

## A Case Report of Psychological Counseling on Anxiety Caused by Retaking Exams

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### Abstract

Academic pressure is often the primary psychological problem faced by university freshman in the process of adapting to the new environment. In this case, the help-seeker was anxious because of the advanced mathematics retake exam. The consultant combined the self-report, preliminary observation and psychological test results of the help-seeker to diagnose the symptoms as general psychological problems, which used reasonable emotional therapy to help the visitors identify and correct irrational beliefs and establish their correct cognitive patterns. The consultant helped the visitor to learn a reasonable way of thinking and relaxation training, self-management of anxiety and nervousness. At the same time, the consultant used system desensitization to alleviate the anxiety that the visitor faces when facing the exam. In the end, the visitor finally said "goodbye" to the advanced mathematics test, and devoted himself to a new round of study with full spirit. College mental health educators should integrate value education into the adaptive education of college students, which can improve their cognitive level and psychological adjustment ability.

### Keywords

Examination; anxiety; reasonable emotional therapy; systemic desensitization; psychological consultation.

### 1. Case information

#### 1.1 Demographic data

Yao was born in Shandong. He is an 18-years-old boy who is only son and the nationality is Han. He is a first-year student of a major university and acts as a squad leader.

#### 1.2 Chief complaint

In the first final exam of the university, the visitor failed the advanced mathematics exam and make up examination was still not passed. The re-examined advanced mathematics test was quickly coming. He felt pressure, anxiety, insomnia and low learning efficiency. At the same time, he showed the tendency to avoid contact with his classmates, and the state lasted for nearly a month. Therefore, the visitor came to consult.

#### 1.3 Personal statement

I used to be good at learning, and I was the pride of my parents. But I was very surprised when I failed at the advanced mathematics test of university's first final exam. I reflect that I am lax in my studies without strict requirement from my parents. In addition, the work of the squad leader delayed the study time. During the winter vacation, I only reunited with my family and classmates, and did not review it. So, the re-examination was still not passed, and only this semester I could re-learned. The school stipulates that it is not possible for the student who fails the exam to participate in the scholarship, and there is no qualification to be sent to graduate students. As a squad leader I hope to be a leader in the class, but I feel embarrassed and useless to fail the exam.

There are still two months to take the exam, and advanced mathematics that caused me headaches is coming again. If I fail this time, I really don't know how to do. This bad college life is not what I want. I think that if I want others to appreciate me I must be good at the academic performance.

Therefore, I have been studying hard since I was young. But this time, my parents must be very disappointed with me. My image in the hearts of relatives, friends and classmates is also terrible. I feel that the pressure which leads to low efficiency is getting bigger and bigger, and I can't calm down and learn. I realize that I have not reviewed well, and I am worried, annoyed, and often suffering from insomnia. I am worried that the lasted state for almost a month will continue to affect the exam and my normal life. I hope I can get your help.

#### **1.4 Mental state**

The visitor's mental is normal and clear, but his concentration and memory are diminished. He feels nervous and anxious, but his will and behavior can be kept in sync. His self-knowledge is complete and he can express his own ideas. He is willing to listen to objective opinions.

#### **1.5 Personal growth history**

The visitor Yao is the only child who has a full-time birth. He comes from the city and has good family economic conditions. Because his parents are high school teachers and his learning requirements are extremely strict and high expectations. Yao has always been obedient and at the top of his academic performance, so his parents often praise him for his excellent behaviors. After successfully passing the key university, Yao quickly adapts to college life and serves as the squad leader. He is responsible for his work and close to his classmates. He also works very hard, so he is unanimously recognized by his parents, teachers and classmates. At the same time, Yao has made stricter demands on himself and he strives to do his best.

#### **1.6 Physical conditions**

The visitor is physically fit with physical illness and no family history of mental illness, but he has been difficult to fall asleep recently.

#### **1.7 Consultant observation**

The visitor's body and intelligence are both normal, clear in consciousness, logical in thinking, clear in speech and fluent in language. He has no illusory, delusional and no intellectual obstacles. The help-seeker has complete self-knowledge, and clear requirements for help. He performed freely from the time he entered the consultation room to the narrative. But he showed symptoms of low mood and anxiety once he talked about exams and learning.

#### **1.8 Others reflect**

The roommates and classmates think that Yao is lively, cheerful, helpful, and very demanding. As a squad leader, he is responsible and his classmates like him very much. Recently, when he was in class, he was in a bad state of mind and had insomnia. He often stayed alone to study. Once talking about the exam or advanced mathematics, his mood was obviously low.

