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Effect of Assertiveness Training and Systematic Desensitization on Test Phobia of Secondary School Students in Awka Education Zone, Anambra State.

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ABSTRACT
The study investigated effect of assertiveness training and systematic desensitization on test phobia of secondary school students in Awka Education Zone, Anambra State. The main purpose of the study was to examine the effect of assertiveness training and systematic desensitization on test phobia of secondary school students in Awka Education Zone, Anambra State. Three research questions and three hypotheses guided the study. The study adopted quasi-experimental research design. The population of the study comprised of 3987 students in public co-educational secondary schools in Awka Education Zone, Anambra State. The sample size of the study was 105 students identified with test phobia in three selected public co-educational secondary schools. Purposive sampling technique was used for the study. The instruments for data collection were Test Phobia Identification Scale (TPIS) and Test Phobia Inventory (TPI). The instruments were validated by three experts. The reliability of the instruments were established using Cronbach Alpha Reliability Coefficient which gave coefficient values of 0.91 for TPIS and 0.81 for TPI. Mean, standard deviation and ANCOVA were used for data analysis. The findings of the study revealed that Systematic desensitization had more better effect in reducing test phobia when compared to assertiveness training and conventional counselling. Based on the findings of the study, the researchers recommended among others that systematic desensitization be applied as first-line treatment and integrative assertiveness training when additional counselling technique is needed.
Keywords: Assertiveness training, systematic desensitization, test phobia, test phobia identification scale, test phobia inventory.

INTRODUCTION

Globally and nationally, test is the most common means of evaluation of students in educational institutions. Test is a measurement tool for the evaluation of students' performance. Test can be defined as an instrument used in obtaining information from an individual, and it involves the presentation of standard set of questions to be answered, which also involved obtaining a numerical value based on an individual's answer to the question (Mbah & Udegbe, 2023). Performance test culture has a negative side to it which has great impact on many students, as many students become fearful of tests. The Greek word

"phobia" means fear, aversion, panic and morbid fear (Khalid, 2022). Phobia is said to have occurred when one is intensely afraid of a situation or something and the reaction to the situation seems out of proportion compared with what might be normally expected (Obi & Oguzie, 2019). Collins (2018) defined phobia as a very irrational fear or hatred of something.

Some students are intensely and irrationally afraid of tests, they have phobia for tests. Zeidner (2016) defined test phobia as the abnormal fear for test characterized by feelings of tension, fear and worrisome thoughts when an individual faces an evaluative achievement demanding situation. Unachukwu and Onwuka (2015) explain test phobia as one of the unpleasant events linked to test. Detroit (2023), is of the view that test phobia may happen before a test, or during the tests or examinations.

In this study the researchers present different definitions of test phobia by some selected scholars. The different definitions of test phobia by selected scholars share the same view that test phobia has to do with the fear of test. Test phobia is a phenomenon that is prevalent in secondary schools, both locally and internationally. Cassady and Johnson (2022), noted that between twenty-five to forty percent of students globally experience test phobia. They are of the opinion that students who experience test phobia tend to be easily distracted during test, experience difficulty in comprehending fairly simple directives and trouble organizing or recalling information. The experience of test phobia by students before test or during test could be as a result of some factors such as parental pressure associated with so much worry to fulfil parental expectations, and stronger unpleasant bodily symptoms relating to phobia during a test. (Putsin & Woods, 2020). Factors contributing to test phobia according to Obi (2021) include the following; study skill deficit, poor information processing models, placing over emphasis on a single test, low self-confidence, fear of failure, challenging social and dysfunctional relationships. Other causes of test phobia also worthy to mention are; unpleasant past experiences of low previous grade point average and cumulative grade point average (GPA, CPGA), assessment system, long duration of tests and extensive subjects load, (Oguzie, 2018).

Test phobia has much consequences for many students at all levels of which failure in test is one of them. According to Oguzie (2019), test phobia can result in physiological, behavioural and/or psychological effects. Physiological effects include rapid heart beat, headache, tension, profuse perspiration; behavioural effects include indecisiveness, being unable to organize thoughts; while psychological effects involve feelings of nervousness, restlessness and continual doubt. Onyekwuru and Ibebgbunam (2018) noted that between twenty-five to forty percent of the students in secondary schools in Anambra State experience test phobia. According to them, twenty percent of test phobia students quit school before graduating because of repeated academic failure. The researchershereby defined test phobia as a persistent and disproportionate fear response elicited by formal testing conditions, characterized by anticipatory cognitive distress, heightened physiological arousal and maladaptive avoidance and performance-impairing behaviours.

