

Addressing Irrational Beliefs and Avoidance Coping in Adolescents: A Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy Case Study

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Abstract. Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT) is a promising intervention for addressing irrational beliefs and avoidance coping in adolescents. This single case study investigated the efficacy of REBT for a 17-year-old male high school student, "Alex," who exhibited frequent school absences and maladaptive coping behaviors following his parents' divorce. A comprehensive assessment, including interviews, observations, and psychological evaluations, revealed that Alex struggled with self-control, introversion, and difficulty trusting others. The formulation of the case suggested that Alex's problematic family climate and personal factors influenced his cognitive appraisal and coping abilities, leading to avoidance coping strategies. The intervention plan focused on cognitive restructuring using the ABC framework of REBT, aiming to help Alex recognize and dispute irrational beliefs and develop adaptive coping strategies. Over eight sessions, Alex demonstrated exceptional cooperation and engagement, with support from teachers and parents, enhancing the effectiveness of the intervention. The study found that REBT successfully reduced Alex's irrational beliefs and avoidance-coping behaviors. This study highlights the potential of REBT as an effective intervention for adolescents experiencing emotional and behavioral difficulties related to family stressors, especially when combined with a collaborative approach involving teachers and parents.

Keywords: Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT); irrational beliefs; avoidance coping; adolescents; case study

1 Introduction

Maladaptive coping mechanisms are unhealthy or counterproductive strategies used to deal with stressful and challenging situations. Research across various populations has consistently shown a negative impact of these coping strategies on psychological well-being and quality of life. Maladaptive coping strategies have been consistently associated with increased psychological distress and poorer mental health outcomes in adolescents in multiple studies. Research indicates that adolescents who employ maladaptive coping mechanisms are at a higher risk for depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other mental health issues [1], [2], [3].

Avoidance behaviors, such as skipping school and procrastination, are common maladaptive coping mechanisms used by high school students to deal with stress and challenges. Research has indicated that such strategies often lead to increased stress and poor long-term outcomes in the long run. Although avoidance may provide temporary relief, it ultimately exacerbates problems. Research has shown that reliance on avoidance strategies is correlated with increased stress levels among students [4]. Furthermore, middle adolescents tend to show a maladaptive coping pattern with increased passive avoidance compared with younger children [5]. To address this, experts recommend implementing primary preventive stress management programs in late childhood and early adolescence to promote more adaptive coping strategies [5], [6].

Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) has shown promise in reducing maladaptive coping behaviors and improving psychological well-being. REBT focuses on identifying and modifying irrational beliefs that lead to emotional distress and dysfunctional behaviors [7]. By targeting these irrational beliefs, REBT can help individuals to develop adaptive coping strategies. Studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of REBT in various contexts. In sports psychology, REBT has been used to decrease irrational beliefs and cognitive anxiety in elite young athletes [8]. Similarly, REBT has shown potential in addressing mental health issues in athletes by promoting rational beliefs and reducing maladaptive emotional and behavioral responses to failure and adversity [9].

Interestingly, while REBT focuses on cognitive restructuring, other approaches such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) have also shown efficacy in reducing maladaptive perfectionism and associated distress in medical students [10]. This suggests that cognitive-based interventions may be effective in addressing maladaptive coping behaviors. In conclusion, REBT appears to be a promising approach for reducing maladaptive coping behaviors by targeting irrational beliefs. Its application in various domains, including sports and general mental health, demonstrates its versatility and effectiveness. However, more research is needed to fully understand the mechanisms of change and to compare REBT's efficacy with other cognitive-behavioral interventions in addressing maladaptive coping strategies across different populations and contexts [7], [9].

The objective of this research was to evaluate the efficacy of Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT) for a high school student exhibiting avoidant coping behaviors. By employing a single case study approach, researchers sought to gain deeper insights into the complexities of the issue and intervention process. REBT is designed to assist adolescents in recognizing faulty thought patterns and developing healthier coping strategies based on their experiences. The findings of this study contribute to the existing knowledge base regarding interventions for adolescents with maladaptive coping mechanisms, potentially serving as a valuable resource for professionals dealing with comparable cases.

