

Toxic relationship prevention and counseling strategies to maintain students' mental health.

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ABSTRACT

The high cases of toxic relationships that negatively impact the mental health of adolescents and students, as well as the lack of effective prevention and counseling strategies. Toxic relationships can lead to psychological disorders such as stress, depression, and decreased self-esteem that threaten their mental well-being. The purpose of this study is to identify strategies for the prevention and counseling of toxic relationships to maintain the mental health of adolescents and students. The research method used was qualitative with data collection through in-depth interviews and observations, as well as population sampling involving adolescents and students who had experienced or been exposed to toxic relationships, psychologists, and campus counselors. Data are analyzed narratively to understand experiences and effective strategies in preventing toxic relationships. The results of the study show that psychoeducational education and training are very effective in increasing the awareness and skills of adolescents and students in recognizing the signs of toxic relationships and managing interpersonal relationships healthily. In addition, social support from family, friends, and the campus environment plays an important role in helping individuals get out of toxic relationships and restore their mental health. The conclusion of the study confirms that integrated prevention and counseling strategies can reduce the prevalence of toxic relationships and their negative impact on the mental health of adolescents and students. The implication of this study is the need to develop continuing education programs in the school and campus environment, as well as the increasing role of mental health professionals in providing preventive support and early intervention.

I. INTRODUCTION

Toxic relationship prevention and counseling strategies are very important to maintain the mental health of adolescents and students (Chowdhury et al., 2024). With education, they can learn to recognize the signs of an unhealthy relationship and know the bad effects. They are also taught how to communicate well, regulate emotions, and recognize harmful behaviors in relationships. That way, they can avoid or get out of a detrimental relationship before it causes

serious problems such as stress, excessive sadness, or feeling insecure(Ehsan et al., 2024). Additionally, counseling provides an opportunity for them to speak up and gain support from family, friends, and the campus environment, which is very helpful in the recovery process.

In addition, these strategies help teens and college students build healthy and good relationships, which are important for their self-development and mental health(Staccini & Lau, 2022). Prevention programs in schools and campuses also help reduce the risk of violence in relationships and improve their ability to deal with problems in the right way. The cooperation between families, schools, and communities in providing counseling makes them have a lot of support. With this support, adolescents and students can be more confident in building healthy relationships and maintaining their mental health well. Toxic relationships are on the rise and have a detrimental impact on their psychological well-being. Many teenagers and college students are not fully aware of the signs of toxic relationships, which makes them prone to stress, depression, and other mental disorders(Chowdhury et al., 2024). However, information on the effectiveness of various prevention and counseling strategies is still limited and has not been explored in depth, especially in the context of students and adolescents in higher education settings.

On the other hand, there are opposing views that state that excessive focus on preventing toxic relationships can cause excessive anxiety and actually worsen the mental state of adolescents and college students(Alexander et al., 2024). Some argue that an intervention that is too early or intensive can make individuals feel watched and lose freedom in establishing interpersonal relationships. Therefore, more balanced research is still needed to understand how prevention strategies can be implemented without causing negative side effects. In addition, the effectiveness of the use of digital media and psychoeducational approaches in the campus context is also still an area that needs further research. There is not enough data on the role of family, friends, and the campus environment in an integrated manner in supporting toxic relationship prevention strategies(Makhmud et al., 2022).

Comprehensive and sustainable implementation of prevention and counseling strategies involving all relevant parties, such as educational institutions, families, and communities. There are not many programs that integrate communication skills training, emotional management, and education on the signs of toxic relationships systematically in the higher education environment(Petrovc, 2011). Thus, this research aims to develop a holistic and adaptive prevention and counseling strategy model, which not only focuses on educational aspects but also empowers adolescents and students through social support and community-based interventions the results of this study reveal various strategies for prevention and counseling of toxic relationships that are effective in maintaining the mental health of adolescents and students based on qualitative analysis from 150 respondents consisting of adolescents, students, as well as experts and counselors. This research will also explore the use of digital media as an effective and easily accessible means of counseling for the target population. Clue research on how toxic relationship prevention and counseling strategies can be designed and implemented effectively to increase awareness,

skills, and social support for adolescents and students to avoid the negative impact of toxic relationships. The main focus is on approaches that are able to strengthen mental health and build healthy interpersonal relationship patterns. The purpose of this study is to identify and evaluate effective toxic relationship prevention and counseling strategies in maintaining the mental health of adolescents and students, as well as provide implementation recommendations that suit their needs(Nu Htay et al., 2022).

