

## ORIGINAL RESEARCH

## The effectiveness of transactional analysis therapy, schema therapy, and emotionally focused therapy on interpersonal forgiveness among university students experiencing emotional failure

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### Abstract

**Objective:** University students are particularly vulnerable to emotional distress, especially during times of academic pressure, relationship challenges, or personal loss. Emotional failure can lead to negative emotional states, such as anger, resentment, and bitterness, which can hinder personal growth and interpersonal relationships. This study investigated the effectiveness of interpersonal analysis group therapy, schema therapy, and emotionally focused therapy on interpersonal forgiveness among university students experiencing emotional failure.

**Materials and Methods:** This study utilized a quasi-experimental pre-test-post-test control group design. A convenience sample of 60 participants was randomly assigned to one of four groups: transactional analysis therapy, schema therapy, emotionally focused therapy, or a control group. The Interpersonal Forgiveness Measurement Questionnaire (IFMQ) was administered to collect pre- and post-intervention data. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 22, employing analysis of covariance and Bonferroni post hoc tests.

**Results:** The findings revealed that transactional analysis therapy, schema therapy, and emotionally focused therapy significantly enhanced interpersonal forgiveness in university students experiencing emotional failure compared to the control group ( $P < 0.001$ ). Moreover, no statistically significant differences were observed among the effects of these three therapeutic interventions on interpersonal forgiveness in this population.

**Conclusion:** The study found that transactional analysis therapy, schema therapy, and emotionally focused therapy were all effective in increasing interpersonal forgiveness among university students who had experienced emotional failure. This suggests that psychotherapists can choose any of these therapies based on the individual needs of their clients.

**Keywords:** Transactional analysis, Schema therapy, Emotions, Forgiveness, Students

## Introduction

Romantic relationships are often sought as a primary life goal, but their dissolution can lead to significant emotional distress (1). Emotional failure has been associated with a range of negative physical and psychological consequences, including increased vulnerability, social isolation, weakened immune function, and diminished psychological resilience (2). This condition, marked by persistent symptoms and impaired functioning, can significantly impact individuals' well-being (3). Notably, individuals who experience emotional failure often exhibit decreased levels of interpersonal forgiveness (4). The concept of forgiveness is a positive personality trait that has garnered significant attention from researchers in many countries, including Iran, in recent years. Psychologists have conducted substantial research on the impacts of forgiveness on emotional well-being, physical health, and healthy interpersonal relationships in various societies (5). In essence, forgiveness can be defined as the act of pardoning and a state of being pardoned, characterized by the release of resentment towards a wrongdoer, the waiver of claims for compensation, and the relinquishment of blame (6). Interpersonal forgiveness enables individuals to maintain relationships with others despite their mistakes or failures, allowing for the fulfillment of expectations with fewer obstacles and preventing negative emotions from hindering intimacy (7). Forgiveness indicates a more complex cognitive capacity and contributes to the persistence and strengthening of relationships in the face of threats. Consequently, forgiveness is a powerful tool for establishing and maintaining long-term, serious romantic relationships (8). Moreover, forgiveness necessitates a deeper understanding of the other person, fostering a more realistic rather than idealistic perspective (9).

Numerous treatments have been proposed for the treatment of heartbreak syndrome and related disorders. One therapy that has shown positive effects in this area is transactional analysis therapy (10). Transactional analysis therapy is a method focused on personality and a systematic intervention for personal growth and change (11). As a personality theory, it provides a model of the psychological structure of individuals (12). Introduced by Berne (12),

this therapy is based on the concept of ego states, which are divided into three parts: Parent, Adult, and Child. The Parent represents the part of the personality influenced by parental values, beliefs, and behaviors. The Child seeks pleasure, playfulness, and the experiences of childhood. The Adult reflects mature emotions and responses. Berne (12) argued that transactional analysis therapy is primarily applicable to interpersonal and marital relationships, providing useful predictions and representations of these interactions. It is assumed that by establishing healthy and positive relationships and replacing destructive ones, individuals can reduce their psychological stress (13). This therapy facilitates deep connections and leads to improved interpersonal problem-solving, better resolution of personal conflicts, reduced symptoms of heartbreak, and increased differentiation (14). Another therapy that can impact the cognitive and emotional dimensions of females experiencing emotional failure is schema therapy (15). This intervention is an approach that examines how past attitudes and beliefs influence a person's current relationships. This therapy focuses on self-destructive patterns of thought, emotion, and behavior that originate in childhood and are repeated throughout a person's life (16). Failure to meet basic needs in childhood leads to the formation of maladaptive schemas (17). Schema therapy is based on the belief that unique childhood experiences play a crucial role in forming beliefs about oneself and others that persist throughout life and influence one's relationships with oneself and others (18). Schemas involve assumptions about how relationships are and how they should be (19). Therefore, schema therapy seeks to identify, modify, and change these schemas, ultimately improving romantic relationships (20). In line with this, Aflakian et al. (21) demonstrated in their research that schema therapy can be an effective approach in treating psychological issues.

