

# Group Therapy to Target Anxiety and Depression for At-Risk Students: A Systematic Review

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## Research Question

What are the benefits of occupation-focused psychosocial groups in middle and high school students identified as at-risk for anxiety and depression?

## Introduction

- If mental health is not addressed as soon as possible, mental disorders such as anxiety and depression can lead to an increase in internalizing symptoms (McLaughlin & King, 2015), which may then inhibit individuals from participating in everyday life activities. This is where occupational therapy can step in.
- Occupational therapy addresses the misfits between the person, environment, and occupations, to develop strategies to increase the individual's occupational performance and participation, while also having an end goal of increasing their overall health and well-being.
- The client-centered approach of occupational therapy may be deeply beneficial for persons with mental disorders.
- Evidence supports the efficacy of occupation-based group therapy in reducing anxiety and depression in middle and high school students (Crowly et al., 2018).

## Method

- A broad search of the literature occurred between May 14, 2025, and June 2, 2025
- **Inclusion criteria:** Peer-reviewed, published in English, and dated between 2015-2025
- **Exclusion criteria:** Systematic reviews, scoping reviews, dissertations, and presentations
- **Electronic databases used:** PubMed, CINAHL Complete, MEDLINE, ERIC, MasterFILE Complete, and OTSeeker through Hawai'i Pacific University's online library database
- **Search terms:** Psychosocial groups, middle school, high school, students, anxiety, depression, as well as combinations of these terms
- The initial search included 84 articles related to the research topic. Five studies met the inclusion criteria for this systematic review.
- Three independent reviewers completed the screening and selection of the studies, assessed their quality, and extracted the data.



Figure 1. Example of Yoga Group Therapy



Figure 2. Example of Group Mindfulness Therapy

## Results

Five studies met the inclusion criteria. The information from these articles were divided into **two themes: mental health and stress**

1. **Mental health:** Two studies that utilized yoga and modified cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) as interventions found no significant change in anxiety and depression but still noted a decrease in either anxiety or depression or both. Three studies that used group mindfulness therapy, mixtape creation, and character strengths-based group therapy as interventions found a significant decrease in anxiety and/or depression.
2. **Stress:** Two studies that used group mindfulness therapy and mixtape creation as interventions showed significant reduction in stress after the intervention.

## Discussion

- Occupation-based group therapy may be an effective way to help middle school and high school students who are at-risk of developing anxiety and depression, but more research is needed.
- Occupation-based group therapy may decrease anxiety, depression, and stress.
- Future research should aim to utilize the unique perspectives of occupational therapists and explore how they may influence the outcomes of these occupation-based group therapies for adolescents.
- Occupational therapists can help children and adolescents with the performance of occupations and management of mental health (Táparo, 2024).

## Conclusion

- Group therapy may be an appropriate intervention approach to decrease anxiety and depression in at-risk middle and high school students.
- Further research is needed to identify how this intervention approach can be implemented into occupational therapy practice and what the long-term effects may be.

## References