## **2. Consulting Information**

The visitor did not receive medication. The consultation time was from April 13, 2017 to May 18, 2017. The consultation frequency was 1 time per week, 50 minutes each time, for a total of 6 times. The free consultation was between face-to-face consultation and internet consultation.

## **3. Case conceptualization**

Combined with the self-report of the help-seeker, the preliminary observation of the consultant, and the psychological test results, the symptoms of the help-seeker can be diagnosed as a general psychological problem caused by the anxiety of the retake exam.

### **3.1 Diagnosis basis**

(1) Three principles of disease and non-pathology. The visitor's perceptual ability, emotional expression, and intentional movement conform to the principle of coordination and unity. He is able to be stable and self-aware. The help-seeker actively seeks medical treatment, and does not exhibit

symptoms such as hallucinations and delusions. He is currently a normal person's mental activity. Thus, the visitor can rule out mental illness.

(2) The standard of symptomology. The visitor has no physical abnormality, who has good physical condition, logical thinking, relatively stable personality, self-knowledge and anxiety. His learning efficiency declined without generalization, but the anxiety did not affect normal life.

(3) Severity criteria. The failure of the help-seeker's exam makes him frustrated with self-esteem, and he has great expectations for the retake, which leads to anxiety before the exam with obvious realistic stimuli; the adverse emotional reaction is normal under a certain degree of rational control; the adverse emotional response of the visitor according to the generalized standard is limited to the anxiety caused by the exam, which is not generalized; he is able to maintain normal basic life, study and social interaction, but the efficiency has declined.

(4) The course of disease. His treatment lasts about a month.

### 3.2 Differential diagnosis

(1) Identification with mental illness. The subjective and objective world of the help-seeker is unified and the informed intentions are consistent. He has relatively stable personality, complete self-knowledge, the ability to seek medical advice, no confusion of logical thinking, no illusion and the delusion and other symptoms of mental illness. His situation is normal, which can exclude mental illness.

(2) Identification with neurosis. The psychological problem of the visitor is caused by the actual stimulus, such as the test, the inner conflict which is related to the actual conflict, and has obvious moral character, so it is a regular conflict. According to Professor Xu Youxin's scoring criteria for neurosis: first, the course of illness is short, about one month, and one point is evaluated; second, the level of mental pain of the help-seeker is moderate, and the help of a counselor is needed to get rid of the predicament. Comment 2 points; Third, the social function is slightly damaged, the help-seekers can learn as usual, and the interpersonal relationship is not much different from the past, 1 point. The total score is 4 points, so the neurosis is excluded.

(3) Differentiate from serious psychological problems. The psychological problem of the help-seeker is caused by the examination and the reaction intensity is not strong. His scope of the reaction is limited to the examination question and it has no serious impact on social function without avoidance and generalization. The duration is only one month and the psychological problem is not serious. Therefore serious psychological problems are ruled out.

(4) Psychological test result.

Tab.1 SCL-90 scale test results

Somatization	force	Interpersonal sensitivity	Depression	anxiety
2.1	1.9	1.8	2.3	2.7
hostility	terror	Paranoia	Mental illness	other
1.3	2.2	1.3	1.1	2.2
Total score	178			

Tab.2 SDS and SAS scale test results

SDS scale test results		SAS scale test results	
Rough score	Standard score	Rough score	Standard score
42	52.5	50	62.5

From the SCL-90 factors and total scores, the visitor is mainly anxious, accompanied by mild somatization, depression, terror, and other factors; from the SDS, SAS standard points, the help-seeker's depression score was mild depression and anxiety score was moderate anxiety.

### 3.3 Cause Analysis

- (1) Biological reasons. There are no obvious biological causes in this case.
- (2) Sociological reasons. The visitor is influenced by family background and educational methods. Parents are high school teachers, who always pay attention to the learning situation and academic performance of the help-seeker. From a young age, the learning requirements are strict, which prompts the help-seeker to get used to the excellent self, doesn't allow himself to have problems in learning, results in strong self-esteem. He is stressed and impacted by social stress events. The university is a new starting point for life. The help-seeker steps into the school with the expectations of their parents and honor. He wants to continue to be excellent. He doesn't expect to fail in the exam, and the pressure he faced is beyond the reach of his life experience and personality traits, which led to a series of painful emotions.
- (3) Psychological reasons. In terms of personality factors, the help-seeker pursues perfection and strict self-question; In terms of cognition, he misunderstands himself and thinks that he has always been excellent, who should not fail in the exam. He regards the parents' expectations and test scores overweight. At the same time, he misunderstands the test and when he fails in the exam, he denies and condemns himself.