Observation has shown that some students in secondary schools in Anambra State appear to experience test phobia, which may lead to poor academic performance, low self-confidence, avoidance of tests and examination situations, reduced motivations to learn, examination malpractice and emotional distress. These are observed problems of test phobia.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study was to investigate the effect of assertiveness training and systematic desensitization on test phobia of secondary school students in Awka Education Zone in Anambra State. Specifically the study sought to:

1. Examine the difference in the effect of assertiveness training and systematic desensitization on test phobia among students in Awka Education Zone.
2. Determine the effect of assertiveness training on test phobia of male and female students in Awka Education Zone.
3. Determine the effect of systematic desensitization on test phobia of male and female students in Awka Education Zone.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the effect of assertiveness training and systematic desensitization on test phobia of students in Awka Education Zone, when compared with those exposed to conventional counselling, using their pre-test and post-test mean scores.
2. What is the effect of assertiveness training on test phobia of male and female students in Awka Education Zone, when compared with those exposed to conventional counselling, using their pre-test and post-test mean scores?
3. What is the effect of systematic desensitization on test phobia of male and female students in Awka Education Zone, when compared with those exposed to conventional counselling, using their pre-test and post-test mean scores?

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were formulated and tested at 0.05 level of significance.

1. There is no significant difference in the effect of assertiveness training and systematic desensitization on test phobia of students in Awka Education Zone when compared with those exposed to conventional counselling using their pretest and post test mean scores.
2. There is no significant difference in the effect of assertiveness training on test phobia of male and female students in Awka Education Zone when compared with those exposed to conventional counselling using their pretest and post test mean scores.
3. There is no significant difference in the effect of systematic desensitization on test phobia of male and female students in Awka Education Zone when compared with those exposed to conventional counselling using their pretest and post test mean scores.

RESEARCH METHOD

This section highlighted the procedures that were used in carrying out the study. A quasi-experimental research design was used for the study. Anaekwe (2021) viewed quasi-experimental research design as a design in which the researcher administers treatment condition to one or more groups called experimental or treatment group, while the other group called the control group will not receive any treatment and their differences are observed. Anaekwe explained that quasi-experimental research design helps a study to find out the significance of the difference between the pretest and post test score called covariates. Therefore, the quasi-experimental research design becomes imperative since the study is to find out the significant difference between the secondary school students treated with assertiveness training and systematic desensitization and the control group who are not treated to reduce test phobia of secondary school students in Anambra State.

The population of the study consisted of 5259 students in 55 co-educational public secondary schools in Awka Education Zone in 2025-2026 academic session. (source: Anambra State Post Primary School Service Commission, PPSC). The sample of the study comprised of 105 SS2 students identified with test phobia using Test Phobia Identification Scale (TPIS) in three selected co-educational public secondary schools. Purposive sampling technique was used to draw three schools that have high number of students with test phobia in the Awka Education Zone. Simple random sampling technique, was drawn to assign each of the selected school that constituted experimental group for assertiveness training, while another secondary school was used as experimental group for systematic desensitization while third school served as control group.

The first instrument used for data collection was TestPhobia Identification Scale (TPIS) structured by the researchers. The instruments contained 20 items used to identify students with test phobia for the project. The second instrument was Test Phobia Inventory (TPI) structured by the researchers to elicit information on test phobia of the students. The instruments were validated by three experts, all in the Faculty of Education Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojuwu University, Igbariam. The reliability of the instruments were determined using Cronbach Alpha Method which gave co-efficient values of 0.91 and 0.81.

The experimental procedure for data collection began by obtaining permission from the principals of the schools, drawn for the study. The conduct of the study took place during the normal school lesson periods. Guidance Counsellors in each of the schools served as the research assistant who assisted in teaching the selected topics. The study lasted for six weeks. The researchers trained the researcher assistants with the general knowledge and information about the concepts: effect of assertiveness training and systematic desensitization on test phobia.

The researchers administered 105 copies of the questionnaire to the respondents with the help of the research assistants. The research assistants were properly briefed on the modalities for administering the instrument in an appropriate way. The 105 copies of the questionnaire were administered to the two groups, namely the experimental groups and a control group. 98 copies were retrieved immediately after their responses. The research questions were answered using mean and standard deviation. The null hypotheses were tested using Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA).