2 Methods

2.1 Research Design

The methodology employed in this investigation was a single-case study approach. This method was selected to allow for a more in-depth examination of specific case [11]. Prior to the commencement of the study, parental consent was obtained. Subsequently, a comprehensive

assessment was conducted using interviews, observational techniques, and psychological evaluation. Based on the findings of this assessment, an intervention strategy was formulated and implemented for the participants. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive and qualitative comparative methods to identify the changes resulting from treatment.

2.2 Case Description

The study focused on a 17-year-old male participant from a Muslim background, given the pseudonym "Alex." Despite his parents' divorce, Alex's father remarried and lived in the same city. As the eldest child, Alex has two younger male siblings. Alex was referred by the Guidance and Counseling teacher due to frequent absences from school. In the 10th grade, Alex was absent for 40 days. According to the teacher, Alex could not adapt to the school environment. Currently, Alex's parents want Alex to transfer to the science department because he was promoted to the social studies department, which his parents did not like. In this new semester, Alex missed 4 days.

2.3 Assessment

Various assessments, including interviews, observations, and psychological assessments, were employed to investigate and comprehend these issues. The evaluation outcomes reveal that Alex possesses superior intelligence (CFIT Scale 3), surpassing that of his peers. His academic record was commendable despite frequent absences during 10th grade.

Alex exhibited caution in his actions and struggled to trust others. He preferred solitude and displayed a limited friendliness. In social contexts, he tends to be dismissive and reluctant to engage. Within his family, he was inclined to introvert and maintain distant relationships. At school, he lacked close friendships and found it difficult to trust his peers. He felt unable to find compatible companions to share personal information. Despite this, his adaptability was relatively good, leading some classmates to view him as entertaining and somewhat humorous. Moreover, Alex struggled with self-control, particularly in terms of laziness and anger management. Furthermore, he was introverted and fixated on past events. He was easily stressed, frustrated, inclined to make independent decisions, and favored a carefree lifestyle.

His attendance record was poor and characterized by frequent class absences, tardiness, and sleeping during lessons. His truancy was often because of oversleeping or out-of-town trips. When skipping classes, he typically arrived late and entered after the first or second period. For subjects he disliked, he would attempt to avoid them, but if unable to leave, he would sleep through the class.

2.4 Formulation

Alex grew up in a family that was not warm, harmonious, and full of conflict. Since childhood, Alex has often seen his parents' arguments. Alex's parents rarely monitored or controlled his activities outside the home. There were no study hours or curfews for Alex and his younger siblings; therefore, they were free to come home at any time. In addition, Alex's relationship with other family members was neither very close nor warm. Alex never shared his problems with his parents or siblings. This shows a lack of emotional support from parents. Parents give Alex the freedom to make his own decisions, although sometimes, they still intervene. This disharmonious family situation has affected Alex's personality development and social life.

There are several risk factors for children's mental and physical health problems in conflicted and separated parents, for instance: temperament and developmental factors, the amount of conflict between parents during marriage, the amount of conflict between parents after separation, the child's low level of adaptation to parental separation, parents' low education, and low emotional and instrumental support [12]. Alex grew up as a fairly introverted child. Alex did not trust others easily, preferred to be alone, and was not very friendly to others. In social relationships, Alex tends to reject new people and is not willing to make social contact with them. Alex takes a long time to be close to his friends. This is in line with research in which a child is more adaptable to social life both at school and in the home environment when their parents have a harmonious marriage relationship [13]. In addition, Alex had difficulty controlling himself in the face of laziness and anger. Alex is also easily tensed and frustrated when faced with problems. Alex's low emotional adjustment is closely related to the family harmony and problems he faces. Families that have experienced divorce and those with low marital quality have a negative influence on adolescents' emotional adjustment [14].

Kurdek, Fine, and Sinclair stated that family climate is influenced by four dimensions: supervision (control and monitoring from parents), acceptance (warmth and support from parents), granting autonomy (freedom to make decisions and encouragement to fulfill needs without help from others), and conflict (the number of quarrels and disputes in the family) [15]. Family climate is an environmental factor that influences a person's cognitive appraisal and coping in dealing with events that occur in their lives [15], [16]. A problematic family climate, such as low supervision, acceptance, and autonomy granting, as well as high conflict in the family, directly and indirectly affects the way a person deals with stressful life events. Moreover, parental monitoring has a significant influence on adolescents' adjustment to stressful events [17].