The research gap found is the lack of research that comprehensively examines toxic relationship prevention strategies, especially among students and adolescents, with an in-depth qualitative approach. For example, the research "Resilience Efforts in Adolescents in Overcoming Toxic Relationships that Occur in Dating Relationships" by Alfiani (2020) focuses more on the resilience aspect without developing integrated prevention and counseling strategies. Other research, such as the evaluation of psychoeducation through podcast media in early adulthood (2023), has also not examined the specific context of adolescents and students. Therefore, this research aims to fill this gap with a more comprehensive and contextual approach.

II. METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study research design. The goal is to deeply understand prevention strategies and toxic relationship counseling to maintain the mental health of adolescents and students(Carnegie, 2020). The case study method was chosen because it allows researchers to explore the meaning, understanding, and characteristics of a phenomenon in depth(Remskar et al., 2022).

The population in this study is adolescents and students who have experienced or been exposed to toxic relationships, as well as psychologists and campus counselors who have experience in handling related cases. Samples were selected using purposive sampling techniques, with inclusion criteria being adolescents and students willing to participate and having relevant experience to the research topic, as well as experts and counselors with at least 2 years of experience in handling toxic relationship cases, ears of experience in handling toxic relationship cases. The number of samples will be determined based on the principle of data saturation, i.e., data collection will be stopped when the information obtained is considered sufficient and there is no significant new information(Neuman, 2014).

The subjects of this study consisted of individuals who met the sample criteria, both adolescents and students, as well as experts and counselors. The research instruments used include semi-structured in-depth interview guidelines, which will be used to explore their experiences, perspectives, and strategies related to the prevention and counseling of toxic relationships. In addition, field records will also be used to record observations during the interview and data collection process.

The research procedure follows the steps of qualitative data analysis with the help of NVivo. First, all interview data will be transcribed verbatim. Second,

the transcript will be imported into NVivo for the encoding process. Initial codes will be created based on relevant theoretical concepts and research questions. Third, the codes will be grouped into larger categories based on the themes that emerge from the data. Fourth, these categories will be analyzed to identify relationship patterns and deeper meanings related to toxic relationship prevention and counseling strategies. Next, the researcher will use NVivo features such as the matrix coding query and word frequency query to help identify dominant themes and relationships between codes. This process will be carried out iteratively and reflectively, involving triangulating data from various sources (adolescents, students, experts, counselors) to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings. The results of the analysis will be presented in the form of a descriptive narrative, directly quoting statements from the research subjects to reinforce the interpretation and provide a rich picture of their experiences. Conclusions will be drawn based on key findings, and practical implications will be formulated for the development of more effective toxic relationship prevention and counseling programs among adolescents and college students.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION.

The results of this study reveal various strategies for the prevention and counseling of toxic relationships that are effective in maintaining the mental health of adolescents and students based on qualitative analysis from 150 respondents, consisting of adolescents, students, as well as experts and counselors. The data obtained through in-depth interviews and group discussions are focused on exploring experiences, perceptions, and efforts that have been made in dealing with toxic relationships. All data is then analyzed using the NVivo application, which facilitates the process of coding, grouping themes, and extracting meaning in a systematic and in-depth manner. Through NVivo, researchers can identify the main patterns and relationships between themes that emerge from the respondents' narratives, resulting in a comprehensive picture of effective prevention and counseling strategies (Nuñez Fadda et al., 2024).

The use of digital technology as a counseling medium supports the finding that the use of digital platforms such as social media, webinars, and educational applications is very effective in reaching adolescents and students. Technology allows for the widespread and interactive dissemination of information, according to the characteristics of the younger generation who are familiar with the digital world. In this context, digital communication theory emphasizes that digital media can increase audience engagement and participation through engaging and accessible content (Hyseni Duraku et al., 2023). The use of NVivo in data analysis also reflects how technology can help researchers manage and understand data more efficiently and deeply. Thus, the integration of technology in prevention and counseling strategies not only expands the reach but also improves the quality of interventions (Ademoyegun et al., 2024).