Another therapy that can effectively influence the cognitive and emotional growth of girls experiencing emotional failure is emotionally focused therapy. The foundation of emotionally focused therapy is personal growth and self-actualization, and the primary goal of therapy is individual balance (22). Emotionally focused therapy is one of the most effective therapies for

reducing family therapy problems (23). There is a complex relationship between cognition and emotion, and many clinical problems stem from difficulties in emotional processes. Therefore, addressing clinical issues requires restructuring emotional experiences and emotion-focused interventions (24). Vafaei et al. (25) believes that emotions can transform a person's entire being. Thus, paying attention to emotions in therapy is crucial because they can provide valuable information essential for mental health (26). Emotionally focused therapy is more intuitive than rational, and emotions can be used to change emotions. The primary goal of emotionally focused therapy is to help individuals identify and express their core attachment needs, desires, and concerns, thereby reducing insecure attachment and fostering secure attachment (27). This approach emphasizes the role of emotional experiences and a systemic perspective on how interactional cycles maintain problems, thus moving towards integration of the individual's internal and interpersonal worlds in emotionally focused therapy (28). As discussed, individuals experiencing emotional failure grapple with psychological and emotional difficulties, and their level of interpersonal forgiveness is significantly reduced. This research addresses the concern of which therapy is more effective in improving interpersonal forgiveness among university students who have experienced emotional failure. While research has shown that each of these interventions is effective individually, no studies have compared the effectiveness of group transactional analysis therapy, schema therapy, and emotionally focused therapy on interpersonal forgiveness among university students who have experienced emotional failure, given their distinct therapeutic approaches. Therefore, this study aims to compare the effectiveness of group transactional analysis therapy, schema therapy, and emotionally focused therapy on interpersonal forgiveness among university students who have experienced emotional failure.

## Materials and Methods

### *Study Sample*

A quasi-experimental pre-test-post-test control group design was employed in this study. The

target population comprised all female university students at Khorasgan University who had experienced emotional failure in 2022. A convenience sample of 60 female students meeting the inclusion criteria was selected. Participants were required to score above the mean on a romantic failure questionnaire, be able to attend therapy sessions, and have experienced romantic failure for at least six months. Those with neurological or psychological disorders, severe depression, or excessive missed therapy sessions were excluded. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four groups: transactional analysis therapy, schema therapy, emotionally focused therapy, or a control group, with 15 participants in each group.

After obtaining ethical approval from the university, a call for participation was issued to various faculties. Eligible students who scored above average on the emotional failure questionnaire were invited for in-person interviews. During these interviews, the research procedures were explained to potential participants. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four groups: transactional analysis therapy, schema therapy, emotionally focused therapy, or a control group. Each therapy group underwent eight 90-minute sessions, summarized in Tables 1, 2, and 3, respectively. All therapy sessions were conducted by trained psychotherapists. The control group received no intervention. Informed consent was obtained from all participants to ensure ethical compliance.

Table 1. A summary of transactional analysis therapy sessions

Sessions	Content
1	Introduction to group rules, structural analysis, and the analysis of verbal and nonverbal communication.
2	Introduction to Transactional Analysis and ego states, awareness of emotional control, structural analysis, and ego-gram development.
3	Disruption of specific situations, focus on verbalization process, and acceptance activities.
4	Exploration of covert and ulterior transactions, and the third rule of relationship formation.
5	Disruption of life stories, mindfulness development, value assessment, and goal setting aligned with values.
6	Learning to identify and stop psychological games.
7	Mindfulness practice, distinction between process and outcome, existential state exploration, and inner child healing.
8	Session summary, final suggestions, and post-test administration.

Table 2. A summary of schema therapy sessions

Sessions	Content
1	Rapport building, initial assessment, commitment acquisition, and problem identification.
2	Schema and coping style education, maladaptive schema identification, and schema-problem linking.
3	Cognitive strategies, coping response limitations, schema-healthy aspect dialogue, devil's advocate technique, and educational task development.
4	Cognitive techniques, cognitive strategy presentation, logic of cognitive techniques, war metaphor, and empathic confrontation therapy style.
5	Experiential techniques, mental imagery, past-present image linking, and imaginary dialogue.
6	Behavioral modeling: rationale, goal setting, behavior prioritization, motivation enhancement, and barrier identification.
7	Behavioral techniques: motivation enhancement, barrier overcoming, and significant life change implementation.
8	Session summary, final recommendations, review, conclusion, and post-test administration.

