

RESEARCH STATEMENT | JEEYEON HONG, LCSW

Suicide is the second leading cause of death among young people in the United States. Despite extensive investments in youth mental health, recent national data show persistently high rates of hopelessness, poor mental health, and suicidal thoughts among high school students. While SAMHSA and the CDC have recognized schools as critical settings for suicide prevention and mental health support, very few evidence-based Tier 2 mental health interventions exist that are both effective and feasible to implement within school settings. My program of research addresses this gap by developing and testing “*Hope in Connection*,” a group-based Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) intervention as a Tier 2 school-based service to address youth mental health challenges. To advance this goal, I have pursued three interconnected lines of research throughout my doctoral training: (1) examining the evidence base for SFBT with youth to identify empirical and theoretical gaps in the literature, (2) understanding the mechanisms of change in SFBT, and (3) developing and pilot-testing the *Hope in Connection* intervention through a strong community partnership with a local alternative high school. Broadly, my research agenda seeks to answer: “*How can we design strengths-based mental health interventions that are evidence-based and feasible to implement in community settings?*”

In the first phase of my research, I have used evidence synthesis projects to identify intervention targets, theoretical gaps, and opportunities for intervention development. I led an SFBT meta-analysis in Korean schools, which demonstrated strong overall effects of SFBT across behavioral, emotional, social, and academic outcomes. This work was published in *Research on Social Work Practice* (Hong et al., 2025). The study also found that integrating creative approaches, such as art and play activities, was as effective as using a standalone SFBT approach for youth in school settings. Building on these findings, I published a scoping review synthesizing the use of creative SFBT techniques, which is now in press in *Children & Schools* (Hong et al., in press). I directly incorporated several of these techniques into *Hope in Connection*, informed by input from school stakeholders. These evidence synthesis projects also led me to examine SFBT’s effects on clinically specific mental health outcomes, as the existing evidence base has primarily focused on broader psychosocial outcomes. Accordingly, I conducted a systematic review examining SFBT outcome studies on youth depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation to evaluate its potential as an early intervention model to address key precursors of youth suicide. As the first review to synthesize evidence on these clinical outcomes, the review identified both empirical and theoretical gaps, including a shortage of SFBT studies on youth internalizing disorders and limited examination of the theoretical mechanisms underlying intervention effectiveness. These gaps are particularly important because SFBT shows strong conceptual alignment with hope, a well-established protective factor against depression, anxiety, and suicide risk, yet few studies have tested these clinical mental health outcomes or hope as a mechanism of change among youth. The related manuscript is currently under review by *Counseling Outcome Research and Evaluation* (Hong et al., under review).

To address these theoretical gaps, I sought to understand how SFBT improves youth mental health. Drawing on shared pathways across theories of SFBT, hope, suicide prevention, and mental health, I developed an integrated theoretical framework proposing hope, social support, and coping as core mechanisms through which SFBT may reduce internalizing symptoms and suicidal ideation. I focused on these constructs because empirical evidence consistently identifies them as modifiable protective factors against internalizing symptoms and

suicide risk. This framework advances theory by emphasizing modifiable protective factors that can serve as intervention targets, given that mental health and suicide research has historically focused on identifying and reducing symptoms. Several research projects informed this work. First, I led a scoping review examining measures related to SFBT processes and core constructs, which was published in the *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* (Hong et al., 2026). Findings identified strengths activation and hope as the most consistently proposed constructs across the literature. I also analyzed nationally representative 2023 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance data and found that school connectedness was a key school-level protective factor that mitigated the association between internalizing symptoms and suicidal ideation. This study is currently under review by *School Mental Health* (Hong et al., under review). Together, these projects identified theoretically and empirically supported protective factors that directly informed the development of *Hope in Connection*.

Finally, my research translates these empirical and theoretical findings into community-based intervention research. As the Principal Investigator (PI), I developed and am currently pilot-testing *Hope in Connection*, a six-session, strengths-based group intervention to address depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation among adolescents in school settings. I have established a strong community partnership with an alternative high school in Texas, secured \$22,500 in external funding, and led intervention research in a real-world setting. A highlight of this project is its community-engaged research approach. Through ongoing collaboration with school counselors, teachers, administrators, and students, I developed an intervention that aligns with the school's needs while strengthening hope, social support, and coping. I conducted qualitative interviews with school stakeholders to refine the intervention and enhance its contextual fit before implementation. In the next phase, I am conducting a mixed-methods pilot study to evaluate the intervention's feasibility, acceptability, and preliminary effectiveness while exploring participants' therapeutic experiences and perceived mechanisms of change. This work is innovative because it shifts the focus away from reducing symptoms and risk factors toward enhancing modifiable protective factors to promote youth mental health through early intervention in community settings. It also responds to the critical need for brief, theoretically and empirically informed school mental health interventions that are feasible to implement and responsive to school environments. In recognition of this work's contribution to advancing youth mental health, I was awarded the competitive 2026 Moore Fellowship from the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health (\$20,000) and the 2026 SFBT Association Research Award (\$2,500).

My long-term research goal is to continue developing scalable, strengths-based mental health interventions to address youth mental health challenges through community-engaged research. Building on this pilot study, I plan to refine and evaluate *Hope in Connection* through multisite studies across diverse school and community settings. I will continue to examine the program's feasibility, acceptability, and preliminary effectiveness, laying the foundation for a future randomized controlled trial. I will apply for external funding from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), and private foundations to support my program of research. Ultimately, my goal is to contribute to the fields of youth mental health and suicide prevention by moving beyond reducing symptoms and risk factors to intentionally strengthening protective factors and existing resources among youth. By developing brief interventions that build on these strengths and can be readily implemented in community-based settings, I envision that my research will expand access to early mental health support, helping youth address mental health challenges before they intensify and increase suicide risk.