RESULTS

Research Question 1: *What is the difference in the effect of assertiveness training and systematic desensitization on test phobia of students in Awka Education Zone when compared with those exposed to conventional counselling using their pretest and post test mean scores?*

Result

Table 1. SS2 students Mean and Standard Deviation Scores on Pre-Test and Post Test Test Phobia Based on Exposure to Assertiveness Training and Systematic Desensitization

Group	Pre-test			Post-test				*M.Diff*	*M.Diff*
	n	***M***	**SD**	**n**	***M***	**SD**	***Adj. M****	*(1&2)*	*(1,2 &3)*
Assertiveness Training (1)	42	63.04	10.36	42	48.54	10.79	46.84	3.11	15.46
Systematic Desensitization (2)	33	65.73	10.53	33	42.81	8.95	45.54		18.57
Control Group (3)	23	69.30	7.61	23	60.26	9.01	64.11		

*Captured as Estimated Marginal Means in SPSS

Table 1 shows post-test mean difference in test phobia among students exposed to assertiveness training and those exposed to systematic desensitization was 3.11 in favour of those exposed to systematic desensitization. When systematic desensitization group was compared with control group (CG) there was a mean difference of 18.57 in the favour of those exposed to systematic desensitization.

When assertiveness training group was compared to the control Group, there was a mean difference of 15.46 in favour of the assertiveness group. This revealed that systematic desensitization had more better effect in reducing test phobia when compared to those exposed to both assertiveness training and those exposed to conventional counselling group, using their pretest and post test mean score.

Research Question 2: *What is the effect of assertiveness training on test phobia of male and female students in Awka Education Zone when compared to those exposed to conventional counselling using their pretest and post test mean scores?*

Table 2. Male and Female Students' Test Phobia Mean and Standard Deviation Scores Based on Treatment Groups(Assertiveness Training and Control Group)

Groups	Gender	Pre-test			Post-test			
		N	*M*	SD	*M*	SD	Adj. *M*	*M.Diff*
Assertiveness Training	Male	19	62.94	10.07	48.94	10.54	46.81	*0.55*
	Female	23	63.13	10.68	48.21	11.03	46.26	
Control Group	Male	11	66.27	7.25	62.73	7.23	61.27	0.69
	Female	12	64.50	8.15	60.58	10.60	60.58	

Table 2 indicates that the pre-test and post-test mean scores on test phobia for male students exposed to assertiveness training were 62.94 and 48.94 and 63.13 and 48.21 for the female students. For the control group, the mean test phobia scores for pre-test and posts were 66.27 and 62.73 for the male students , and 64.50 and 63.75 for the females.

In terms of adjusted mean scores, while that of male students in assertiveness training group was 46.81 that of the females was 46.26 which indicates a mean difference of 0.55 in favour of the female students. For the control group, the adjusted mean scores for male and female students were 61.27 and 60.58 respectively. This gave a mean difference of 0.69 in favour of the females as well. The small mean difference between male and female students in assertiveness training group indicates that the reduction in test phobia was relatively the same among male and female students. The findings indicated that assertiveness training was effective in reducing test phobia of both male and female students exposed to assertiveness training when compared to both the male and female students exposed to conventional counselling, using their pretest and post test means score. Furthermore, assertiveness training was more effective in reducing test phobia of female students more than their male counterparts using their pretest and post test mean score, but the mean difference was so small (they were relatively the same).

Research Question 3: *What is the effect of systematic desensitization on test phobia of male and female students in Awka Education Zone when compared to those exposed to conventional counselling using their pretest and post test mean scores?*

Table 3. Male and Female Students' Test Phobia Mean and Standard Deviation Scores Based on Treatment Groups (Systematic Desensitization and Control Group)

Groups	Gender	Pre-test			Post-test			
		N	*M*	SD	*M*	SD	Adj. *M*	M.Diff
Systematic Desensitization	Male	15	67.33	11.50	41.26	7.96	45.11	1.99
	Female	18	65.61	9.81	44.11	9.81	47.10	
Control Group	Male	11	66.27	7.25	62.73	7.23	61.27	0.69
	Female	12	64.50	8.15	63.75	10.60	60.58	

Table 3 shows that the pre-test and post-test mean scores on test phobia for male students exposed to systematic desensitization were 67.33 and 41.26 and 65.61 and 44.11 for the female students. For the control group, the mean test phobia scores for pretest and posts were 66.27 and 62.73 for the male students , and 64.50 and 63.75 for the females.

