

At Eighteen: A Screenplay Dealing with Social Phobia in Adolescence

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ABSTRACT

Feeling nervous before performing in front of many people or worried in a new place is normal. However, if it significantly affects our daily lives, this might be a sign of fear of being judged or evaluated by people around us. This creative work, *At Eighteen*, intends to raise awareness of social phobia in adolescence by discussing the cause, effects, and a way to recover. All of these are based on theories by Rapee and Heimberg's cognitive-behavioral model and Stallard's cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). The work is a screenplay about a high school writing champion, Elizabeth, who dreamed of attending college. Her journey was not easy as she moved to her mother's hometown, transferred to public school, and failed to fulfill her own and her surroundings expectations with her writing skills. After seeing her avoiding people many times, Elizabeth was diagnosed with social phobia because she was afraid of getting negative evaluations. She recovered after attending several therapy sessions that helped change her dysfunctional thoughts to positive ones. This work falls under the drama genre to show Elizabeth's personal life story and process of overcoming obstacles.

Keywords: social phobia; adolescence; dysfunctional thoughts; cognitive behavioral model; CBT; drama film

INTRODUCTION

It is normal to feel nervous before doing a presentation or worried whenever doing certain activities in public, but it becomes a serious problem when it disturbs our daily activities. People with severe nervousness or anxiety may encounter social phobia. According to Bridges to Recovery (2020), social phobia is described as "the fear of being scrutinized and judged while performing some type of task in public" where people are free to observe and judge. Activities such as eating in public, performing in theater, or taking public transportation may trigger the physical, emotional, and behavioral symptoms. The most common physical symptoms are blushing, trembling, dizziness (Bridges to Recovery, 2020). Intense fears and obsessive self-consciousness are examples of emotional symptoms in people with social phobia (Bridges to Recovery, 2020). Also, people with social phobia will avoid threatening, unfamiliar, and intimidating situations as the form of behavioral symptoms (Bridges to Recovery, 2020). This fear disturbs people's daily life at work or school because they have to interact with people around them.

Social phobia is known as the most common mental health problems. In the domestic case, the number of adolescents aged 15 to 24 with mental health issues scored 6% of the Indonesian population (Indriyani & Wahyudi, 2019). The pandemic also plays a big role in increasing the number of adolescents with anxiety and other mental health problems. As cited from UNICEF's recent international survey of children and adolescents during the early pandemic of Covid-19, "a

median of 1 in 5 young people aged 15-24 surveyed said they often feel depressed or have a little interest in doing things” and other mental health issues such as ADHD, anxiety, bipolar, and many more (UNICEF, 2021). Meanwhile in Indonesia, more than 50% of adolescents are affected with anxiety (Ifdil & Fitria, 2020). As a result, mental health problems can harm children and youngsters education, well-being, and life outcomes (UNICEF, 2021). This inspires me to create a story with Covid-19 pandemic as one of the background problems that causes social phobia. The sudden death of my main character’s father because of Covid-19, family financial problems, and moving to her mother's hometown became a huge pressure on my main character. She fights to get a scholarship in order to go to college because her family cannot afford paying the tuition fee. The only way to get a scholarship is by becoming the school representative and winning the national writing competition. Her teacher and friends have high expectations towards her, especially after knowing that she is a writing champion. As she cannot impress the teacher with her skill and fulfill the expectations of her surroundings, she develops signs of social phobia as she is afraid of getting negative feedback.

With all of these taken into consideration, I would like to share the awareness of social phobia and ways to deal with it. Hopefully, it would help people, especially adolescents, to see and evaluate themselves whether they are experiencing the signs of social phobia. If they are, what they can do to seek help from adults and deal with it. On the other hand, when adolescents know a friend with social phobia, I hope they would be understanding friends and help to find a way out.

This creative work will follow the journey of an 18-years old girl to deal with social phobia in order to achieve her dream to go to college. She is trapped in a cycle of her own dysfunctional thoughts as she cannot fulfill her own and surroundings expectation of being a creative writing champion. In order to break the cycle, she has to change the negative thoughts into positive ones through a therapy called Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT).