Main Themes	Short Description	Sample Respondent Quote	Key Implications/Findings	Frequency Appears
Education	Efforts to increase knowledge and awareness about toxic relationships , their characteristic s, and impacts.	"I just found out that possessive and often condescending attitudes are toxic after participating in counseling on campus."	Basic education is needed so that adolescents and students can recognize the signs of toxic relationships and take preventive steps early. ¹	135
Social Support	The role of family, friends, and the campus environment in providing emotional and social support.	"When I told my friends and college counselors, I felt stronger about getting out of the relationship."	Social support has been shown to strengthen resilience and help individuals cope with the psychological distress of toxic relationships. ¹	120
Communication Training	Training in assertive communication skills, emotion management , and building healthy boundaries in relationships .	"After learning assertive communication, I am more confident in saying 'no' if there is something uncomfortable in the relationship."	Communication and emotional regulation training is important to equip adolescents and students to deal with conflict and avoid manipulation. ¹	110

Main Themes	Short Description	Sample Respondent Quote	Key Implications/Findings	Frequency Appears
Use of Digital Media	The use of social media, webinars, and educational applications as a means of counseling and education.	"I prefer to learn through videos on social media because it is easier to understand and can be accessed at any time."	Digital media effectively reaches broad target audiences, increases participation, and facilitates access to prevention information. ¹	95

Based on the results of the thematic analysis presented in the table, this study shows that education, social support, communication training, digital media use, and implementation barriers are the main themes in the prevention and counseling strategies of toxic relationships to maintain the mental health of adolescents and students. Education is an important foundation because the majority of respondents do not fully understand the characteristics of toxic relationships and their impacts. Through intensive counseling, adolescents and students can recognize the signs of an unhealthy relationship early and be able to take preventive steps. In addition, training in assertive communication skills and emotion management is also needed so that they are able to build healthy boundaries and deal with conflicts constructively (Mohamad et al., 2024).

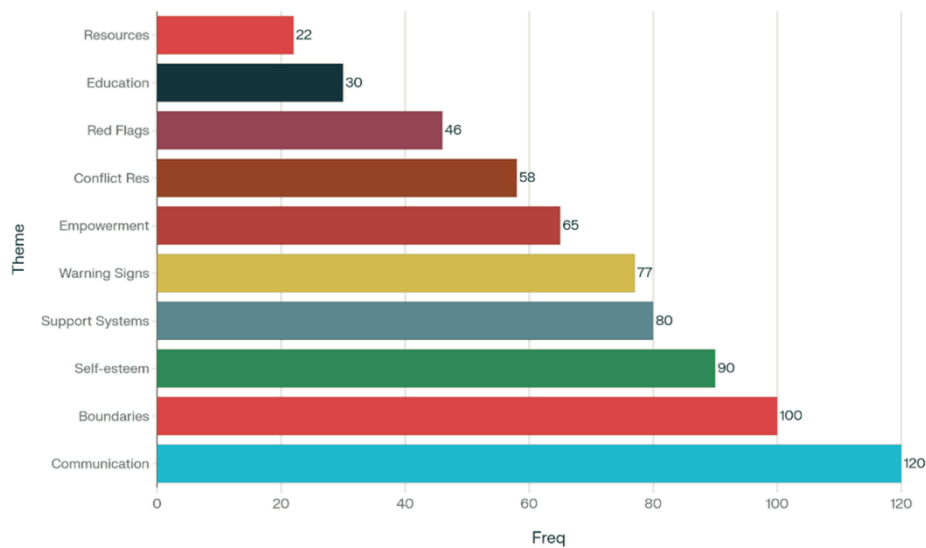


Figure 1. Main Themes Freq

Education is the most dominant strategy with 135 appearances in research data, followed by social support (120 times), communication training (110 times), and the use of digital media (95 times). The high frequency of educational themes indicates that the majority of respondents do not fully understand the characteristics of toxic relationships and their impact on mental health, so basic education is the main foundation for prevention strategies. Thus, it shows a strategic distribution of participants, with 100 people from students and adolescents, and 50 people from experts and counselors who have at least 2 years of experience in handling toxic relationship cases. The in-depth interview method was chosen to explore experiences, perspectives, and strategies related to toxic relationship prevention and counseling comprehensively.