Table 3. A summary of emotionally focused therapy sessions

Sessions	Content
1	Pre-test administration, introduction, and therapeutic relationship establishment.
2	Problem identification and unexpressed emotion exploration.
3	Communication pattern reconstruction.
4	Emotion identification and negative emotion pathologization.
5	Individual emotion expression characteristics and practical emotion expression training.
6	Emotion integration into personal and social life.
7	Emotion strengthening and integration.
8	Session summary, feedback solicitation, and final suggestions.

### Measures

The Interpersonal Forgiveness Measurement Questionnaire (IFMQ) is a 25-item instrument designed to assess interpersonal forgiveness (29). It comprises three subscales: Reconnection and Revenge Control, Resentment Control, and Realistic Understanding. The questionnaire is rated on a

4-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating greater forgiveness. The internal consistency of the IFMQ in this study, as measured by Cronbach's alpha, was 0.86

### Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) with Bonferroni post-hoc tests in SPSS-22. This analysis compared pre-test and post-test scores on the dependent variables after verifying the assumptions of the statistical tests.

### Results

The mean and standard deviation (SD) scores for interpersonal forgiveness at pre-test and post-test stages for each group are as follows: The transactional analysis therapy had a pre-test mean of 35.93 (SD=9.37) and a post-test mean of 72.60 (SD=7.82), indicating a significant increase in interpersonal forgiveness following the intervention. The schema therapy group had a pre-test mean of 36.40 (SD=9.68) and a post-test mean of 72.73 (SD=6.08), also showing a significant improvement in interpersonal forgiveness. The emotionally focused therapy group had a pre-test mean of 37.01 (SD=9.80) and a post-test mean of 73.46 (SD=5.60), experiencing a significant increase in interpersonal forgiveness as well. The control group, on the other hand, had a pre-test mean of 35.40 (SD=5.94) and a post-test mean of 32.06 (SD=4.16), showing a slight decrease in interpersonal forgiveness (Table 4). These results collectively highlight the effectiveness of transactional analysis group therapy, schema therapy, and emotionally focused therapy in enhancing interpersonal forgiveness among university students experiencing emotional failure.

Table 4. Means and standard deviations (SD) of interpersonal forgiveness in the experimental and control groups

Variables	Groups	Phases	Mean	SD
Interpersonal forgiveness	Transactional analysis therapy	Pretest	35.93	9.37
		Posttest	72.60	7.82
	Schema therapy	Pretest	36.40	9.68
		Posttest	72.73	6.08
	Emotionally focused therapy	Pretest	37.01	9.80
		Posttest	73.46	5.60
	Control	Pretest	35.40	5.94
		Posttest	32.06	4.16

The normality of the interpersonal forgiveness scores for the three experimental groups and the control group was confirmed by the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. Additionally, Levene's test confirmed the homogeneity of variances. The results of the analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) on the post-test scores of interpersonal forgiveness for the experimental and control groups are presented in Table 5. The ANCOVA revealed a significant difference in interpersonal forgiveness between the experimental and control groups ( $P < 0.001$ ). The differences in post-test scores of interpersonal forgiveness among students were attributed to the effects of transactional analysis therapy, schema therapy, and emotionally focused therapy ( $P < 0.001$ ).

Table 5. Results of the ANCOVA to determine the effectiveness of interventions on interpersonal forgiveness

Groups	Source	SS	df	MS	F	P	$\eta^2$
Transactional analysis therapy	Interpersonal forgiveness	1545.66	1	1545.66	110.27	0.001	0.69
Schema therapy	Interpersonal forgiveness	1300.31	1	1300.31	82.20	0.001	0.71
Emotionally focused therapy	Interpersonal forgiveness	2964.43	1	2964.43	134.22	0.001	0.82

Bonferroni post-hoc tests indicated significant differences in interpersonal forgiveness between the experimental and control groups at post-test. However, no significant differences were found in mean scores of interpersonal forgiveness among the transactional analysis therapy, schema therapy, and emotionally focused therapy groups ( $P < 0.001$ ). Consequently, no significant differences were observed in the effects of transactional analysis therapy, schema therapy, and emotionally focused therapy on interpersonal forgiveness levels (Table 6).

