

# *Exam Anxiety and Cognitive Behavior Therapy*

Yixi Lin<sup>1,a,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Olive Tree International Academy, Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, 311199, China*

*a. 3525439407@qq.com*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** Exam anxiety is a type of performance anxiety that appears when people experience stress during the preparation before the exams or during the tests. This paper investigates whether Cognitive Behavior Individual Therapy (CBIT) works better than Cognitive Behavior Group Therapy (CBGT) for treating exam anxiety. The report will first introduce the motivations behind this research paper, then discuss test anxiety symptoms and common ways to deal with exam anxiety by ourselves. Then, this paper will present two standard therapies -- CBIT and CBGT, and also show their similarities and differences. Subsequently, the form will briefly introduce the benefits and drawbacks of both treatments and finally will go back to discuss whether the CBIT works better than the CBGT for treating test anxiety. I argue that both CBIT and CBGT work well for exam anxiety. Also, both therapies should depend on several factors, including affordability and comfort levels with discussing issues with the public.

**Keywords:** Exam Anxiety, Cognitive Behavior Individual Therapy (CBIT), Cognitive Behavior Group Therapy (CBGT)

## 1. Introduction

In contemporary society, exam anxiety has gradually become a severe problem for people, not just because it will decrease academic results but also impact their mental health. Test anxiety is a common and painful problem, with few people publicizing it and having knowledge about it, whereas this anxiety will cause plenty of symptoms. For students who struggle with test anxiety, some nervousness that appears during the exam preparation may turn into feelings of worry and dread, which may lead to a negative implication for test performances [1]. According to a study published by the British Psychological Society, 80 percent of young people have felt that their psychological health has been negatively affected by this kind of pressure [2]. Ten million children in North America have already been affected by test anxiety, and approximately 16-20% of students have high test anxiety [1]. Several reasons can cause this psychological issue. Since people all acknowledge that the prerequisite of having a good life has good grades, there is an increasing number of rat races in schools and workplaces, thereby owning high levels of test anxiety.

Furthermore, some people's self-esteem depends too much on grades. Thus, they may get into a vicious cycle when they get negative feedback from the test. Bad scores subsequently lead to self-denial and bad text performances afterward [3]. Besides, biological issues may also cause anxiety. Not all people have high study skills; some are born with learning disabilities, such as

attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Consequently, they may be less confident with their exam and grades and cannot perform the average levels in the exams [4].

Exam anxiety is the intense anxiety that prevents the effective use of knowledge learned before the test and leads to a decrease in success [5]. There are several ways to treat exam anxiety, most of the time, exam anxiety can be dealt with by us, but when the symptoms become severe, professional treatments should be sought. It is known that one of the most popular and effective treatments is Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT), which can be defined as a type of psychotherapy that combines cognitive therapy with behavior therapy and talk therapy by identifying defective or maladaptive patterns of thought, emotional response, or behavior and replacing them with ideal ones [6]. Nowadays, therapists always use both Cognitive Behavior Individual Therapy (CBIT) and Cognitive Behavior Group Therapy (CBGT) to treat patients.

In this paper, I intend to investigate whether Cognitive Behavior Individual Therapy works better than Cognitive Behavior Group Therapy for treating exam anxiety. I will mainly use secondary research to discuss the symptoms of test anxiety, the ways we can cope with ourselves, and finally, the similarities and differences, benefits, and drawbacks of CBIT and CBGT. After careful examination, I argue that Cognitive Behavior Individual Therapy does not work substantially better for all people to treat exam anxiety than group treatment, and therapists need to find the appropriate method for patients depending on individual cases.

Existing scholarships on exam anxiety mainly focus on the physical, emotional, cognitive, and biological symptoms. Also, some scholarships discuss how to overcome test anxiety ourselves. However, few scholars recommend the traditional therapies that psychologists, counselors, or therapist uses for patients. Therefore, I would like to introduce two treatments, discuss their advantages and disadvantages, and finally find whether one therapy works better.

For the rest of this paper, I will first discuss the symptoms of test anxiety and the common ways to deal with exam anxiety by ourselves. I will then introduce two standard therapies -- CBIT and CBGT-- and show their similarities and differences. After that, I will briefly introduce the benefits and drawbacks of both treatments, and finally, I will go back to discuss whether the CBIT works better than the CBGT for treating test anxiety.

## 2. Exam Anxiety and CBT

The symptoms of exam anxiety can be divided into three categories: physical, emotional, and cognitive and behavioral signs [7]. For the physical symptoms, the most common one is a headache. It may be a sharp pain, throbbing sensation, or dull ache. [8]. People who experience exam anxiety may become extra nervous, shake unconsciously or sweat a lot during the exam, maybe just because they are facing questions that they are not sure about. Also, others with test anxiety may have stomach aches or even get diarrhea. [7].

One of the most prominent emotional symptoms is fear and depression, and also, there may be a significant reduction in one's self-esteem, mainly due to getting low grades. Also, people may get into a vicious cycle. For instance, when some people fail an exam, they may worry too much about what others think about them and feel that they cannot do well on the next test; in such situations, they cannot indulge themselves in their studies, and they are unable to complete an adequate preparation before the following exams, so they cannot perform well again and again.

On the other hand, cognitive and behavioral symptoms may reduce the motivation to learn since people who have exam anxiety may think that their abilities can just let them get these results because of failing the tests many times. They may no longer want to strive for higher honors. Apart from that, it is more likely for people with test anxiety to get distracted, and it becomes harder for them to concentrate; they may also find their minds blanks or freezing up during the preparations and the actual exams [7].