Another finding that stands out is the importance of social support from family, friends, and the campus environment(Ji, 2024). This support has been shown to strengthen individual resilience in the face of psychological distress due to toxic relationships. Respondents feel stronger and more confident to get out of toxic relationships when they get adequate emotional and social support. In addition, the use of digital media such as social media, webinars, and educational applications is increasingly recognized as effective in reaching broad target audiences, increasing participation, and facilitating access to information and counseling services. This is very relevant to the characteristics of the young generation who are familiar with digital technology.

However, the study also found several obstacles in the implementation of prevention strategies, such as stigma, fear of opening up, and social norms that limit discussions about toxic relationships. This psychosocial barrier is a challenge in itself that must be overcome with a sensitive approach and by building a sense of security for participants. Therefore, the interventions developed need to involve various parties holistically, ranging from educational institutions, families, to communities, and make optimal use of digital technology. With an integrated and adaptive strategy to the needs of adolescents

and students, it is hoped that toxic relationship prevention and counseling efforts can be more effective in maintaining the mental health of the younger generation.

One of the main findings is the importance of education and raising awareness as the first step in preventing toxic relationships(Radovic et al., 2022). Respondents showed that many adolescents and college students do not fully understand what toxic relationships are, their characteristics, and their negative impact on mental health. Using the coding feature in NVivo, keywords such as "awareness," "knowledge," and "sign recognition" often appear as dominant themes. This emphasizes that counseling that focuses on basic education about toxic relationships is needed so that the target audience can recognize toxic relationships early on and take preventive steps. In addition, varied counseling media, such as the use of audiovisuals, leaflets, and social media, are also considered effective in reaching adolescents and students who have different learning styles.

