

Peer Group Therapy for Adolescent Substance Misuse Treatment: A Scoping Review Protocol

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Abstract

Objective: The objective of this scoping review is to understand the extent and type of evidence, in relation to group therapy to support adolescents who misuse substances.

Introduction: There has been an increasing concern for adolescent substance use. In response, researchers and practitioners have been devoted to learning various treatment methods. However, while there have been studies focused on individual and family therapy, less is known about the effectiveness of peer group therapy in treating adolescent substance misuse.

Inclusion criteria: Studies must evaluate the effectiveness of group therapy directly on adolescents aged 12 to 18 years and implement group therapy for substance misuse treatment. The following group therapies will be included: psychotherapy groups (or group therapy), psychodrama groups, cognitive-behavioral groups, and psychoeducational groups. The studies must predominantly focus on adolescent substance use. Substances included will be alcohol, marijuana, vaping/tobacco, opioids, and illicit drugs. We will exclude studies that cover children and young adults. Additionally, literature on substance use prevention and family therapy will be excluded. Though family therapy is considered a form of group therapy, we will be focusing on group therapy among peers, not family members.

Methods: Multiple databases will be searched, including PubMed, Embase, CINAHL, PsycInfo, Scopus, Web of Science, and ProQuest using keywords, indexed terms, and phrases, for the following concepts: group therapy, adolescent, and substance use. Each included study will be rated using the JBI Levels of Evidence framework. Details on the type of and effectiveness of group therapy in each included study will be extracted, and results will be presented in tables and diagrams.

Keywords: Group therapy; Adolescent; Substance Use; Addiction

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Background

Adolescent alcohol and substance use and misuse remain a significant global public health problem. According to the World Health Organization, worldwide, over 25% of people aged 15-19 – 155 million adolescents – are current drinkers. Globally, cannabis is the most widely used psychoactive drug, among which 4.6% of adolescents aged 15-16 report using it at least once in 2018 (World Health Organization, 2021). Of those who use tobacco, the majority consists of adolescents, where at least 1 in 10 adolescents aged 13-15 years uses tobacco (World Health Organization, 2021). According to the World Health Organization (WHO), illicit drug use is prevalent among adolescents, so much so that in some places, around 10% to 30% of adolescents use illicit drugs. Moreover, over 1.5 million adolescents and young adults aged 10-24 have died in 2019 due to substance use (World Health Organization, 2021).

According to the National Institutes of Health, approximately 1.5 million adolescents meet the criteria for a Substance Use Disorder (SUD), but only approximately 111,000 (7%) of them receive treatment for the disorder (Winters et al., 2011). Compared to adults, adolescents are more likely to hide their binge drink (drinking five or more drinks in a row on a single occasion), not report withdrawal symptoms, hide their substance use, get complaints from others about their substance use, and continue using substances despite fights or legal trouble (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2021).

Treating adolescents who misuse substances is essential (Leader, 1991; Swadi, 2000; Zeitlin, 2000). Though many adolescents usually grow out of using psychoactive substances, there are many who do not and become dependent during their adult lives (Swadi, 2000). Moreover, substance misuse is often associated with comorbid disorders such as depression, suicidal behavior, conduct disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, eating disorders, and psychoses (Swadi, 2000; Zeitlin, 2000).

Group therapy as a form of treatment is gaining accelerated global recognition. Group therapy started to take shape in the 1930s and involves one or more therapists guiding a group of patients (Leader, 1991). Unlike individual therapy, group therapy provides a space for interpersonal learning and collective emotional experience among peers, two things that develop during the adolescent phase (Leader, 1991). Like individual therapy, group therapy can take on different forms, such as group psychodrama, cognitive-behavioral groups, and psychoeducational groups. Psychodrama involves clients using role-playing and spontaneous dramatization and offers a creative method for an individual and group to explore problems (Hamamci, 2006; Pires et al., 2021). Cognitive-behavioral groups aim to improve the coping skills of the participants through behavior, thought processes, and group relations (Hamami, 2006). Finally, psychoeducational groups are designed to educate clients on related behaviors and consequences (DeLucia-Waack, 2006).