Regarding the adjusted mean scores while that of male students in systematic desensitization group was 45.11 that of the females was 47.10 which indicates a mean difference of 1.99 in favour of the male students. For the control group, the adjusted mean scores for male and female students were 61.27 and 60.58 respectively. This gave a mean difference of 0.69 in favour of the males. The small mean difference between male and female students in systematic desensitization group suggests that reduction in test phobia was similar name among male and female students. Systematic desensitization was effective in reducing test phobia of both and female students exposed to systematic desensitization when compared to

both the male and female students exposed to conventional counselling using their pretest and post means score. Furthermore, systematic desensitization was more effective in reducing test phobia of male students more than their female counterparts using their pretest and post test mean score, however the mean score difference in favour of the male students was so small (that the reduction effect was on test phobia among male and female students was relatively similar).

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant difference in the effect of assertiveness training and systematic desensitization on test phobia of students in Awka Education Zone when compared to those exposed to conventional counselling using their pretest and post test mean scores.

Table 4. Analysis of Covariance for Mean Scores on Test Phobia by Treatment Group and Gender

Source of Variation	**SSS**	**df**	**MS**	***F***	***P***	**Effect Size (η^2)**
Corrected Model	20903.49*	3	6967.83	194.18	.000	0.78
Intercept	3.87	1	3.87	0.11	.743	0.00
Pretest	10595.04	1	10595.04	295.26	.000*	0.64
Group	5998.65	2	2999.33	83.59	.000*	0.50
Error	6064.30	169	35.88			
Total	332644.00	173				
Corrected Total	26967.79	172				

*R Squared = 0.775 (Adjusted R Squared = .771); **Significant

Results of Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) displayed in Table 4 indicates that the pre-test (covariate) was significantly correlated with the posttest scores on test phobia, $F(1,169) = 295.26$, $p = 0.000$, $\eta^2 = 0.64$.This implies that the pre-test could be entered as a covariate in this study.

Regarding the hypothesis, the result indicates that there was a significant difference in the posttest mean scores on test phobia among the students in the various treatment groups after controlling for the effect of the pre-test, $F(1,169) = 83.59$, $p = 0.000$, $\eta^2 = 0.50$. Since the p-value was less than 0.05 level of significance, the null hypothesis was rejected. The effect size implied that assertiveness training had large significant effect in reducing test phobia. However, a post-test multiple-comparison test was done to ascertain the group that was significantly different from the other groups (See Table 5)

As shown in Table 5 below, students exposed to the two treatments; groups assertiveness training (AT) and the systematic desensitization (SD) group were significantly less in their mean test phobia compared to the control group (-15.62 and -18.99). Furthermore, when compared across treatment group, students exposed to AT had significantly higher test phobia mean score (*M.* Diff = 3.37) compared to those exposed to SD. This indicates that although the two treatments were effective, systematic desensitization had more significant effect better than assertiveness training on test phobia among students in Awka Education zone when compared with those exposed to conventional counselling using their pretest and post test mean scores.

Table 5. Posthoc Multiple Comparison Tests Comparing Posttest Mean Score on Test Phobia of SSS II Students Exposed to Assertiveness Training, Systematic Desensitization and Those in Control Group

(I) Group	(J) Group	*M*. Diff (I-J)	SE	*p*	Remark
AT Group		3.37	0.99	.002	Significant
	Control Group	-15.62	1.45	.000	Significant
SD Group		-18.99	1.48	0.000	Significant

Hypothesis 2. There is no significant difference in the effect of assertiveness training on test phobia of male and female students in Awka Education Zone when compared to those exposed to conventional counselling using their pretest and post test means score.