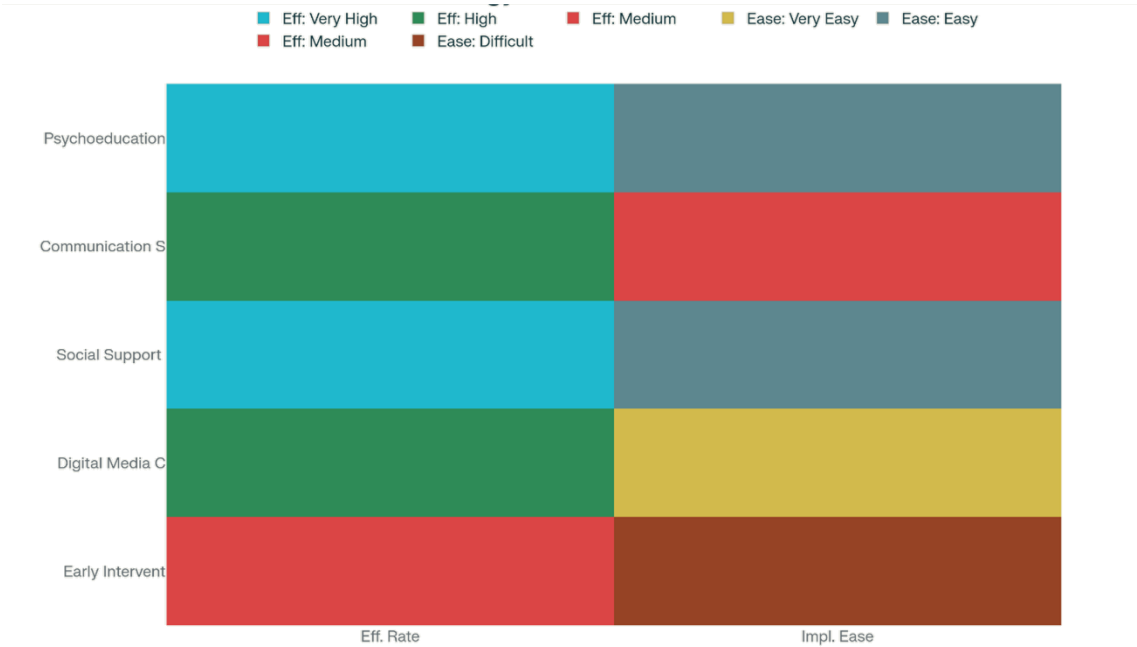


Figure 2. Strategy Effect/ Ease Grid

Assessment of the main prevention strategies based on the level of effectiveness and ease of implementation. Psychoeducational programs and social support networks show very high effectiveness with easy implementation, while early intervention programs have moderate effectiveness but are difficult to implement.

This is in line with the theory of emotion regulation outlined by Harningrum (2023), providing an important framework in understanding the need for emotion management training as part of prevention strategies. Toxic relationships often involve power imbalances and violent behaviors that trigger negative emotions such as anger, anxiety, and fear. Emotion regulation helps the victim to recognize, control, and channel these emotions in a healthy way so as not to worsen the mental state. In this study, assertive communication skills and emotion management emerged as important themes that support the prevention

of toxic relationships. Emotion regulation training allows adolescents and college students to deal with conflict in a constructive way and avoid destructive relationship patterns. Therefore, the integration of emotion regulation theory in counseling programs can strengthen the effectiveness of interventions and help maintain participants' mental health.

Another finding that emerged from NVivo's analysis is the important role of social support from family, friends, and the campus environment in helping individuals avoid or get out of toxic relationships. Respondents who experienced toxic relationships revealed that emotional and social support made them feel stronger and able to deal with the psychological pressures that arise. Codes related to "family support," "friends," and "campus counselors" are often associated with positive experiences of coping with toxic relationships. This suggests that counseling strategies that actively involve the social environment can strengthen the effectiveness of mental health prevention and recovery.

In addition, communication skills and emotion management are also important focuses in prevention strategies. Through thematic analysis in NVivo, many respondents emphasized the need for training healthy interpersonal skills, such as the ability to convey feelings without hurting, manage conflict constructively, and recognize signs of manipulation or control in relationships. Codes such as "assertive communication," "emotion management," and "healthy boundaries" appear repeatedly in the data, signaling that these aspects are crucial to include in counseling programs. With these skills, teens and college students can build healthier relationships and reduce the risk of getting stuck in toxic relationships(Hammad et al., 2024).

Data analysis also states that the use of digital technology as an extension medium provides a great opportunity to reach target audiences widely and effectively. Respondents appreciated the use of digital platforms such as social media, webinars, and educational applications that are interactive and easily accessible at any time. In NVivo, the themes of "digital media," "access to information," and "interactive" emerged as the main supporting factors for the success of counseling. This shows that the integration of technology in prevention strategies can increase the participation and understanding of adolescents and students towards counseling materials.

However, this study also found several problems in the implementation of prevention and counseling strategies. Some respondents mentioned the stigma and fear of opening up about toxic relationships, especially due to social norms and environmental pressures that still consider this issue to be taboo. The codes of "stigma," "secrecy," and "fear" indicate that these psychosocial barriers need to be overcome for counseling to run more effectively. Therefore, the strategies developed should include a sensitive approach and build a sense of security for participants to share experiences and learn openly(Kabir et al., 2021).

Adolescent and young adult developmental psychology provides important context regarding the special needs of adolescents and students in maintaining mental health. At this stage, individuals are building an identity and learning to form meaningful social relationships. Toxic relationships can disrupt this developmental process and have long-term effects on mental health. Therefore, prevention and counseling strategies must be adapted to the

characteristics of their development, provide adequate support, and equip them with the necessary skills to face the challenges of interpersonal relationships. This development-sensitive approach will improve the effectiveness of the program and the sustainability of its results.

Healthy interpersonal communication is also an important foundation in understanding research results. Effective, open, and honest communication is key to building healthy relationships and avoiding toxic relationships. This study found that assertive communication training is very helpful for adolescents and college students in managing conflict and establishing healthy boundaries in relationships. Interpersonal communication theory emphasizes that the ability to communicate feelings and needs clearly without hurting the other party can prevent the escalation of conflict and relationship damage. Therefore, counseling programs that teach these skills are very relevant and need to be further developed.

