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Board games as an element of psychological training in developing soft skills among psychology students

ABSTRACT

The article presents the results of a study on the use of board games during group psychological training for psychology students. A longitudinal study design was employed, with data collected from participants in six psychological training groups during the first, fourth (midpoint), and seventh (final) sessions. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and a questionnaire containing questions developed by the authors were used. In three groups, psychological training was conducted using board games ($n = 44$), while in the other three groups it followed a “standard scenario” involving psychological exercises ($n = 54$). The collected data were compared between groups (game groups with vs. non-game groups) and within groups (first vs. fourth vs. seventh session).

In the first phase, participants in the psychological training groups using board games reported higher motivation to attend the sessions and rated them more highly in terms of their usefulness for personal development and understanding group processes. Anxiety related to participation in the sessions was similar in both groups and decreased significantly over the course of the training. In the second phase, greater changes were observed in the group not using games, where participants rated the sessions more highly in terms of their usefulness for self-understanding and personal development. It was also observed that self-esteem increased significantly in this group when comparing the first and final sessions.

Board games were particularly useful during the initial part of the training, when building motivation was an important aspect, whereas in the later stages of the training, less structured psychological exercises were more conducive to participants' development.

KEYWORDS: psychological training, board games, group processes, soft skills

Suggested citation: Lickiewicz, J., Wajda, Z. (2026). Board games as an element of psychological training in developing soft skills among psychology students. © *Perspectives on Culture*, 3(54), pp. 325–341 <https://doi.org/10.35765/pk.2026.5403.18>

Submitted: 07.05.2026

Accepted: 08.05.2026

STRESZCZENIE

Gry planszowe jako element treningu psychologicznego w kształtowaniu kompetencji miękkich u studentów psychologii

Artykuł przedstawia wyniki badania nad wykorzystaniem gier planszowych podczas grupowego treningu psychologicznego dla studentów psychologii. Zaprojektowano badania podłużne, w których zbierano dane od uczestników sześciu grup treningu psychologicznego podczas pierwszego, czwartego (środek) i siódmego (ostatniego) spotkania. Zastosowano Skalę Samooceny Rosenberga oraz ankietę z pytaniami własnego autorstwa. W trzech grupach trening psychologiczny był prowadzony z użyciem gier ($n = 44$), a w kolejnych trzech wg „standardowego scenariusza” zawierającego ćwiczenia psychologiczne ($n = 54$). Zebrane dane porównano międzygrupowo (grupy z grami vs bez gier) oraz wewnątrzgrupowo (pierwsze vs czwarte vs siódme spotkanie).

W pierwszej fazie, w grupie treningu psychologicznego z grami, uczestnicy deklarowali wyższą motywację do zajęć, oraz oceniali je lepiej pod kątem przydatności dla własnego rozwoju oraz rozumienia procesów grupowych. Lęk dotyczący udziału w zajęciach był podobny w obu grupach i istotnie malał wraz z czasem ich trwania. W drugiej fazie treningu, większe zmiany obserwowano w grupie bez gier, gdzie uczestnicy wyżej ocenili zajęcia jako przydatne dla rozumienia siebie i dla własnego rozwoju. Zaobserwowano również, że w tej grupie istotnie zwiększyła się samoocena, porównując pierwsze i ostatnie spotkanie.

Gry były przydatne szczególnie w pierwszej części zajęć, w których istotnym elementem było budowanie motywacji, zaś w dalszych fazach treningu ćwiczenia psychologiczne o mniejszej strukturze bardziej służyły rozwojowi uczestników.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: trening psychologiczny, gry planszowe, procesy grupowe, kompetencje miękkie

1. Introduction

1.1. Group Psychological Training

Group psychological training has long been used in education, particularly in the development of soft skills (Merta, Wolfgang, & McNeil, 1993; Martin et al., 2019). There are many types of psychological training based on different models, such as interpersonal training, encounter groups, and psychoeducational training, as well as training programs designed to develop specific skills and achieve particular goals, including assertiveness, personal development, communication, social skills, and relaxation, among others (Liu, Zhu, & Turner, 2021).

All types of training groups, as well as therapeutic groups, make use, to a greater or lesser extent, of small-group dynamics and “experiential learning” to achieve developmental or therapeutic goals. The literature identifies numerous factors associated with the effectiveness of group-based interventions.