I will portray this issue in the form of a screenplay. Among many ways of telling stories, I find visual storytelling through screenplay the most interesting format. According to Trottier (2014)’s book titled *The Screenwriter’s Bible*, the screenplay is a work that concentrates “on the visual and emotional aspects of the scene” (p.15). The story portrays emotions through characters' movements, actions, and conversations because films are primarily visual. In this context, Trottier (2014) mentioned that these elements work better if a film shows the characters' actions more instead of telling stories with dialogues. This format allows me to present my character's inner feelings and struggles with a sequence of pictures. Therefore, I believe the screenplay helps show my main character's journey in coping with social phobia.

This creative thesis will be in the form of a screenplay with drama as its genre. First of all, I choose screenplay because it can create similar or relatable moments with the audience’s life from the story, characters, and setting. Like the famous ‘action speaks louder than words’ quote, film utilizes visual storytelling elements from the frame composition, set, character’s actions, and visual effect to deliver a story or essential life lessons to the audiences instead of explaining everything with words. Aside from being a visually attractive work, the film also engages the audiences to be in the same place as the characters using the background music and sound effect. All these elements can help me create memorable stories that can help and inspire people with problems they encounter. I want to deliver the importance of dealing with mental health issues to young adults. Then, I utilize drama as the genre to create a realistic story. Known as one of the staple genres, drama revolves around characters' crucial moments of their lives. Based on a book titled *Film Genre for the Screenwriter*, the common characteristics of drama covers dominant personal stories, obstacles that stall a person’s ability to cope or move forward in life, and the consequences of

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actions (Selbo, 2014). Using drama as the genre of this creative work can help me portray a relatable story with unique life problems to my audiences.

With all of these things in mind, I want to find out through this creative work what causes a person, or in this context of creative work is Elizabeth's, social phobia. Also, I would like to explore the negative effects of social phobia in Elizabeth's life and how she deals with those negative effects.

For this creative work, the research was done by doing a secondary research, a method that uses the already existing data. Journal articles, ebooks, and websites are the sources I used to collect data for this thesis. The theories I am using are Cognitive Behavioral Model of Anxiety in Social Phobia by Rapee and Heimberg and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) by Aaron Beck. The first theory is used to answer how and why social phobia occurred while Aaron Beck's is used to show how CBT works to help adolescents with mental health issues. I will elaborate each of these theories in the next section.

Rapee and Heimberg (1997) introduce a model or a diagram based on the anxiety experienced by people in socially threatening situations. The model starts with the premise that people with social phobia hook up to the importance of being positively evaluated by others. Yet, intrinsically any evaluation will be negative from their perspective. When an individual perceives socially threatening situations, they will create their own mental representation of themselves as how others will see them (Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). This representation can be created from memories of their past experiences (Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). According to the diagram above, there are ten important points of this model: perceived audience, preferential allocation of attentional resources, external indicators of negative evaluations, perceived internal clues, mental representation of self as seen by the audience, comparison of self-mental representation with the appraisal of audience's expected standard, a judgment of probability and consequences of negative evaluations, and symptoms of anxiety of their physical, behavior, and cognition.

I use a book titled *Thinking Good, Feeling Better: A Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Workbook for Adolescents and Young Adults* by Paul Stallard (2019) to specifically discuss how CBT works for adolescents. Cognitive behavioral therapy aims at one's relationship between thoughts, feelings, and behavior (Stallard, 2019). As quoted from the book, CBT aims "to improve current well-being, resilience, and future coping" (Stallard, 2019, p.9). This goal is achieved by developing "increased self-awareness, improved self-control, and enhancing personal efficacy by promoting helpful cognitive and behavioral skills" (Stallard, 2019, p. 9). The practice of CBT leads youngsters to get out of a negative cycle into a positive one. The negative process, known as the dysfunctional cycle, consists of unpleasant feelings, hostile behavior, and negative thoughts. Meanwhile, the positive or functional cycle has more positive emotions, behavior, and beliefs. Stallard (2019) provides some worksheets for the therapy sessions in the book. It defines the "ideas from mindfulness and acceptance and commitment therapy which promote non-judgmental compassionate awareness and acceptance" (Stallard, 2019, p.27). However, all materials in this book do not provide a specific answer for particular mental health problems. Instead, the therapist can use the worksheets flexibly and tailor them based on the client's needs and preferences (Stallard, 2019).