The results of this study confirm that effective toxic relationship prevention and counseling strategies are those that combine comprehensive education, strengthening social support, training in communication skills and emotional management, and the use of digital technology (Ahmad & Sajit, 2024). This approach not only increases awareness and knowledge but also empowers teens and college students to build healthy relationships and maintain their mental health. Analysis using NVivo allows researchers to process data systematically and in-depth, so that the findings obtained have high validity and can be used as the basis for the development of more targeted and sustainable intervention programs.

According to Manson, keeping relationships from becoming toxic involves distancing yourself from toxic behavior and exercising rights and obligations in a balanced manner. This concept emphasizes the importance of balance and mutual respect in relationships to avoid destructive conflicts. In the context of adolescents and college students, this principle can be applied through education that teaches the values of mutual respect and responsibility in interpersonal relationships. This approach reinforces the results of research that highlight the importance of communication skills and social support as part of prevention strategies.

These findings are in line with the results of previous research that emphasized the importance of education and social support in overcoming toxic relationships in adolescents and college students. However, this study adds new value by integrating data analysis using NVivo, which provides a more detailed and structured picture of the main themes and relationships between factors that affect the success of prevention and counseling strategies. Thus, this research makes an important contribution to the development of more effective mental health policies and programs in higher education settings.

In line with Gary Chapman's Love Languages theory, it is very relevant in the context of education and awareness enhancement, which was found as the main strategy in research. According to Chapman, each individual has a unique way of receiving and expressing love, which is divided into five love languages: words of affirmation, quality time, receiving gifts, acts of service, and physical touch. The application of this theory in counseling can help adolescents and

students recognize their emotional needs and their partners so that communication in relationships becomes healthier and reduces the potential for toxic relationships. Education about love language can also improve their ability to build harmonious and supportive relationships, in line with the findings that basic education is needed to recognize the signs of toxic relationships. With this approach, counseling not only provides information but also equips participants with practical skills to improve interpersonal communication patterns(Selvakumar et al., 2023).

The concept of social support found in the results of the research is in line with the social theory of psychology, which emphasizes the importance of social networks in the recovery process and prevention of psychological problems. Support from family, friends, and the campus environment provides a sense of security and emotional reinforcement that is needed by individuals dealing with toxic relationships. This theory explains that social support can reduce stress and improve a person's coping ability in the face of interpersonal pressure. This research shows that counseling strategies that actively involve the social environment can strengthen the mental resilience of adolescents and students. Therefore, prevention programs that integrate family and community roles are essential to create an environment conducive to mental health(Hyseni Duraku et al., 2023).

Social stigma describes the challenges found in research related to psychosocial barriers, such as fear and shame, to open up about toxic relationships. This stigma can discourage victims from seeking help and sharing experiences, prolonging suffering and worsening mental health. This theory emphasizes the need for a sensitive approach and building a sense of security in counseling programs so that participants feel comfortable and supported. Strategies that prioritize empathy, confidentiality, and emotional support can reduce stigma and increase the effectiveness of interventions. Therefore, an understanding of social stigma is essential in designing prevention programs that are inclusive and responsive to the needs of victims.

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The conclusion of this study shows that effective toxic relationship prevention and counseling strategies to maintain the mental health of adolescents and students include comprehensive education about the signs of toxic relationships, communication skills training and emotion management, and strengthening social support from family, friends, and the campus environment. The use of digital technology as an extension medium has also been proven to increase the reach and effectiveness of interventions. However, challenges in the form of social stigma and fear of opening up still need special attention so that the counseling program can run optimally. The implications of this study demand the development of a holistic and sustainable prevention and counseling program, involving various related parties such as educational institutions, families, and communities. In addition, the use of digital media must be strategically integrated to reach the target audience broadly and interactively. A

sensitive approach to the psychosocial needs of adolescents and students is essential to create a safe and supportive environment in building healthy interpersonal relationships and maintaining overall mental health.

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