The most well-known factor contributing to change is *group cohesion*. It has a long history of being studied in the fields of psychology and psychotherapy (Yalom & Leszcz, 2025). Systematic reviews and meta-analyses indicate that when group cohesion is higher, participants derive greater benefits from the group, and the group itself demonstrates greater effectiveness (Burlingame, McClendon, & Yang, 2018). This applies not only to developmental and psychotherapeutic groups but also to sports teams and work teams. As a dynamic aspect of group functioning, cohesion is not easy to describe, and many authors have proposed their own definitions over the years. Forsyth (2021) undertook an integration of this body of knowledge, proposing that cohesion be defined as the degree of unity within a group. Thus, a cohesive group is one characterized by a strong alliance, strong bonds, and a sense of unity, whereas a group with low cohesion has weak bonds, is divided, and its members are not engaged in its functioning.

Another important factor contributing to change is *social learning*. According to Yalom and Leszcz (2025), a properly conducted group sooner or later develops into a “social microcosm,” that is, an environment in which participants (unconsciously) display their habitual patterns of behavior, emotions, and perceptions that shape their everyday functioning. During group sessions, this creates an opportunity to observe and identify these patterns and discuss their usefulness in different areas of life, both with the group facilitator and with other group members. Ultimately, participants may also have the opportunity to experiment with new ways of functioning in interpersonal relationships.

To stimulate group interactions and direct the group’s attention toward aspects that maximize the achievement of intended goals, a variety of techniques are used. One of the more popular approaches is directing the group’s attention to the “here and now,” which involves encouraging the group to interact freely and then pause to jointly engage in a meta-analysis of what happened, how it happened, and why it happened (Yalom & Leszcz, 2020). The group facilitator has a wide range of techniques at their disposal, which can be used depending on their needs and preferences, including role-playing, psychodrawing, group integration exercises, work in subgroups, sociometry, bodywork, relaxation, and psychoeducation (Chen & Rybak, 2018; Corey, Corey, & Corey, 2018). Another possibility is the deliberate use of games as a tool for stimulating group interactions, emotions, and behaviors, which can subsequently be subjected to metalevel reflection by the training participants.

1.2. Games

Board games have served as a source of entertainment for centuries. Their origins can be traced back to antiquity (Donovan, 2017). Today, they may seem to be increasingly displaced by electronic entertainment. This, however, is a misleading impression, as board games are gaining new significance in education (Boghian & Cojocariu, 2019) and even in the process of psychotherapy (Garcia-Roca et al., 2023).

A particularly important period during which board games gained prominence was the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions imposed to limit people's ability to leave their homes. During this time, attention was drawn to the particular impact of board games on improving interpersonal relationships (Kritz, 2020). This process occurred somewhat incidentally, as the primary reason for using board games during the pandemic was the desire to spend the surplus free time productively. Electronic games generally do not offer the same benefits, as they are typically played individually or online, without direct, face-to-face interaction. The consequence of the latter is a lack of close contact and interpersonal connection.

The aforementioned use of board games in education has numerous positive consequences. They are used in language learning, improving problem-solving and critical-thinking skills, as well as enhancing social awareness (Pomichal, 2023). One of their important benefits is increased interest in new material and greater effectiveness of the educational process. The choice of game should depend on the intended objective. Donovan's (2017) proposed typology of games may be helpful in this regard, distinguishing between games based on mathematical thinking and those designed to elicit emotions.

However, as was the case during the pandemic, it is worth considering the impact of using board games on the relationships between participants in educational settings. Although their importance for the learning process is emphasized, it is difficult to overlook the often unintended process that unfolds somewhat independently and involves changes in interpersonal relationships among participants. It can be assumed that this influence may be bidirectional, as it cannot be ruled out that competitive games may have a different effect from cooperative ones (Toyan et al., 2021).

2. Method

2.1 Research Aim and Research Questions

At the Institute of Applied Psychology at Jagiellonian University, psychological training sessions are conducted as part of the psychology degree program. Their

aim is to develop a broad range of soft skills and foster personal growth, with particular emphasis on developing self-awareness and observational skills, experiencing different phases of the group process, improving the quality of interpersonal relationships, self-esteem and self-acceptance, acceptance of others, and control over one's emotional reactions, among other areas. Psychological training sessions, which take place during the first and second years of study, have become an important element of students' education, standing in marked contrast to traditional lectures and practical classes (Słowik & Passowicz, 2020). In subsequent years, students also frequently refer to these training sessions during other classes, as they provided them with an opportunity to experience group processes, psychological interventions, and other psychological phenomena from the perspective of a "participant" in a practical setting.