One group therapy approach frequently used to treat adolescent substance misuse is family therapy. Family therapy is considered an important modality of treatment because it considers the role of the family in the life of the adolescent (Deas & Thomas, 2001) and often

focuses on addressing and resolving familial issues, such as communication (Winters et al., 2011). Overall, a large portion of studies examining family therapy found that it significantly reduced adolescent substance use (Muck et al., 2001; Winters et al., 2011; Tanner-Smith et al.). For example, in a study conducted by Liddle et al. (2009), multidimensional family therapy was significantly more effective at reducing adolescent substance use than peer group intervention. Family-based and multisystemic interventions have received the most attention in empirical research (Deas & Thomas, 2001, Muck et al., 2001; Winters et al., 2011). Yet, during adolescence, group therapy with peers may also be an important approach for treating adolescent substance misuse and should be looked at in more detail.

Peer group therapy may be particularly beneficial to adolescents as it can provide a space for social skills training and identify exploration (Fine et al., 1991; Leader, 1991). Fanshawe et al. (2017) completed a review on tobacco cessation. Of the 41 articles included in the review, only 9 looked at group counseling as an intervention effect for tobacco use (Fanshawe et al., 2017). Though articles about group therapy were found in Fanshawe et al.'s review (2017), there was limited discussion of its effects. To our knowledge, no reviews exist examining the effectiveness of group therapy as a treatment for adolescents who misuse substances. The objective of this scoping review is to investigate the effectiveness of peer group therapy for substance misuse treatment during adolescence. Because family therapy is widely researched and there is less known about peer group therapy, we will be excluding family therapy from our review.

Methods

The proposed scoping review will be conducted in accordance with the JBI methodology for scoping review as outlined in the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) method for scoping reviews. The study will use the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analysis (PRISMA-ScR) checklist and AACODS checklist. The review protocol will be published in the University of Michigan Deep Blue Repository.

The scoping review will use the methodological framework proposed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) and adaptations by the Joanna Briggs Institute (Peters et al., 2020). The framework consists of five consecutive stages: (1) identifying the research questions, (2) identifying relevant studies, (3) study selection, (4) charting the data, and (5) collating, summarizing and reporting the results.

Stage 1: Identifying the research questions

Based on gaps in research, the scoping review will aim to answer the following question: Is group therapy an effective treatment method for adolescent substance misuse?

Along with this review question, four sub-questions are addressed:

1. What are the benefits of adolescent peer group therapy?
2. What are the risks of adolescent peer group therapy?
3. What is the state of the science on the use of peer group therapy for adolescent substance use treatment?
4. How may adolescent group therapy differ from adult peer group therapy?

Stage 2: Identifying relevant studies

Inclusion criteria

A comprehensive search strategy will be developed to review the available literature using the “Population-Concept-Context (PCC)” framework for scoping review (Peters et al., 2020). The pre-defined inclusion criteria will be underpinned (Table 1)

Table 1

Inclusion criteria

Component	Characteristics
Population	The focus of this review is studies that evaluated adolescent peer group therapy for substance misuse treatment. This means that the population will be restricted to those aged between 12 and 18 years. This age restriction is necessary to make the important distinction between group therapy for adolescents versus group therapy for children and adults.
Concept	Studies that assess the effectiveness of peer group therapy in treating adolescent substance misuse will be included in the study. Concepts include group therapy, adolescent, and substance misuse.

Context

Our primary focus is group therapy. For this review, group therapy will be defined as a form of therapy in which there is one or more therapists/facilitators treating a small group of clients who are in recovery from substance misuse together. The following group therapies will be included: psychotherapy groups (or group therapy), psychodrama groups, cognitive-behavioral groups, and psychoeducational groups. If a therapist or facilitator is leading the group, we will consider including support and interpersonal process groups. We will not include family therapy.

Substance use refers to the use of drugs and alcohol and becomes problematic when one uses it excessively or it starts to interfere with one's life. The substances that we will be including are alcohol (including binge alcohol use), marijuana, vaping/tobacco, opioids, and illicit drugs.

This review will examine group therapy in a global context, meaning we are not limiting our review to studies from a specific region. Countries and states study or prioritize different forms of group therapy, and different substances may be more popular among adolescents in different regions.