Table 6. Analysis of Covariance for Mean Scores on Test Phobia by Treatment Group and Gender

Source of Variation	SSS	Df	MS	*F*	*P*	Effect Size (η^2)
Corrected Model	15480.52*	4	3870.13	88.16	.000	0.78
Intercept	0.13	1	0.13	0.00	.956	0.00
Pretest	6880.62	1	6880.62	156.74	.000**	0.61
Group	3766.77	1	3766.77	85.81	.000**	0.46
Gender	14.39	1	14.39	0.33	.568	0.00
Group * Gender	0.80	1	0.80	0.02	.893	0.00
Error	4477.71	102	43.90			
Total	232513.00	107				
Corrected Total	19958.22	106				

*R Squared = .776 (Adjusted R Squared = .767) **Significant

ANCOVA result displayed in Table 6 shows that there was no significant interaction between gender and treatment on mean post-test test phobia of students in Awka Education Zone after controlling for the effect of the pretest, $F(1,102) = 0.02$, $p = 0.893$, $\eta^2 = 0.00$.The zero-effect size also indicates that there was no interaction effect of gender and treatment on students' test phobia. This implies that effect of the assertiveness training was equally beneficial both male and female students. Therefore, the null hypothesis was accepted. There was no significant difference in the effect of assertiveness training on test phobia of male and female students in Awka Education Zone when compared to those exposed to conventional counselling using their pretest and post test mean score. The null hypothesis was accepted.

Hypothesis 3: There is no significant difference in the effect of systematic desensitization on test phobia of male and female students in Awka Education Zone when compared to those exposed to conventional counselling using their pretest and post test means score.

Table 7;Analysis of Covariance for Mean Scores on Test Phobia by Treatment Group and Gender

Source of Variation	SSS	df	MS	*F*	*P*	Effect Size (η^2)
Corrected Model	14703.84*	4	3675.96	166.37	.000	0.89
Intercept	3.85	1	3.85	0.17	.677	0.00
Pretest	5103.96	1	5103.96	231.00	.000**	0.73
Group	5741.04	1	5741.04	259.84	.000**	0.76
Gender	0.71	1	0.71	0.03	.858	0.00
Group * Gender	5.36	1	5.36	0.24	.624	0.00
Error	1855.98	84	22.10			
Total	189216.000	89				
Corrected Total	16559.820	88				

*R Squared = 0.888 (Adjusted R Squared = .883); **Significant

As shown in the ANCOVA result present in Table 7, there was no significant interaction between gender and treatment on mean post-test test phobia of students in Awka Education Zone after controlling for the effect of the pre-test, $F(1,84) = 0.24$, $p = 0.624$, $\eta^2 = 0.00$. The zero-effect size also indicates that there was no interaction effect of gender and treatment on students' test phobia. This implies that effect of the systematic desensitization was equally beneficial for both male and female students. Therefore, the null hypothesis was accepted. There was no significant difference in the effect of systematic desensitization on test phobia of male and female students when exposed to systematic desensitization in Awka

Education Zone when compared to those exposed to conventional counselling using their pretest and post test mean score. Therefore the null hypothesis was accepted.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study were discussed in line with the research question and hypothesis that guided the study as thus:

Effect of assertiveness training and systematic desensitization on test phobia and significant difference in the pretest and post test mean scores on test phobia among the treatment groups and the control group.

The result of the study revealed that both assertiveness training and systematic desensitization was effective in reducing test phobia compared to the control group. It further revealed that systematic desensitization was better in reducing test phobia when compared to both assertiveness training treatment group and non-treatment group (control group). The result of the study is in line with Jibrin (2017) who recommended systematic desensitization, therapy. This further underlines the need for students with test phobia to be treated with systematic desensitization.

The result of this study in relation to hypothesis three indicates that there was a significance difference in the post-test mean scores on test phobia among the students in various treatment groups after controlling for the effect of the pre-test.

The Posthoc Multiple Comparison Test, revealed that students exposed to the two treatments; assertiveness training (AT) group and the systematic desensitization (SD) group were significantly less in their mean test compared to the control group. Furthermore, when compared across treatment group, students exposed to AT had significantly higher test phobia mean score compared to those to SD. The finding of this result indicates that although the two treatment were effective, SD was better than AT in reducing test phobia among students in Awka Education Zone. The result of this study is consonant with the findings of Dantani and Patrick (2021), they reported significant large effect of systematic desensitization on test phobia of students.According to Olatuiji et al (2020), test phobia is primarily a conditional anxiety response and systematic desensitization directly targets the physiological and behavioural components of anxiety, through exposure and relaxation, making it more effective for test phobia reduction than assertiveness training, which focuses on interpersonal skills and cognitive confidence. Barlow (2022), behaviourally focused interventions such as systematic desensitization tend to produce faster and more effective test phobia reduction compared to cognitive – skill based technique such as assertiveness training.

