under investigation to check the effect of the Gestalt therapy in decreasing the levels of depression, anxiety, and stress. The solid results supported study's hypotheses as the results showed significant differences in the levels of the three psychological disorders in the pretest and posttest. More precisely, the levels of depression, anxiety, and stress were prominently reduced after the pretest. The findings from this study is consistent with some previous studies who conducted similar study and demonstrate in their studies that Gestalt therapy is effective in addressing level of depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (Bretz, Heekerens, & Schmitz, 1994; Hooffman *et al.* 2007; Imes *et al.* 2007; Leung & Khor, 2017; Leung *et al.* 2013; Sisson & Carpenter, 1997; Spagnuolo Lobb, 2013; Yalon & Laszcs, 2005). Possible reason for the changes in their level of depression, anxiety, and stress could be consequence of awareness, and communication and communication style which are the principles of gestalt therapy. The participants were encouraged to have self-acceptance, which according to Akkoyun (2001) will enable them to have contact with self and environment without losing their personality. In addition, the participants felt relieved through their involvement in the gestalt sessions. Moreover, the participants stated that they felt relieved from the depression symptoms, anxiety and stress as a result of their communication with the therapist. This could be owing to fact that the participants

developed more awareness of their personal needs which makes it possible for them to have inner experience reduced. Meanwhile, our findings contradicts the position of Tyson and Range (1987) who stated that that anxiety level of people reduced over time, even without having a gestalt therapy session.

Conclusion

This current study examined the effects of group counseling employing Gestalt Therapy in reducing depression, anxiety and stress among traumatized people. The results concluded that female Yezidi survivors experienced depression, anxiety and stress, but after taking the group therapy for two months, the levels of these three psychological disorders among participants of the study reduced. This experimental study had an important role to make the participants of the study aware of their thoughts, behavior and emotions, on the one hand, the present study encouraged the participants to feel their values in their environment and participate in social interactions. Finally, the findings of the study may serve as a key contributor to help them think positively in their current life, verifying the very psychological fact that one of the major goals of counseling psychology sessions is the long-term goal, which will support the clients of the study to rely on. The current study results can help experimental studies such as group counseling in decreasing the levels of psychological disorders such as depression, anxiety and stress among internally-displaced persons especially children, women and men who have experienced traumatic events. Additionally, the findings of the study may help different psychological organizations to provide several psychological activities aimed at bettering self-esteem and scaffolding psychological support to the survivors of traumatic events. Due to absence of time and non-cooperative of most of the women, the limitation of this study lies in the sample size which could affect its generalizability. In the future work, it would be useful to hold more sessions and encourage more participants so as to ensure robustness of the findings and enable generalization of the results.

Recommendations

This study investigate the effect of Gestalt Therapy on ameliorating depression, anxiety and stress among traumatized women in North Iraq and the study found that Gestalt Therapy is highly effective in reducing depression, anxiety and stress, as the hypotheses formulated were found to be significant. Therefore, we suggest that the psychologist should endeavor to use Gestalt Therapy for their counseling. In addition, it is evident from our findings that traumatized people can get relieved if they have an opportunity to be counseled, hence government agencies and non-governmental agencies in charge of traumatized people should employ Gestalt Therapy to reduce depression, anxiety, and stress among them.

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