CONCEPT OF THE CREATIVE WORK

Premise and Creative Principle

My story follows the journey of Elizabeth who has a dream to win the national writing competition, but when she encounters social phobia, her decision making skill is tested whether she would continue to prepare herself for the competition while coping with social phobia or simply give up and let the social phobia influences the relationships she had with her surroundings. Hence, my work's premise is that when adolescents want to achieve a particular goal, they must first deal with the current problems.

Pitch

1. After moving to her mother's hometown, Elizabeth wants to win the national high school writing competition by being the representative of her new school.
2. However, she is struggling to adapt to her new social life and feeling overwhelmed with high expectations from herself and her surroundings, causing her to encounter social phobia.
3. After going through several sessions of CBT, Elizabeth regains her courage and confidence to keep going and reach her goal, which is winning the writing competition in first place.

Synopsis

Upon the sudden death of her father by Covid-19, Elizabeth and Janice have to move to Janice's hometown and start a new life there. Elizabeth transfers from a private high school to a public one in the new city. She keeps her dream of getting a college degree by being the school's representative for a writing competition, which allows her to get a scholarship.

As time passes, Elizabeth finds out that her writing skill is not as impressive as other students and not improving much after some sessions of preparation. It distressed Elizabeth, causing her to avoid meeting people because they kept asking about her preparation. Feeling worried, Janice and Elinne suggest she must go to a psychologist for either consultation or therapy. Although Elizabeth declined the offer initially, Elinne convinced her to do CBT after talking with Elinne's acquaintance, Michella. The first few sessions went well as Michella helped Elizabeth list and reorganize her thoughts. Even though the therapy went well, Elizabeth started questioning CBT as she did not feel improvement. Andrea, Elizabeth's favorite Indonesian writer, inspires her to continue writing during the special lecture in preparation class. Michella also supports her through the most stressful moment when she has to compete with Annina. With Michella's patience and sincerity, Elizabeth can finish all sessions of the therapy and make some improvements in herself.

Elizabeth invites Michella to the competition's final during the last therapy session. She wants to show Michella that, finally, she can do a presentation in front of many people as she overcomes social phobia. After the writing session, the judges started to read all participants' work, and Elizabeth's work caught their attention. When it is Elizabeth's turn, she gets unexpected questions and compliments from the judges. Finally, the MC announces that Elizabeth is the first-place winner, and she gets the scholarship for college.

Conflict

There are two types of conflicts occurring in this screenplay. The first one is man versus self in the form of internal issues such as identity crisis, mental health, moral dilemma, and choosing a path in life (Fleming, 2018). The other conflict is man versus man, which occurs

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between “two people, or groups of people, that have goals or intentions that conflict with each other” (Fleming, 2018). Both of these conflicts can be seen in my screenplay, but man versus self is the dominant one because I want to show how Elizabeth fights with herself to improve her writing and overcome her fear of interacting with people. Meanwhile, Man versus Man conflict will play a role in Elizabeth’s relationships with her surroundings, such as her family, therapist, and friends at school.

Characters

1. Elizabeth Hartanto, 18 years old

After a huge change in her life, Elizabeth is seen as a quiet and reserved person. Her love of English books leads her to write her own short stories. She has been writing since middle school and has won many writing competitions. Because her mother cannot afford her college tuition, she is determined to get a scholarship by being the public school representative and joining the national writing competition. Achieving that goal as a transfer student is difficult because she has to deal with high expectations from the teacher and students there. Feeling overwhelmed to impress everyone and survive in the representation election, Elizabeth encounters social phobia. She discovers that going to therapy and writing help her to get through social phobia.

2. Michella Kurniawan, 26 years old

Elizabeth’s therapist and Elinne's acquaintance. She is known to have a heart of gold by being a good listener to help many people with mental health problems. Michella has been working with teens and young adults, especially those with trauma and anxiety after family members' deaths caused by Covid-19. Aside from her kindness and generosity, Michella is also a secretive person because of trauma in her past. This reason pushed her to be a therapist so she would be used to opening up like her clients. Unfortunately, none of her clients knows her background story throughout her therapy and counseling career unless her name, age, occupation, and education. One day, she tells Elizabeth a story about her senior year in high school. She loves coffee or tea, as she is often seen drinking it.