The decision was therefore made to obtain direct feedback from participants in the current edition of the training sessions and examine their perceptions of selected aspects related to the training. Students were invited to participate voluntarily and anonymously in the study described below.

The aim of the research presented in this article was to compare the benefits of using different techniques in psychological training, specifically board and card games, with training based on other exercises designed to stimulate group interactions. These benefits were understood as an increase in participants' self-esteem, as well as their subjective perceptions of their motivation to participate in the training, their level of anxiety related to participation in the group, the perceived benefits for their personal development and self-understanding, and the perceived benefits for understanding the group and group processes. Comparisons were made both between groups and within groups, as the study employed a longitudinal design with three measurement points.

Taking into account the research aim outlined above, the following research question was formulated:

Are there differences between participants in group psychological training involving the use of games and students participating in training without the use of games in their perceptions of the following aspects:

- a. Changes in self-esteem
- b. Changes in motivation to participate in psychological training
- c. Changes in anxiety related to participation in group sessions
- d. The perceived usefulness of the training for personal development
- e. The perceived usefulness of the training for self-understanding
- f. The perceived usefulness of the training for understanding the group and group processes

2.2. Study Procedure and Participants

The study was conducted as part of a course entitled “Psychological Training,” whose aim was to develop a broad range of soft skills and foster personal growth, with particular emphasis on developing self-awareness and skills related to observation, experiencing different phases of the group process, overcoming anxiety in interactions with others, self-esteem, and self-acceptance. The study participants were first-year psychology students for whom these classes were among the first components of their academic education. This was due to the fact that the students had not known one another previously, and the course provided their first opportunity to interact with each other. Therefore, they had no opportunity to establish informal social bonds before the course began.

A total of 98 first-year psychology students from Jagiellonian University participated in the study (44 in the game group and 54 in the non-game group). The mean age was 20.08 years ($SD = 1.58$). The study sample consisted of 81 women, 16 men, and one participant who identified their gender as “other.”

The participants were divided into six groups. In three groups, the sessions were conducted using games, while in the remaining three groups, the training was conducted without their use.

The standard structure of the sessions was as follows: (a) an opening round; (b) an introduction to the exercise, including an explanation of its purpose and procedure and, when necessary, random assignment of participants to pairs or subgroups; (c) an exercise or game, depending on the kind of training; (d) a group discussion aimed at reflecting on the exercise or game; and (e) a summary of the session. The study used the following games: *Story Cubes*, *Dixit*, *Gra na emocjach (Iconicus)*, *Codenames*, and *Coup*. These games have been used in previous studies, which demonstrated their impact on communication and cooperation within groups (e.g., Zsiray & Koos, 2022; Silva et al., 2023). A detailed description of each game is provided in Appendix 1.

2.3. Research Instruments

To assess the impact of board games, two research instruments were used: a self-developed questionnaire and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. In the self-developed questionnaire, students expressed their opinions regarding their perceptions of the effectiveness of the training, its impact on their knowledge of the subject matter, and their motivation to participate in the sessions.

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (SES) assesses global self-esteem, understood as a conscious attitude toward the self. It consists of 10 items, with respondents indicating on a four-point scale the extent to which they agree with each

statement. Previous studies have demonstrated correlations between SES scores and, among other factors, curiosity and emotional reactivity (Łaguna et al., 2007).

2.3. Study Procedure and Statistical Analysis

The psychological training was planned as seven sessions, each lasting four hours, for a total of 28 hours. Students completed the questionnaires during the first session (baseline measurement), the fourth session (midpoint measurement), and the seventh session (final measurement). At each measurement point, data were collected on selected variables according to the study design (e.g., motivation was assessed at the beginning and midpoint of the training, while the perceived usefulness of the training for personal development was assessed at the midpoint and at the end of the training).

