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A systematic review of universal, teacher-led interventions targeting anxiety in U.S. schools

Sonja F. Tutsch  
*University of Nebraska Medical Center*, sonja.tutsch@unmc.edu

Patrick Fowler  
*University of Nebraska Medical Center*

Gaurav Kumar  
*University of Nebraska Medical Center*, gaurav.kumar@unmc.edu

Adam Weaver  
*University of Nebraska at Omaha*

Brian McKevitt  
*University of Nebraska Medical Center*

See next page for additional authors

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Authors
Sonja F. Tutsch, Patrick Fowler, Gaurav Kumar, Adam Weaver, Brian McKevitt, Denise Britigan, Christian I.J. Minter, and Lorena Baccaglini

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A systematic review of universal, teacher-led interventions targeting anxiety in U.S. schools

Sonja F. Tutsch, MPH, BSED\textsuperscript{a}, Patrick Fowler, MS\textsuperscript{b}, Gaurav Kumar, MBBS, MPH\textsuperscript{c}, Adam Weaver, PhD\textsuperscript{d}, Brian McKevitt, PhD\textsuperscript{b}, Denise H. Britigan, PhD\textsuperscript{a}, Christian Minter, MSLIS\textsuperscript{a}, Lorena Baccaglini, DDS, MS, PhD\textsuperscript{a}

\textsuperscript{a} College of Public Health & McGoogan Library of Medicine, University of Nebraska Medical Center, Omaha, NE, USA
\textsuperscript{b} Department of Psychology, University of Nebraska at Omaha, Omaha, NE, USA

Abstract

Implications of anxiety symptomatology experienced among children and adolescents in the U.S. constitute a major public health crisis, calling for promising universal mental health interventions in K-12 schools. Schools represent an ideal setting for the implementation of population-based, public health interventions, as children and adolescents spend a significant proportion of their time in school.

Discussions within the scientific community detail several advantages to universal, Tier I interventions. However, the efficacy of universal, school-based anxiety interventions in the U.S. are not consistently documented. The purpose of this study is to systematically review the literature to identify the efficacy of universal teacher-led school-based anxiety interventions in the U.S.

A comprehensive literature search was conducted employing PubMed, Cochrane Central Register of Controlled Trials (CENTRAL), Embase, Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL), Scopus, PsyNFO, Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), and Google Scholar databases up to December 2016. Each of the articles was independently reviewed for relevance and inclusion/exclusion criteria, with five studies meeting these criteria. Overall, the quality of the included studies was moderate. All reviewed studies found that universal teacher-led anxiety interventions in school-based programs had a positive impact on the anxiety outcomes of students when compared to control groups. However, several methodological and design concerns were identified across studies. While our findings suggest that universal teacher-led anxiety interventions have the potential to reduce anxiety symptomatology among school-aged children in the U.S., further research is needed.

Background & Significance

Anxiety is among the most prevalent of psychiatric disorders affecting youths and adolescents and represents the most common referral to mental healthcare teams. Recent estimates suggest approximately one-third of adolescents may meet DSM-5 criteria for an anxiety disorder, prior to the age of 18, with an average age of onset at 11-years old.\textsuperscript{1} Involving affective, behavioral, physiological, and cognitive components, anxiety disorders can severely impair youth and adolescents’ success at school and at home, as well as interfere with their social-emotional development.\textsuperscript{2} Adolescent anxiety disorders significantly increase the likelihood of comorbid depression, substance abuse, psychotic disorders, and low academic achievement.\textsuperscript{3} While there exist treatments available for childhood anxiety disorders, adolescents face many barriers to receiving help, including the underidentification of symptoms by adults and limited access to community-based resources.\textsuperscript{4} Given the prevalence and scope of concerns associated with anxiety disorders, schools represent the ideal location for the provision of mental health services to students. Within a tiered system of school-based mental health services, interventions at the universal level are designed to promote positive well-being, increase protective factors for at-risk students, instruct in adaptive coping and problem-solving skills, and encourage a positive school climate for all students.\textsuperscript{5} While prior research has demonstrated positive effects in examining mental health interventions at the universal level, there remains a relative lack of evidence-based treatments within the U.S., which impedes the growth of these preventive programs at a larger scale.

PRISMA 2009 Flow Diagram

Conclusions and Future Directions

Following an extensive review of the literature, we found five randomized controlled trial studies that examined the effectiveness of universal school-based anxiety interventions in the United States.

- Risk and bias of studies included in qualitative synthesis was moderate.
- Our findings support the growing notion that there is a need for universal school-based mental health promotion programs in schools (Dawson, et al., 2004; Weare & Marsham, 2005; Barrett, et al., 2006; Dominich, et al., 2008; Weare & Nind, 2011), as such programs have previously shown much potential in reducing the mental health burden and advancing public health outcomes in schools outside of the United States (Barrett, et al., 2006; Werner-Geidler, et al., 2017).
- A meta-analysis examining efficacy of studies in addressing anxiety was not possible due to the small number of studies that met our inclusion criteria.
- Our review identified a range of tools employed to measure anxiety among children/youth. Future studies of universal anxiety interventions in schools should align instrumentation to measure intervention effectiveness.
- Students populations were inadequately described in articles that met our inclusion criteria. From a health equity perspective, special consideration should be given to training and testing universal school-based anxiety interventions in disadvantaged communities (Ozuka, et al., 2014), where implications of the burden of anxiety on health outcomes are often most prevalent.