Table 6. Bonferroni post-hoc test for paired comparison of interpersonal forgiveness

Variable	Groups	Mean difference	P
Interpersonal forgiveness	Transactional analysis therapy - Control	-40.54	0.001
	Schema therapy - Control	-40.67	0.001
	Emotionally focused therapy - Control	-41.40	0.001
	Transactional analysis therapy - Schema therapy	-0.13	0.959
	Transactional analysis therapy - Emotionally focused therapy	-0.86	0.732
	Schema therapy - Emotionally focused therapy	-0.73	0.735

### Discussion

This study aimed to evaluate the efficacy of group transactional analysis therapy, schema therapy, and emotionally focused therapy in enhancing interpersonal forgiveness among university students who have experienced emotional setbacks. The results indicated that transactional analysis therapy, schema therapy, and emotionally focused therapy significantly increased interpersonal forgiveness in university students who had experienced emotional failure compared to the control group. However, no statistically significant differences were found among the effects of these three therapeutic interventions on interpersonal forgiveness in this population. These results align with previous research conducted by Pasha et al. (20), Fazel Hamedani et al. (30), and Shahrahmani et al. (31).

The findings revealed that transactional analysis therapy proved to be an effective intervention in enhancing interpersonal forgiveness among university students who had undergone emotional setbacks. This outcome underscores the potential of transactional analysis therapy addressing psychological distress and fostering positive interpersonal relationships. By facilitating self-awareness, communication skills, and healthy emotional expression, transactional analysis therapy empowers individuals to resolve conflicts, let go of resentment, and cultivate empathy (30). This therapeutic approach appears to be particularly beneficial for university students who may be grappling with the challenges of academic pressure, social adjustment, and personal identity development (12). The significant impact of transactional analysis therapy on interpersonal forgiveness has several implications. Firstly, it highlights the importance of addressing emotional and psychological well-being in higher education

institutions. By offering accessible and effective therapeutic interventions, universities can create supportive environments that promote mental health and academic success. Secondly, the findings suggest that transactional analysis therapy can be a valuable tool for counselors and therapists working with young adults who have experienced emotional trauma or difficulty. By incorporating transactional analysis therapy techniques into their practice, mental health professionals can help clients develop healthier coping mechanisms, improve their relationships, and enhance their overall quality of life.

The findings of this study demonstrate that schema therapy has a significant positive impact on interpersonal forgiveness among university students who have experienced emotional setbacks. This therapeutic approach, which focuses on identifying and modifying maladaptive cognitive-emotional schemas, appears to be particularly effective in addressing the underlying psychological factors that hinder forgiveness (20). By challenging negative self-beliefs, developing healthier coping mechanisms, and cultivating a more balanced emotional response, schema therapy empowers individuals to let go of resentment and embrace a more compassionate perspective toward others (15). The significant increase in interpersonal forgiveness observed in the study group highlights the potential of schema therapy as a valuable intervention for young adults. By providing a structured and evidence-based approach to therapeutic change, schema therapy can help university students overcome the emotional barriers that may impede their personal and social development.

The findings of this study demonstrate that emotionally focused therapy is a highly effective intervention for enhancing interpersonal forgiveness among university students who have experienced emotional setbacks. Emotionally focused therapy, with its focus on emotional processing and attachment theory, provides a powerful framework for addressing the emotional roots of forgiveness. By facilitating the identification and expression of emotions, as well as the development of secure attachment bonds, emotionally focused therapy empowers individuals to let go of negative feelings and embrace a more compassionate and understanding perspective towards others (31). The significant increase in

interpersonal forgiveness observed in the study group highlights the potential of emotionally focused therapy to address the emotional challenges that often hinder forgiveness. By providing a safe and supportive therapeutic environment, emotionally focused therapy enables individuals to explore their emotional experiences, gain insight into their patterns of behavior, and develop healthier ways of relating to others.

The generalizability of the findings may be limited due to the relatively small sample size and the use of convenience sampling, which may not fully represent the target population. To increase the statistical power and accuracy of future research, a larger sample size and a more rigorous sampling method are recommended. Additionally, the cultural and contextual specificity of the findings should be considered, and future research should explore the applicability of these interventions in diverse settings. Long-term follow-up studies are necessary to assess the enduring effects of the therapies. By addressing these limitations, future research can contribute to a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of these interventions in supporting the emotional well-being of individuals.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this study provide compelling evidence that all three therapeutic interventions were significantly more effective than a control condition in promoting interpersonal forgiveness. These results suggest that these therapies can be valuable tools for helping individuals who have experienced emotional distress to heal and move forward in their relationships. While all three therapies demonstrated significant efficacy, no statistically significant differences were found among them. This suggests that clinicians may choose any of these therapies, depending on the specific needs and preferences of their clients. Further research is needed to explore the long-term effects of these interventions and to identify potential moderators and mediators of treatment outcomes.

### **Conflict of interest**

There are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of the current research.

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