Alex's family environment factors are not harmonious, Alex's personal factors that tend to be closed and difficult to open to others, as well as stressful events that occur in Alex's life, affect Alex's cognitive assessment and coping ability towards stressful events in his life [16]. Coping is a cognitive and behavioral effort that constantly changes in order to manage internal or external demands that are perceived as a burden beyond the individual's ability [18]. Roth and Cohen distinguish coping into two types, namely approach coping and avoidance coping. Approach coping and avoidance coping are terms used for physical and emotional activities that a person does to deal with threats or stay away from threats [19]

Approach coping is a person's active effort to solve the problems they are experiencing, while avoidance coping is a way for a person to avoid the problems they are experiencing and to focus on the emotions associated with the problem [19], [20]. A person's efforts in dealing with problems usually consist of two domains: cognitive and behavioral. In the cognitive domain, people coping with approach have reactions in the form of logical analysis and positive reappraisal of stressful events that happen to them. They will try to analyze the events that happen to them as logically as possible, such as looking at the problem from a different perspective and thinking of other ways to deal with the problem. They attempted to provide a positive assessment of a problem. In contrast, people with avoidance coping try to forget the problems they face and act as if the problem has never happened (*cognitive avoidance*). They also give up on the situation and/or accept it without any attempt to change it (*acceptance/resignation*) [19], [20]. In the behavioral domain, people with approach coping will try to seek guidance and support from others to help them solve problems (seeking guidance

and support and problem solving). Meanwhile, people with avoidance coping try to perform other activities to be able to distract themselves and also get away from the stressor (seeking alternative rewards) and vent emotions by shouting or getting angry (emotional discharge).

Alex's parents officially separated when Alex entered high school. Alex lives with his mother and younger siblings in the city of Yogyakarta. Alex's father was remarried and lived in the same city. Alex was shocked when he learned that his father had remarried. Alex still hopes that his mother and father will be united. In addition, Alex had to part with his junior high school friends, with whom he felt very close. At the new school, Alex felt that he did not have friends with whom he could share stories like his friends in junior high school. This transition condition became a stressor for Alex. Alex, who is introverted and has difficulty getting close to other people, tries to overcome the problems he faces by visiting friends who generally live in other cities. It is not uncommon for Alex to skip school to go to his friends' places. Several domains trigger stress in adolescents, including health conditions, home and finances, parents, siblings, extended family, school, friends, girlfriends, and negative events [20]. The domains that trigger stress for Alex are divorced and remarried parents, new schools, friends, and girlfriends, who live far from Alex.

In dealing with these stressful events in his life, Alex often chose to leave home and visit his friends outside the city. Alex did not seek support from parents, friends, or school counselors to overcome the problems he faced. Alex tended to be uncaring and irritable towards his parents and younger siblings. Alex's efforts to deal with his problems can be classified as avoidance coping, both cognitively and behaviorally.

According to Roth and Cohen, avoidance coping has both advantages and disadvantages [18]. The advantage of avoidance coping is that it can reduce stress, increase hope and courage, and make it possible to measure the consequences of problems, because people with avoidance coping try to distance themselves from stressors. While the disadvantages of avoidance coping are contrary to the action that should be, emotional immunity, distraction from threatening things, annoying avoidance behavior, and lack of awareness of the relationship between symptoms and trauma. The disadvantages of avoidance coping can be experienced by someone as long as the problems they face are still unresolved.