3. Elinne Hartanto, 25 years old

Elizabeth’s older sister. Elinne has typical first born traits, such as being a great leader and diligent. She lived near her workplace but is currently staying with her family while recovering from an accident. Elinne was in a huge fight with her sister because she accidentally threw away some of Elizabeth’s books and writings, which made Elizabeth initially hate her. But after a few weeks of staying at home, she has grown quite fond of Elizabeth by helping her to overcome social phobia.

4. Ms. Renata, 29 years old

Ms. Renata is 12-A3’s homeroom and English teacher. Despite being a strict teacher that sets a high standard for her students, Ms. Renata always notices slight changes in her students. She is known as the most reliable and creative person in school. Ms. Renata loves anything related to arts, making her the coordinator of the after-school training.

5. Janice Li, 52 years old

Elizabeth and Elinne’s mother. She is a strict Chinese-Indonesian housewife and an understanding mother. Upon the sudden death of her husband, she decides to bring Elizabeth and move back to her hometown. Her parents ran a small Chinese restaurant, and Janice continues their business as she becomes the family's only breadwinner.

6. Kelly Santoso, 18 years old

Elizabeth's best friend and classmate at the public school. Kelly is a caring, open-minded, and quick-witted person, making her get along with many people at school. She loves to play piano.

7. Aska Boediman, 18 years old

Elizabeth's friend from the public school. He is a bubbly and outgoing boy who loves writing. Sometimes, Aska cannot express himself well, which causes misunderstandings between him and Elizabeth. He has a crush on Elizabeth.

8. Annina Kartika, 18 years old

Elizabeth's biggest rival and classmate from the public school. Annina is the only daughter of a rich family who often donates to the school facilities. Her writing talent comes from the well-educated background of her parents.

9. Kanzak Andrea, 29 years old

An Indonesian novelist who writes in English. Andrea starts to write as his coping mechanism for his trauma. He is famous among young Indonesian readers, especially Elizabeth and Aska.

CONCLUSION

This creative work aims to explore the causes, effects, and coping strategies of someone dealing with social phobia. With drama as the genre, the story mainly revolves around a character with her problems in life. In essence, the screenplay illustrates the obstacles in achieving a dream while coping with fears of negative evaluations. This is seen as Elizabeth wanting to be the school representative for the national writing competition. However, she encountered a social phobia that made her scared of getting negative feedback, avoiding people around her, and stopping going to school at some point. In this section, I will show how the screenplay answers the purpose of creative work.

First of all, this screenplay shows that both social and personal expectations played a big role in the cause of Elizabeth's social phobia. As an outstanding student with many achievements, it was natural for people in her new school to have expectations of Elizabeth, especially her teacher and friends. On the other hand, Elizabeth also set high expectations for herself to be the representative of her new school for the national writing competition. With all of these expectations upon herself, Elizabeth was burdened with showing her skill in writing.

Second, the negative effects of social phobia on one's life are avoiding and having terrible relationships with people around us. As Elizabeth got a negative evaluation from Ms. Renata at the first training session, received tons of questions regarding her progress, and was mocked by other students at school, she became a quiet person. This stressful situation made Elizabeth avoid meeting people. Gradually, she developed aloof relationships with others as she avoided eye contact and refused to meet up with anyone. Elizabeth would be a few steps apart from her dream unless she dealt with her social phobia.

Lastly, the coping mechanism of social phobia is through a therapy called Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). This therapy works to transform dysfunctional or negative thoughts into positive ones. Also, it helps people with specific mental health problems face their fears by placing

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them in a certain situation they are most afraid of. In Elizabeth's case, her therapist helped her to construct a thought that 'negative evaluations help us to improve.' She also challenged Elizabeth to talk with friends and teachers again when returning to school.

To sum up, this creative work has conveyed the cause of social phobia and the process of recovery from social phobia. Social phobia occurs when someone is afraid to get negative judgment from other people while doing their activities or performing in front of many people. As a result, they might avoid meeting people and struggle emotionally. In order to help these people, CBT is used to change their dysfunctional thoughts and change them into positive thoughts.

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