All research studies (experimental, quasi-experimental, observational, and qualitative) that examine the use of peer group therapy for adolescent substance use will be included. Grey literature (narrative reviews, conference papers, and proceedings, government reports, community agency/group reports, editorials, theses) examine the use of group therapy for adolescents substance use.

Systematic reviews will not be included for the final review. However, identified systematic reviews will be used for further citation tracking.

Due to time constraints and financial resources, we are restricting the language of studies to English.

Exclusion criteria

The population is restricted to those between ages 12 and 18 to make the important distinction between group therapy for adolescents versus group therapy for children or adults. Moreover, we will not be looking into family therapy. Though family therapy is a form of group therapy, we will be focusing on group therapies among peers. Within the search level, we will not be restricting the language to studies of English as they often have a translated title and

abstract. However, once we start to read included studies, we will be restricting the languages of studies to English.

Search strategy

The search strategy will aim to locate both published and unpublished studies. An initial exploratory search on PsychInfo and PubMed was conducted to identify key articles on the topic. The text words contained in the titles and abstracts of relevant articles and the index terms were used to develop key terms for refining the database search strategies. Authors met with health sciences librarians to narrow down on key terms.

The database search strategy will include combining keywords, indexed terms, and phrases for the following concepts: adolescents, group therapy, and substance use. The search strategy will be adapted for each included database and/or information source. The search strategy for PubMed is presented in Appendix 1.

Due to time and funding restrictions, included studies will be limited to English.

The databases to be searched include PsychInfo, PubMed, Embase, CINAHL, Scopus, and Web of Science, and ProQuest. Sources of unpublished studies/grey literature to be searched across government or organization websites and through google scholar.

Stage 3: Study selection

Following the search, all identified citations will be collated and uploaded into Rayyan – a web and mobile app for systematic reviews – and duplicates removed (Mourad et al., 2016). Titles and abstracts will be screened by two independent reviews for assessment against the inclusion criteria for the review. Potentially relevant sources will be retrieved in full, and text will be assessed against the inclusion criteria by FD and SS. Reasons for excluding full texts will be reported in the scoping review. Any disagreements between reviewers at each stage will be resolved through discussion with a third reviewer. The results of the search and the study inclusion process will be reported in full in the final scoping review according to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analysis (PRISMA-ScR) checklist (Tricco et al., 2018) and AACODS checklist (Tyndall, 2010).

Stage 4: Charting the data

A draft extraction form will be provided (see Appendix II). The draft data extraction tool will be modified and revised as necessary during the process of extracting data from each included evidence source. Data extraction will be performed by two independent reviewers through the charting form. Changes will be recorded and detailed in full in the scoping review. If necessary and where required, authors of papers will be contacted to request missing or additional data.

Stage 5: Collating, summarizing, and reporting the results

The findings from the retrieved data will be combined to generate a summary of the effectiveness of group therapy for treating adolescent substance misuse. The data will be

presented through visual presentations, narratives, and tables. The data extracted from the studies will be presented in relation to the year, country/state, and type of study. Information presented about the group therapy interventions will include the name of intervention, results, participants, context, duration of group therapy, the method or strategy the group therapy was based on, the content of the intervention, actions, assessments and instruments, and the persons involved in the group therapy (participants and therapists/facilitators)

The results of the search will be included in the final scoping review and presented in the PRISMA flow diagram (Page et al., 2021).

Dissemination

The purpose of the scoping review is to gather current research and information that discusses adolescent group therapy as a form of treatment for adolescent substance misuse. As a vital review, it will inform stakeholders of a different, likely more cost-effective, method for supporting adolescents who struggle with substance use. Readers will gain the information from existing forms of adolescent group therapies for treating substance misuse. The study findings will be disseminated through peer-reviewed publications and conference presentations, such as the upcoming International Association for Group Psychotherapy (IAGP) 2022 Conference.

Supplementary Information

See Appendices.

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Contributions

All authors have made substantive intellectual contributions to the development of the protocol. FD and SS jointly conceived the idea for the project. FD and SS contributed to the study design and development of research questions. FD conceptualized the review approach and led the writing of the manuscript. SS led the supervision of the manuscript preparation. All authors provide detailed comments on earlier drafts and approved this manuscript. SS and SA are guarantors of this review.

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Competing interests

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