The following variables were assessed at each measurement point:

- Session 1 (beginning of training): self-esteem (pretest), motivation to participate in the training, anxiety related to participation in the group
- Session 4 (midpoint of training): motivation to participate in the training, anxiety related to participation in the group, perceived usefulness of the training for personal development, perceived usefulness of the training for self-understanding, perceived usefulness of the training for understanding group processes
- Session 7 (end of training): self-esteem (posttest), perceived usefulness of the training for personal development, perceived usefulness of the training for self-understanding, perceived usefulness of the training for understanding group processes

To ensure anonymity, students were asked to use a pseudonym of their choice and to use the same pseudonym at subsequent measurement points, without providing their first or last names. Completing the questionnaires was voluntary. Students provided written consent to participate and were informed at the beginning of the sessions that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

The research project received a positive opinion from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Management and Social Communication at Jagiellonian University (dated May 16, 2023).

After the data had been collected, a database was created and statistical analyses were conducted using Microsoft Excel and IBM SPSS Statistics 29 Imago Pro 9.0. Two types of comparisons were performed: (a) between-group comparisons—examining the values of the variables at each measurement point in the training group using games versus the group without games; and (b) within-group comparisons—examining whether the values of individual variables changed over the course of the training.

As most of the variables were measured on an ordinal (rank-order) scale, non-parametric tests were used, namely the Mann–Whitney U test and the Wilcoxon signed-rank test. For the self-esteem variable, which was measured on a quantitative scale, Student’s *t*-tests for dependent and independent samples were used.

3. Results

3.1. Between-Group Comparisons

Tables 1–5 below present the most important results of the statistical analyses. In the first stage, comparisons were made between the psychological training groups in which games were used and the groups in which no games were used.

Table 1. Comparison of Variables Using the Mann–Whitney U Test for Psychological Training With and Without Games at Each Measurement Point (Sessions 1, 4, and 7)

Variable	Training Using Games (Mean Rank)	Training Without Games (Mean Rank)	Z	Significance
Session 1 (beginning of training)				
Motivation to participate in the training	55.59	39.20	-2.981	0.003
Anxiety related to participation in the group	47.10	46.02	-0.194	0.846
Session 4 (midpoint of training)				
Motivation to participate in the training	56.43	37.06	-3.571	<0.001
Anxiety related to participation in the group	46.81	45.31	-0.277	0.782
Perceived usefulness of the training for personal development	56.79	40.00	-3.023	0.003
Perceived usefulness of the training for self-understanding	53.21	42.88	-1.845	0.065
Perceived usefulness of the training for understanding group processes	59.06	38.16	-3.757	<0.001
Session 7 (end of training)				
Perceived usefulness of the training for personal development	34.41	36.00	-0.309	0.757

Perceived usefulness of the training for self-understanding	41.18	40.88	-0.058	0.953
Perceived usefulness of the training for understanding group processes	51.82	33.56	-3.477	<0.001

Source: own development.

The comparison of variables between the study groups presented in Table 1 indicates five statistically significant differences. In the groups using games, motivation to participate in the psychological training was significantly higher both during the first session and at the midpoint of the training. Students participating in the training involving games also rated the training as more useful for their personal development at the midpoint of the training and for understanding group processes at both the midpoint and the end of the training. Anxiety related to participation in the sessions was similar in both study groups. The groups also gave similar ratings of the usefulness of the training for personal development and self-understanding at the end of the training.

Table 2. Comparison of Participants’ Self-Esteem Using the Independent-Samples *t*-Test at the Beginning and End of Psychological Training in Game- and Non-Game Groups

Variable	Week	Training Using Games (Mean)	Training Without Games (Mean)	<i>t</i> -test	Significance
Self-esteem	Session 1 (beginning of training)	27.21	28.17	-0.762	0.448
	Session 7 (end of training)	27.67	29.79	-1.560	0.124

Source: own development.

As shown in Table 2, the mean self-esteem scores did not differ significantly between the two groups. In the non-game groups, mean self-esteem was slightly higher and increased over the course of the training; however, the difference between the two groups did not reach statistical significance.

3.2 Within-Group Comparisons

In the second stage, within-group comparisons were conducted to determine whether the values of the variables under study changed over the course of the training. Table 3 presents changes in the results for the psychological

training group using games, while Table 4 presents the same variables for the group undergoing training without games. Finally, mean self-esteem scores at the beginning and end of the training were compared using the paired-samples *t*-test.