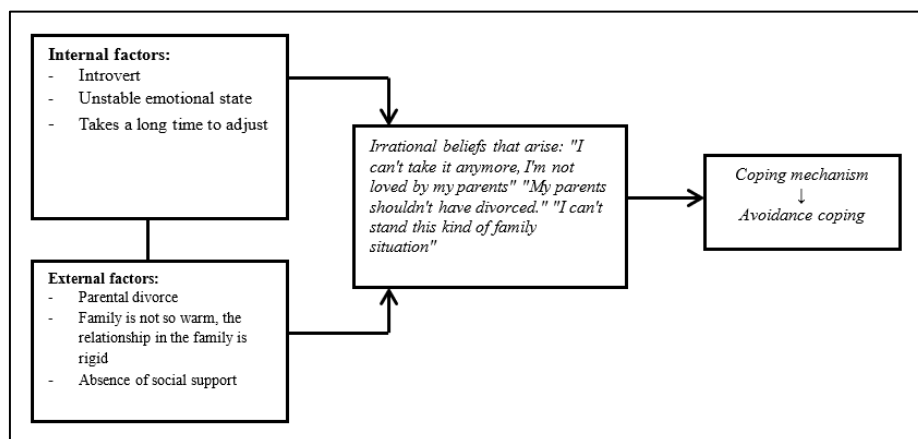


Fig 1. conceptual framework

2.5 Intervention Plan

This study employed Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) as the primary intervention. This approach was designed to assist the subject in addressing cognitive distortions and enhancing their ability to cope. Specifically, the cognitive distortion targeted was the subject's conviction that their parents lacked affection. REBT employs a technique known as cognitive restructuring to modify irrational beliefs that contribute to psychological issues [21][22]. The foundation of REBT rests on the premise that there is a significant interplay between cognition, emotion, and behavior, with these elements exhibiting a causal and reciprocal relationship.

The cognitive restructuring process was implemented in three stages: 1) Recognizing thoughts rooted in irrational beliefs. This initial phase is part of the evaluation, which involves identifying the activating event (A), irrational belief (B), and emotional and behavioral consequences (C); 2) confronting thoughts or irrational beliefs; and 3) substituting thoughts stemming from irrational beliefs by assisting Alex in learning to observe their self-talk, detect maladaptive self-talk, and replace it with adaptive self-talk.

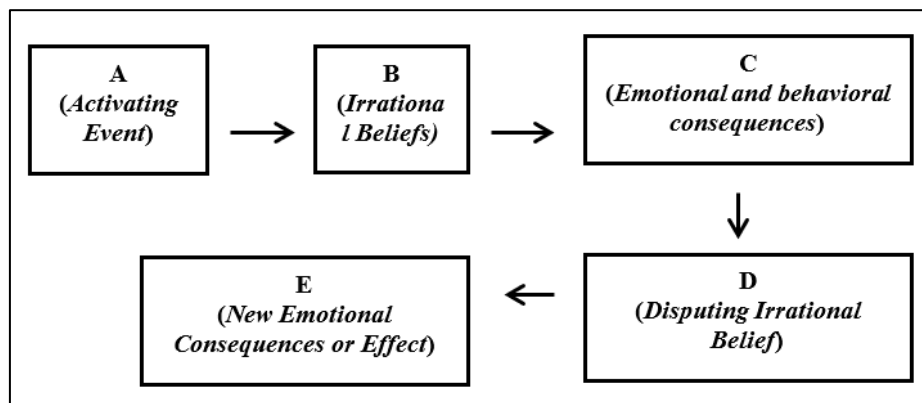


Fig 2. ABC Framework of REBT by Ellis and MacLaren

After the assessment, Alex's cognitive and behavioral function analysis (ABC Framework) [23] was performed as follows in Table 1.

Table 1. Cognitive and behavioral function analysis

A (Activating Event)	B (Irrational beliefs)	C (Emotional and behavioral consequences)
Parents divorce and father remarries	"I can't take it anymore, I'm not loved by my parents" "My parents shouldn't have gotten divorced." "I can't stand this kind of family situation"	Emotional: Angry towards his parents, ashamed of his family situation Behavior: Frequent trips to other cities, skipping school and lessons, often not at home

The use of REBT as an intervention method for Alex’s case because REBT has been proven as a psychotherapy method that has been tested and has strong evidence-based [24]. REBT can be applied to the emotional and behavioral problems of Alex.

3 Result

3.1 Intervention Implementation

Table 2. Intervention Detail

Intervention stages	Explanation	Activity	Session
Recognizing irrational belief	Ask about the problems experienced by Alex	Alex was requested to describe the challenges he had encountered thus far.	Session 1
	Defining and agreeing on the target problem	The therapist asked him to identify which issues were causing him the most distress and which ones he was most motivated to address. Together, Alex and the therapist established the focus of their therapeutic work.	
Confronting irrational belief	Conducting an assessment of C (emotional and behavioral Consequences)	The evaluation findings concerning Alex's present emotional state and actions were communicated and verified with Alex.	Session 2
	Conducting an assessment of A (Activating event)	Alex was informed and confirmed the findings of the evaluation concerning the incidents that contribute to their current emotional state and behavioral patterns.	
	Identifying and assessing other emotional problems	Alex was questioned about additional emotions they experienced concerning the situations they had been going through.	
	Teaching the relationship between B-C (Beliefs - emotional & behavioral Consequences)	Discussing the significant impact of personal beliefs on human emotions and actions. Elucidating the ABC Framework.	Session 3
	Conducting an assessment of Beliefs,	Discussing and evaluating Alex's assumptions with him to	Session 4