Effect of assertiveness training on test phobia of male and female students in assertiveness training group and significant difference in the pretest and post test mean score of male and female students in the assertiveness training group and pretest and post test mean score of the male and female students in the control group.

The result of the study revealed that assertiveness training was effective on test phobia of both male and female students in the treatment group, when compared to both male and female students in the control group. The small mean difference between male and female students in assertiveness training group and the small mean difference between male and female students in the control group indicates that the reduction in test phobia was relatively the same among male and female students. The result of the study is in line with Ugwoke et al (2023) does not influence assertiveness training.

The result of this study in relation to hypothesis four indicates that there was no significant interaction between gender and treatment on mean post-test test phobia of students after controlling for the effect of the pre-test. The zero effect size also indicates that there was no interaction effect of gender and treatment on students test phobia. This implies that effect of assertiveness was equally beneficial to both male and female students. The result of this finding is consonant with the findings of Ugwoke et al (2024), gender has significant effect on examination phobia among secondary school students.Hyde, J.S (2024), female adolescents often internalize academic stress and social expectations more than males and assertiveness training empowers them to voice concerns, challenges, self-doubts, and enhance self-confidence-leading

to more significant reductions in test phobia than male students. Matud (204), among male students and females students, females are more responsive to interpersonal and communication-based interventions due to higher social orientation and emotional expressiveness.

Effect of systematic desensitization on test phobia of male and female students in systematic desensitization group and significant difference in the pretest and post test mean score of male and female students in the systematic desensitization group and pretest and post test mean score of the male and female students in the control group.

The result of the study indicates that systematic desensitization was effective on test phobia of both male and female students in the treatment groups, when compared to both male and female students in the control group. The small mean difference between male and female students in systematic desensitization group and the small mean difference between male and female students in the control group indicates that the reduction in test phobia was relatively the same among male and female students. The result of this study is in line with Jared and Khan (2021), the level of test phobia in male and female students were the same.

The result of this study in relation to hypothesis eleven indicates that there was no significant interaction between gender and treatment on mean post-test test phobia of students after controlling for the effect of the pre-test. The zero effect size also indicates that there was no interaction effect of gender and treatment on students test phobia. This implies that effect of systematic desensitization was equally beneficial to both male and female students. The result of this finding is in line with the findings of Dantani and Patrick (2021), they reported that there was no gender difference in the efficacy of systematic desensitization among male and female students. Kelly et al (2018), males often respond more positively to structured, action-orientated and exposure-based techniques which align with problem-focused coping styles since systematic desensitization emphasizes practical steps-hierarchies, exposure sessions, and relaxation exercises, male students may find it more compatible with their cognitive-behavioural patterns which makes it more effective in reducing test phobia among male students than their female counterparts. Additionally, males often under report emotional distress but engage better with task-oriented interventions rather than verbal or interpersonal ones, such as assertiveness training.

CONCLUSION

The study investigated the effect of assertiveness training and systematic desensitization on test phobia of students in Awka Education Zone, Anambra State. Based on the findings, the study concluded that assertiveness training and systematic desensitization were effective in reducing test phobia among students in Anambra State. Systematic desensitization was better on reducing test phobia than assertiveness training.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the finding the following was recommended:

- Given the superior effectiveness of systematic desensitization, it is recommended that policy makers such as the Ministry of Education should prioritize systematic desensitization as the primary intervention, while maintaining assertiveness training as a complimentary or secondary method. An evidence based framework should be developed so counsellors can apply systematic desensitization as the first-line treatment and integrate assertiveness training when additional counselling technique is needed.
- Guidance counsellors should design gender-responsive Assertiveness Training Programmes, tailoring activities to the unique socio-emotional needs of female students in Anambra State Secondary Schools. This may involve incorporating culturally relevant empowerment exercises, peer-support groups, and communication workshops that particularly enhance girls confidence and academic self-efficiency, without sidelining supportive exercises for male students.
- Counsellors should adopt a gender-differentiated implementation of systematic desensitization, adjusting exposure intensity, pacing, and relaxation strategies to align with male students

responsiveness. For female students who may benefit differently. counsellors should integrate systematic desensitization with complementary techniques such as restructuring of mindfulness to maximize outcomes. This flexible approach ensures gender-specific optimization of the intervention.

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