Table 3. Comparison of Variables Using the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test at the Beginning, Midpoint, and End of Psychological Training in Groups Using Games

	Psychological Training Using Games					
	Median (ranks)		Negative ranks	Positive ranks	Z	Significance
Variable	Session 1 (beginning) vs. Session 4 (midpoint)	Session 4 (midpoint)				
Motivation to participate in the training	8	8	13.31	12.85	-1.5291	0.126
Anxiety related to participation in the group	4	3	16.60	10.00	-3.813	<0.001
X	Session 4 (midpoint)	Session 7 (end of training)	Negative ranks	Positive ranks	Z	Significance
Perceived usefulness of the training for personal development	8	8	7.33	7.63	-0.553	0.580
Perceived usefulness of the training for self-understanding	6	7	12.29	12,59	-1.859	0.063
Perceived usefulness of the training for understanding group processes	8	8	11.08	10.97	-1.727	0.084

Source: own development.

Table 3 shows that only one change reached the required level of statistical significance: in the group using games, anxiety related to participation in

the sessions decreased at the midpoint of the training compared with the beginning. The variables concerning the perceived usefulness of the training for self-understanding and for understanding group processes were also close to statistical significance. In the latter case, however, a surprising downward trend was observed.

Table 4. Comparison of Variables Using the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test at the Beginning, Midpoint, and End of Psychological Training in Non-Game Groups

	Psychological training not using games					
	Median (ranks)		Negative ranks	Positive ranks	Z	Significance
Variable	Session 1 (beginning)	Session 4 (midpoint)				
Motivation to participate in training	6	6	13.81	19.19	-0.818	0.414
Anxiety related to participation in the group	5	3	20.39	7.50	-4.897	<0.001
	Session 4 (midpoint)	Session 7 (end of training)	Negative ranks	Positive ranks	Z	Significance
Perceived usefulness of the training for personal development	6	8	15.56	20.72	-3.423	<0.001
Perceived usefulness of the training for self-understanding	5.50	7	17.67	19.84	-3.886	<0.001
Perceived usefulness of the training for understanding group processes	6	7	16.05	17.25	-1.088	0.277

Source: own development.

Table 4 shows that, similarly to the group using games, anxiety related to participation in the group sessions also decreased significantly in the psychological training group without games. Two other statistically significant changes were also observed: participants' ratings of the usefulness of the training for personal development and for self-understanding increased.

Table 5. Comparison of Participants' Self-Esteem Using the Paired-Samples *t*-Test at the Beginning and End of Psychological Training in Game- and Non-Game Groups

Variable	Group	Session 1 (beginning) Mean	Session 7 (end) Mean	t-test	Significance
Self-esteem	Training using games	27.21	27.67	-0.715	0.480
	Training not using games	28.17	29.79	-3.038	0.004

Source: own development.

As shown in Table 5, self-esteem increased in the psychological training group without games. Although the increase was only slightly more than 1.5 points, the change was statistically significant for the group as a whole. No statistically significant change in self-esteem was observed in the group using games.

4. Discussion

The research presented in this article aimed to address the question of whether there are differences in the educational experience when psychological training for students is conducted using games compared with training conducted without games. These differences concerned changes in self-esteem and participants' perceptions of selected aspects of the sessions. The study employed a longitudinal design, with data collected during the first, fourth, and seventh (final) sessions.

The study showed that after the first session, participants in the training using games reported higher motivation to participate in the psychological training. The first session of group training corresponds to the phase referred to in theories of group processes as the orientation and dependency phase (Corey et al., 2018; Ogrodniczuk, Cheek, & Kealy, 2021). This means that group members begin to establish an understanding of the rules governing their interactions and tend to be dependent on the leader. Games can reduce tension through their clear structure and instructions, while also providing somewhat greater opportunities to regulate the degree of interpersonal distance between participants. In comparison with training without games, participants in the latter condition are more likely to engage in conversations involving personal topics, self-exploration, and greater interpersonal confrontation. Moreover, games appear to be an attractive alternative to “typical” academic classes and create an atmosphere of play. Although somewhat different variables were examined, this is broadly consistent with previous research reporting increased

satisfaction resulting from the introduction of games into the teaching process (Hung, 2018; Sousa et al., 2023). Board games have also been shown to have a positive impact on engagement and group work (Cardinot et al., 2022).