Intervention stages	Explanation	Activity	Session
	identifying the types of beliefs that Alex have	assess whether his current beliefs are logical or illogical.	
	Explaining the relationship between irrational beliefs and emotional and behavioral consequences	Illustrating how Alex's thoughts and beliefs influence their emotional state and actions thus far.	
	Challenging irrational beliefs	Questioned and disputed Alex's self-perceptions, interpretations of his circumstances, and unfounded assumptions about himself and his situation.	
	Helping Alex recognize irrational beliefs and rational belief.	Assisted Alex in distinguishing between irrational and rational thoughts. Clarified the outcomes associated with each type of belief.	Session 5
Substituting irrational belief	Preparing Alex to deepen their belief in rational beliefs	Demonstrated the negative impact of Alex's beliefs on his well-being. Assisted in creating new mental frameworks to interpret his challenges.	Session 6
	Encouraging Alex to practice what has been learned previously	According to REBT, it is recommended to evaluate actions as positive or negative rather than applying such judgments to individuals themselves.	
	Facilitating Alex to do what they have practiced before. (Termination)	Alex received instructions to develop his rational thinking skills. He was directed to consistently identify and examine his beliefs whenever he felt disappointed. The task involved recognizing these beliefs and transforming them into more rational ones.	Session 7
	<i>Follow-up</i>		Session 8

3.2 Intervention Analysis

The intervention program for Alex spanned eight comprehensive sessions, each designed to address specific aspects of his development and behavior. Throughout the entire duration of the program, Alex demonstrated exceptional cooperation and engagement, consistently showing willingness to participate actively in all activities and exercises presented to him.

Alex's positive attitude and receptiveness to the intervention strategies were particularly noteworthy. He displayed a remarkable level of focus and dedication during each session, actively listening to instructions, asking thoughtful questions, and applying the techniques and skills being taught. This high level of engagement significantly contributes to the overall effectiveness of the intervention. The program's success was further enhanced by unwavering support and cooperation from both Alex's teachers and parents. Educators involved in Alex's daily academic life showed a strong commitment to reinforcing intervention strategies in the classroom setting. They regularly communicated with the therapist, providing valuable insights into Alex's progress, and adapting their teaching approaches to align with the program's objectives.

Similarly, Alex's parents played a crucial role in the success of the intervention. They consistently attended informational meetings, diligently implemented recommended strategies at home, and maintained open lines of communication with the intervention team and school staff. This level of parental involvement creates a cohesive support system that extends the benefits of the intervention beyond formal sessions. The collaborative effort between Alex, his teachers, and his parents created an ideal environment for intervention to thrive. This synergy allowed for a more holistic approach to address Alex's needs, ensuring that the strategies and skills learned during the sessions were reinforced consistently across different settings in his life.

4 Discussion

The single case study provided evidence that Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT) is effective in reducing irrational beliefs in adolescents and consequently diminishes avoidance-coping problems. The involvement of teachers and parents in supporting the program may enhance the effectiveness of interventions.

REBT has been shown to be effective in treating various psychological issues among adolescents, with support from teachers and parents playing a crucial role in its efficacy. Studies have demonstrated that REBT can reduce anxiety, anger, and depression while improving social skills and self-concept in young people [25], [26]. The involvement of teachers and parents in REBT interventions appears to have enhanced their effectiveness. Interestingly, research has shown that non-mental health professionals, such as teachers, can produce REBT effects of greater magnitude than mental health professionals [26]. This suggests that integrating REBT principles into educational settings and training teachers in their applications could be highly beneficial. In conclusion, while REBT has proven to be effective for adolescents across various settings, the support and involvement of teachers and parents can significantly enhance its impact. Incorporating REBT principles into teacher education and classroom management strategies [27], and fostering strong parent-child relationships [28], may lead to more comprehensive and successful interventions for adolescents facing emotional and behavioral challenges.