## 4. Consulting plan

### 4.1 Consulting methods and theoretical basis

Because the help-seeker has an unreasonable cognition of the test event and is in a state of moderate anxiety, this case uses reasonable emotional therapy and systemic desensitization to alleviate his anxiety.

Reasonable emotional therapy is the theory and method of psychotherapy created by American psychologist Ellis. It solves emotional and behavioral problems by changing the irrational concept of help-seekers through pure theoretical analysis and logical speculation. The core theory is ABC theory, A is the induced event, B is the belief, and C is the emotional response and behavioral outcome. The core of treatment is to change and control emotional and behavioral outcomes by correcting irrational beliefs.

Systematic desensitization is the theory and method of psychotherapy proposed by American scholar Wolpe. It mainly induces help-seekers to slowly expose the situations that cause fear and anxiety, and to fight against the whole body to achieve the purpose of eliminating fear or anxiety. Specifically, it is through a series of steps, according to the intensity of the stimulus from weak to strong, from small to large, gradually training the psychological endurance, and enhance the adaptability, so as to achieve no "allergic" reaction to the real experience and maintain a normal or near normal state of mind and body.

### 4.2 Consulting target

- (1) Specific goals and near-term goals. The consultant gets the trust of the help-seeker, establishes a good relationship of visits, eases the visitor's test anxiety, improves his sleep quality, helps him learn to manage his emotions and use relaxation techniques or positive self-talk to reduce anxiety levels, changes his perfectionist cognitive model and enhances his self-confidence.
- (2) Final goal and long-term goal. The consultant changes the unreasonable cognition and behavior patterns of the help-seeker, establishes rational cognition and behavior patterns, improves individuality, shapes personality, forms correct self-concepts, improves his mental health and ability to cope effectively with setbacks, and helps his develop into a healthy and self-fulfilling person.

### 4.3 Responsibilities, rights and obligations of help-seekers and consultants (omitted).

## 5. Consulting process

### 5.1 Diagnosis stage (the first consultation)

Purpose: Collecting information, building relationships, making diagnoses, and identifying goals.

Process: i Defining the desire to get help; filling in the consultation registration form, asking about the basic situation, and explaining the responsibilities, rights and obligations of both parties in the consultation; ii Conducting with the help-seeker through techniques such as listening, empathy, and active attention. Ingestion talks, establishing a good counseling relationship, collecting clinical data, understanding the status quo of anxiety, exploring his psychological problems and changing his willingness; iii Completing SCL-90, SAS and SDS psychological tests, conducting psychological diagnosis, and determining the counseling goals.

### 5.2 Comprehension stage (the second consultation)

Purpose: Consolidating relationships, identifying irrational beliefs, and establishing their correct cognitive models.

Process: I The consultant analyzes the relationship between irrational beliefs and emotional distress, and introduces the basic principles of rational emotional therapy. ii The consultant helps the help-seeker to identify some negative auto-intelligence, incorrects ideas that are gradually leaked out and conducts self-censorship and reflection. For example, "I'm just a shame if I fail in the exam when I first arrived at the university. " "Parents must be extremely disappointed with me. " "Only if others have good grades, they will really appreciate me. " "If I fail in the advanced mathematics test and my college life is terrible." Totally, the lack of faith in the help-seeker mainly includes the requirements of absolutization, the over-differentiation, the poor self-evaluation, the irrational beliefs and the way of thinking. iii Arranging consulting work. The visitor combines the life of the schedule, reflects on his irrational beliefs; he communicates with his parents, asks if they will accept himself if they have not tested well, carefully reads the 11 common irrational beliefs that Alice has summarized and briefly writes his thoughts against his own situation.

### 5.3 Completion stage (the 3-4th consultation)

Purpose: Debating with irrational beliefs, learning reasonable thinking ways and relaxation training, and self-managing anxiety and nervousness.

Process: i The consultant feedbacks counseling work, discusses the mistakes and cognitions of the helpers, and understands their recent sleep status and relaxation training. After inquiry, Yao's parents have great expectations, but if he is not particularly good, He is still the good son of his parents. ii Debating with irrational beliefs. "Is there any evidence that good grades are successful and excellent?" "Is there any evidence that you can't pass advanced mathematics is worse than others?" etc. Refining and strengthening rationalization beliefs, such as "good grades do not mean all, he should be fully developed" "If you work hard, you will have a corresponding return." iii The consultant demonstrate the inefficiency of irrational beliefs, how these beliefs affect his behavior and lead to related emotional distress, and let him realize that the absolutization of language is an important reason for irrational thinking, such as "only" and "must". iv The visitor performs simple muscle relaxation exercises and abdominal breathing relaxation exercises to improve his ability to respond to anxiety and emotional reactions, and further improves sleep. v Arranging consulting work: The help-seeker combines with the analysis of consultants, debates with his own irrational beliefs and relaxes training when going to sleep is difficult.