The symptoms that I mentioned above can all stimulate and affect each other. In other words, if one experiences one of the symptoms listed above, one may soon experience another. If one desires to seek self-treatment, one of the most effective methods is being well-prepared. This includes reviewing all the chapters one has learned thoroughly and ensuring one can remember all the key points. People also need to have a nice sleep on the night before the exam and ensure that they have a great meal to make them energetic [9]. Another one is preparing the tests with breaks and exercises, which can help improve concentration and develop memories [10]. Individuals can divide their schedules, such as studying 40 minutes for this chapter and then having a ten minutes break.

Furthermore, it is essential to highlight a means to keep calm before the exam; one can try to laugh and modulate one's breaths frequently. People can use abdominal respiration to control their breath to be clear and more likely to concentrate during the exam and remember; they can also use laughter to keep them happy. Also, one should always think positively, and chewing gum is an effective way to keep one away from negative thoughts [9].

Professional treatments might be required if an individual experiences severe exam anxiety. Therapists today always use individual therapy and group therapy to treat patients. One of the main similarities between individual and group treatment is that they are both effective for exam anxiety and can develop patients' self-awareness and communication skills. However, the most significant difference is that individual treatment only occurs when one person is in therapy with a therapist. In contrast, group therapy occurs when one person is treated by a legal team which should include at least two patients with the same issue [11].

Before choosing an effective treatment method, it is critical to understand the respective characteristics of CBIT and CBGT. The advantages of CBIT include high privacy and confidentiality since the information shared between the therapist and patient remains completely private [12]. Also, a therapist can concentrate on the individual and develop personalized solutions. It is highly flexible, customizing treatment to fit one's schedule [13]. Furthermore, patients can create self-awareness by discussing issues and symptoms and getting feedback from the counselor [12], which can give participants a better understanding of their current situations and how they can change positively. For the disadvantages, however, the biggest one is the cost of the therapy, which is typically more expensive than the CBGT. Also, there are no opportunities for participants to talk with the person with test anxiety. Individual treatment, nevertheless, has some drawbacks. For instance, one may feel a particular therapy is too intense due to the sole presence of a patient and their therapist, and thus it may become overwhelming for some people [12].

Benefits of group therapy include improvement of self-esteem, as well as the development the communication and socialization skills among patients. Since there are plenty of opportunities for participants to receive and support others during group therapy, it allows patients to gain confidence and learn from each other. Moreover, a broader therapeutic alliance for patients can provide a wide range of sources and allow different views to join together and lead to a better treatment result [12]. Also, people can feel a sense of belonging since people around them support them in changing the terrible state, and a network of support leads to high efficiency [14]. Moreover, the cost of group therapy is also lower than individual one since the therapist's time has been equally divided among members, so it is less expensive for everyone. However, the most significant drawbacks are less privacy and confidentiality since some information will be shared with everyone in the group.

Furthermore, it is not fit for everyone to join group therapy. People cannot always be the center of attention [12] because not everyone will feel comfortable with people they are not familiar with. Last but not least, unlike individual therapy, group therapy offers less flexibility since the schedules need to depend on the majority of people.

### 3. Evaluation and Conclusion

In the above sections, I have already discussed test anxiety symptoms and methods for self-treatment and professional treatments. Now I want to discuss whether Cognitive Behavior Individual Therapy works better than Cognitive Behavior Group Therapy for treating exam anxiety. Some argue that individual treatment works better than group treatment since the individual can only use resources. Some others believe that group therapy works better than individual therapy because it allows patients to learn from each other and treat them together. Thus it builds a higher efficiency [15]. I, however, support the statement that cognitive behavior individual therapy and group therapy work well for exam anxiety. Also, both treatments should depend on several factors, including affordability and comfort levels with discussing issues with the public and so on [16].

Table 1: Comparisons Between CBIT and CBGT.

Characteristics	CBIT	CBGT
<b>Privacy and Confidentiality</b>	Higher	Lower
<b>Flexibility</b>	Higher	Lower
<b>Therapist's Attention</b>	One-on-one	One to several patients
<b>Self-Awareness</b>	Lower, develop by discussing issues and getting feedback	Higher, develop by receiving and giving support to others
<b>Cost</b>	Higher	Lower
<b>Interaction</b>	No opportunities to talk to other people who have the same issues	Develop communication and socialization skills while talking with others
<b>Atmosphere</b>	More suitable for introverts	More suitable for extroverts
<b>Therapeutic Alliance</b>	Narrower	Broader
<b>Confidence Level</b>	Lower	Higher, gain confidence from others

The chart above illustrates the comparisons of characteristics between CBIT and CBGT. Three aspects of CBIT exhibit better results than the CBGT. CBIT owns higher degrees of privacy, confidentiality, and flexibility. Also, the therapist can pay full attention to one patient. Meanwhile, CBGT can provide more information and resources in five aspects. CBGT has a lower cost with a broader therapeutic alliance. One can also develop communication skills and gain confidence during group therapies. However, one cannot simply choose group therapies over individual sessions just because group therapies have a higher number of advantages. Instead, one should make an informed decision depending on their own needs. For instance, regarding the atmosphere of medicines, CBIT is more suitable for introverts, while CBGT is more suitable for extroverts. Patients with the financial capacity to afford individual sessions and prefer privacy and confidentiality over interactions should choose the CBIT. Alternatively, CBGT can be determined by patients who like to cooperate with others and who are willing to spend much time on therapies. Few scholars have researched the topic of exam anxiety, and the number of clinical evaluations of the effectiveness between CBIT and CBGT is also deficient. Test anxiety is a vital and severe problem that the public needs to care about. Future research should be directed to investigate different treatments for exam anxiety and offer enough clinical data to inform patients how to choose appropriate treatment plans.

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