Avoidance tendencies are common among adolescents who experience emotional and behavioral problems related to parental separation. This pattern is evident in several studies examining the impact of family dynamics on adolescent well-being [29], [30], [31]. Research indicates that adolescents from separated or conflicted homes often exhibit avoidant behaviors as coping mechanisms. For instance, a study on children from divorced or separated families found that marital violence was associated with children's experiences of negative emotions, particularly sadness and anger, which predicted behavioral problems [32]. The study also noted that certain emotion regulation strategies, such as "direct intervention," were positively associated with behavioral issues, suggesting that some coping methods may be maladaptive. Interestingly, the impact of parental separation on adolescent behavior appears to be moderated by the quality of parent-child relationships prior to the separation. One study found that adolescents who had higher satisfaction with their relationship with the same-sex parent before separation showed greater increases in delinquent behavior when separated from that parent [33]. This finding highlights the complex interplay between family dynamics and adolescent adjustment. In conclusion, avoidance tendencies in adolescents, like Alex, are a common response to emotional and behavioral problems related to parental separation. These behaviors often stem from difficulties in emotional regulation and can be influenced by factors such as the quality of pre-existing parent-child relationships, family conflict, and the adolescent's own emotional reactivity. Understanding these patterns is crucial for developing effective interventions to support adolescents in navigating family transitions.

The study participant experienced a shift in cognitive distortions through the application of REBT. Several studies demonstrate that Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) can be effective in reducing irrational beliefs in various populations, including adolescents. For instance, a report showed that REBT reduced irrational beliefs and cognitive anxiety in elite youth cricketers [8]. Similarly, another report indicated temporary reductions in irrational beliefs following an REBT education workshop with elite soccer academy athletes [34]. However, the papers provided do not address the specific claim about reducing avoidance-coping problems. The closest evidence comes from Wood et al., who reported that REBT led to reductions in avoidance goals among elite Paralympic athletes along with improvements in athletic performance and psychological well-being [35]. It is important to note that this study was conducted with adult athletes rather than with adolescents. In conclusion, while evidence supports REBT's effectiveness of REBT in reducing irrational beliefs in adolescents and athletes, the specific link to reducing avoidance coping problems in adolescents has not been established in the provided context. Further research is required to investigate this relationship among adolescents.

Research suggests that adolescents who have experienced family separation, such as Alex, often struggle with trust, and may require additional time to feel comfortable during interventions. This difficulty in putting faith in others is a common challenge among youths who have undergone family disruptions. Interestingly, studies have shown that parental support plays a crucial role in adolescents' mental health and treatment engagement. Higher levels of parental support are associated with lower depression levels and a reduced likelihood of suicide attempts [36]. However, for adolescents like Alex, who have experienced family separation, this protective factor may be compromised, potentially making them more vulnerable to mental health issues and less likely to engage in treatment. To address these challenges, interventions focusing on building trust and improving family relationships may be beneficial. Approaches such as Functional Family Therapy (FFT) aim to improve parent-child relationships and reduce

antisocial behavior in adolescents [37]. Additionally, home-based interventions like Multisystemic Therapy (MST) have shown promise in improving health outcomes for adolescents with chronic conditions [38]. These intensive, tailored approaches may provide the extra time and support needed for adolescents, such as Alex, to feel comfortable and effectively engage in treatment.

4.1 Limitation

This study employed a single case study method that focused on only one participant. Thus, the generalizability of the findings to broader populations is limited. A larger sample size would provide more robust evidence for the effectiveness of REBT in addressing irrational beliefs and avoidance coping among adolescents. Moreover, a single case study has a risk of researcher bias in interpreting the results and limited control for confounding variables. The study did not fully account for other factors that may have influenced the participants' progress, such as natural maturation or external events unrelated to the intervention.

5 Conclusion

This case study demonstrated the potential effectiveness of Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT) in addressing irrational beliefs and avoidance coping behaviors in adolescents experiencing family related stress. The intervention resulted in positive changes for the participant, including reduced cognitive distortions and improved coping strategies. A collaborative approach involving teachers and parents enhanced the impact of the intervention. However, limitations such as the single-case design and lack of long-term follow-up suggest the need for further research with larger samples and diverse populations to establish the broader applicability of REBT in adolescents facing similar challenges. Future studies should incorporate standardized measures, control groups, and cultural factors to strengthen the evidence base for REBT efficacy in this context.

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