Previous studies, however, concerned situations involving a lower degree of psychological intensity (e.g., classes in science-related subjects), where games served as an additional element making the learning process more engaging. The above-mentioned factors may therefore have contributed to the higher motivation observed among participants in the training using games. Motivation was also higher after the fourth session, which may suggest that participants in training involving games maintained somewhat higher motivation throughout the first part of the training. We also examined whether motivation changed in either group between the first session and the midpoint of the training. Although the scores changed numerically, the differences were not statistically significant.

No between-group difference was observed in anxiety related to participation in the psychological training. However, as expected, anxiety decreased significantly over the course of the first four sessions in both groups. This probably indicates that participants successfully navigated the initial phase of group development and progressed to subsequent phases characterized by lower levels of anxiety.

The study also examined how participants in the training with and without games perceived the usefulness of the training for their personal development, self-understanding, and understanding of group processes—variables that are important in psychological education and, more broadly, in academic education. These variables were assessed after the fourth and the concluding seventh group sessions.

At the midpoint of the training, after the fourth session, participants in the training involving games rated its usefulness for their personal development and for understanding group processes significantly higher. In the case of the latter variable, the significant difference persisted at the seventh session. At the same time, no between-group differences were observed after the final session in participants' ratings of the usefulness of the training for personal development and self-understanding.

It should also be noted that in the group without games, during the second part of the training (between the fourth and seventh sessions), there was a significant increase in ratings of the usefulness of the training for personal development and self-understanding. No such changes were observed in the groups using games. It may therefore be reasonably assumed that this finding supports the conclusions of previous research suggesting that games may provide sufficient justification for participating in educational activities, but not necessarily for active engagement in the process of self-improvement (Swank, 2008).

However, a distinction should be made between therapeutic games, which are specifically designed for work with clients/patients, and recreational games,

whose design serves purposes other than their use in interpersonal training or therapeutic groups. From the perspective of group development stages, the results may be explained by the possibility that, once the groups moved beyond the orientation and dependency phase, participants derived greater developmental benefits without the interaction structure imposed by games.

The study did not, however, include systematic observation of the stages of group development. Such observation could be particularly relevant because the orientation and dependency phase is followed by the conflict phase, during which processes of role and norm formation begin and interactions become characterized by competition (Corey et al., 2018; Ogrodniczuk et al., 2021). Competition is an essential element of most games; therefore, games may have acted as a catalyst for competitive behavior or may have provided a safe context in which such behavior could be expressed within the group. These aspects require further investigation.

The final variable examined was participants' self-esteem. Although no statistically significant between-group differences were observed at the beginning or end of the psychological training, a statistically significant increase in self-esteem was observed within the non-game group. Similar findings have been reported in previous research (Prihadi et al., 2018). However, the present study allows for a broader conclusion: introducing board games may, when the same overall training strategy is used, be a factor associated with a lack of change in self-esteem levels. This may be related to the fact that board games can serve as a source of distraction, potentially diminishing the salience of the primary goal of the training. Participants may focus on the playful aspect of the sessions, which could, in turn, hinder their process of personal development.

5. Conclusions and Limitations of the Study

Games can be an interesting element of psychological training in the educational process; however, both the benefits and limitations of their use should be taken into account. The findings presented in this study indicate that games were particularly useful during the initial part of the training, when an important objective is to build motivation to participate and address phenomena characteristic of the first stage of group development, namely orientation and dependency. The results suggest that games may be dispensed with during the later stages of training, as other psychological exercises may be more conducive to participants' development and to outcomes such as increased self-understanding and self-esteem.

The study also has several limitations. First, the variables examined were measured using highly subjective methods, and most of them were assessed using simple, single-item questions. Second, other potentially relevant variables

were not systematically controlled for, including participants' personality traits, changes in the stages of group development, and random life events that may have influenced their perceptions of the educational and developmental experience during the training (e.g., participants may have been taking part in other personal development activities, undergoing therapy, or experiencing other significant life changes). Third, although the longitudinal perspective is a strength of the study, the number of participants in the individual groups was relatively small, and the training involved psychology students exclusively. All of these limitations prevent the findings from being generalized too broadly. Nevertheless, they highlight the need for further research in this area.

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