### 5.4 Re-education stage (the fifth consultation)

Purpose: The consultant continues to debate with irrational beliefs and combines systemic desensitization to help the help-seeker to alleviate the anxiety he faces when he takes the test.

Process: i The consultant feedbacks consulting work, and asks about sleep conditions and use of relaxation exercises. According to Yao's feedback, he has understood a lot of truths, but still can't eliminate the anxiety of the advanced mathematics test. ii The consultant uses system desensitization to improve the fear and anxiety of the help-seeker on the test scene. The consultant guides the help-seeker to build the level of anxiety from weak to strong according to the severity of the test stimulus scenario. iii Consolidating relaxation training and carrying out systematic desensitization training. In the relaxed state, The visitor gradually desensitizes according to the anxiety level of 1-6, evokes the

anxiety state by imagining the test scene, evaluates the anxiety level until the anxiety level does not exceed 40 points, and enters the next level of anxiety situation. After several times of desensitization training, Yao no longer felt anxious when he imagined the exam. iv The consultant arranges homework, continues to debate with irrational beliefs, applies reasonable emotional therapy to adjust emotions, at the same time combines relaxation training, repeatedly imagines the level 6 anxiety situations and maintains physical and mental relaxation.

Tab.3 From weak to strong anxiety scale

Numbering	Degree of anxiety	event
1	0	Two months away from the exam
2	20	Usually think of the exam
3	40	Think of the exam one week before the exam
4	60	One night before the exam, I thought about the exam.
5	80	Waiting outside the exam room to think about the exam
6	100	Sitting in the examination room and having to take the test

### 5.5 The end stage (the sixth consultation).

Purpose: The consultant consolidates the effect, establishes adaptive behavior, and ends the consultation. Process: i The consultant feedbacks and consults work, affirms Yao's changes and progress, encourages him to continue to perform; ii The consultant discusses the pre-test time schedule, living arrangements and self-regulation methods with Yao; iii Affirming Yao's growth and suggesting its future. Yao continues to work on improving adaptive and self-regulating capabilities.

## 6. Consulting effect

### 6.1 Consultant evaluation

The specific goals and short-term goals of the help-seeker are basically realized. The help-seeker basically eliminates or alleviates the test anxiety, has confidence to face the test, whose self-awareness tends to be reasonable and the self-evaluation can be properly evaluated.

### 6.2 Help-seeker self-assessment

The help-seeker's learning status has obviously improved, and the events related to the advanced mathematics have obviously not been anxious. The symptoms of insomnia have basically disappeared, and he believes that he will pass the advanced mathematics test smoothly.

### 6.3 Psychological assessment

Tab.4 SCL-90 scale test results

Somatization	force	Interpersonal sensitivity	Depression	anxiety
1.7	1.8	1.9	1.7	1.9
hostility	terror	Paranoia	Mental illness	other
1.3	0.9	1.1	0.7	1.8
Total score	126			

The SDS standard is divided into 45 points and the SAS standard is divided into 42.5 points.

According to the comparison before and after the test results, it can be seen that the scores of the factors, SDS and SAS in the helper SCL-90 decreased, and the anxiety was significantly relieved.

## 7. Case evaluation and reflection

For outstanding students who have been admitted to key universities, due to lack of integration into university life, lack of mastery of learning methods, lack of test-taking ability, etc., the examinations are not satisfactory or the score is unsatisfactory and they have a large gap with the outstanding self in high school. This case combines subjective assessment with psychological test, reasonable emotional therapy and system desensitization, face-to-face consultation and Internet consultation, and achieves good results. Through return visits and tracking, Yao finally said "goodbye" with the

advanced mathematics test, the negative emotions that had plagued him have disappeared, and he devoted himself to a new round of study with full spirit.

Adaptability education for college students is a long-term, continuous and systematic project. It can help students transform their cognition into behavioral change and help students adapt to the natural environment, social needs, lifestyle, interpersonal relationships, study life, etc. It can improve students' ability to adapt and reduce various psychological problems caused by inability to adapt to the environment. Therefore, as mental health educators, we should always adhere to the combination of mental health education and moral quality education, and take the whole process of adaptive education as the main line, vigorously cultivate the values of lower grade students, focus on cultivating the social responsibility of senior students, and help students complete the transition from "middle school students" to "college students" and "college students" to "social people". In the end, the students' mental health quality, ideological and moral quality, and scientific and cultural quality will be coordinated.

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