

Effectiveness of cognitive behavioural therapy for the treatment of psychological distress among the youth

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Abstract

Psychological distress affects people of all ages and most especially the youth. Its implications on young people who are early adults are quite enormous and felt heavily in all aspects of their lives. To manage psychological distress, psychotherapy is always recommended for the youth's optimal personal and social adjustment. Among many types of psychotherapy, the Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is the most indicated for psychological distress because it is an evidence-based treatment. However, there is scarcity of psychotherapeutic package for managing psychological treatment among the youth considering their unique developmental tasks and experiences in life. The objective of this study was to prepare a treatment package for the management of psychological distress among the youth for sustainable counselling interventions towards personal and social adjustment. Case study research design was chosen for the purpose of the study. This choice was informed by the nature of the study which is qualitative. A brief CBT, a treatment package in eight sessions, was developed for managing psychological distress for young people between 20 and 35 years who may be in school, married, unmarried, self-employed, paid workers, clergy, and other walks of life. Based on the present study, CBT is a best remedy for the treatment of psychological distress among the youth which has great promise for good quality of life and all round ideal functioning among young people. Hence, it is recommended to counselling psychologists, including adolescents and youth counsellors and pastoral counsellors, governments, non-governmental organisations, correctional centres, and researchers.

Keywords: Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, Psychological Distress, Psychotherapy, Quality of life, Youth

1. Introduction

All human beings, from every race and nation, experience one form of stress or the other; they are exposed to a variety of stressors and stressful events in their daily lives that can threaten their mental and physical health (Hatef, Maleki, Amini & Khodadadi, 2020). Young people are not exempted from the stressors in the present-day ever-changing society. It is observed that youth nowadays are distracted, addicted, frustrated, discouraged, embattled, problematic and distressed. All these may be caused by expectations from self, expectations from others, career/work issues, marriage and family life, social media pressures, school and societal challenges, uncertainty surrounding the future, health concerns and social isolation (Dar & Akther, 2023; Anyanwu, 2023).

Stressors are the factors that cause stress, thus there is a distinction between physiological and psychological stressors (Spencer, Chun, Hartsock & Woodruff, 2021). Physiological stress factors are physiological conditions which provoke autonomic homeostatic changes, such as hypoxia, hypothermia, tissue damage, dehydration, haemorrhage and hypotension. On the other hand, psychological stress factors can be caused by the remembrance of stressful events or expectation of upcoming harmful experiences. Studies have acknowledged numerous basic psychological issues which are common to several psychosocial conditions considered traumatic, and these issues comprise dearth of controllability, dearth of certainty, originality, and social evaluation of danger. Dar and Akther (2023) brings to our awareness the detrimental consequences of stress on people's mental health including anxiety, depression, and sleep disruptions.

Distress has been mentioned as a condition of extreme and long-lasting stress, which affects people to weakness, sickness and mental problems. It is known to be the pertinent psychological wellbeing pointers to observe the exposure to the development of psychological sicknesses like depression and anxiety (Pereira, Santos-Vitti & Faro, 2021). Distress has physiological and psychological aspects. Physiological distress happens when a person is confronted with stressor and the nervous system begins to release a torrent of stress hormones. People may begin to sweat and their heartbeat and beating rates increase, and their muscles may tense up. On the other hand, psychological distress is a common conception of psychological performance incompetence when experiencing stressful events. For various researchers, psychological distress is from time to time seen as equal to damage of self-confidence and pessimism about the upcoming, inferiority, anxiety, isolation and withdrawal from other people (the society), and physical ailment. It can be supplemented by signs and symptoms such as unhappiness, rigidity, sleeplessness, agitation, bad temper, irritation, and problems of breathing (Spencer, Chun, Hartsock & Woodruff, 2021). Hence, distress is a negative mental reaction to the perceived danger, challenging or traumatic situations which may consist of a range of mental and emotional conditions, such as insecurity, annoyance, worry, and sadness. When early indications of distress are not recognised by health care specialists, there is an increased danger of being affected by additional psychological distress and decreased efficient status. Therefore, an individual can no longer have the capacity to undertake his or her normal everyday activities essential to meet his or her needs, realise normal roles, and sustain fitness and welfare. There are some examples of individuals who may likely be victim of psychological distress base on their various situations: people who have lost their job, individuals in unhealthy workplace and homes, students at the university when the school is on session mainly during exams, people with incurable sicknesses, bereaved, immigrants, to mention but a few (White, 2018; Anyanwu, 2023).

All of these examples and many others impose upon people major life transformations that lead to psychological distress if the victims possess no ability to meet the demands initiated by these changes. The individuals concerned are disturbed and experience an increase in negative emotion and maladaptive behaviour. This is where the therapy is needed to help the sufferers of psychological distress. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is the best to address the issue of distress. By assisting their clients assess and adjust their thoughts that disregard facts and believe in falsehoods, CBT therapists can lead to a lifelong help in mood and behaviour. An individual in the situation of psychological distress should go for psychotherapy or psychological treatment. Among many types of psychotherapy, CBT is the most indicated for psychological distress. It is grounded on the idea that individuals' way of thinking effects their feelings and comportment. It was developed by Dr. Aaron Beck in the 1960s and 1970s and has then been confirmed to be effective in more than 2,000 published outcome studies (Beck, 2021). It is said that in the field of psychotherapy, CBT is the 'gold standard' mental cure, the best available for these reasons: (a) CBT is the most examined practice of psychiatric help. (b) There is no other psychiatric therapy that has been identified to be superior to CBT; (c) Furthermore, the CBT theoretic models/tools of adjustment are the most investigated and are in line with the normal standards of

human mind and behaviour (David, Cristea & Hofmann, 2018). By assisting their clients assess and adjust dysfunctional or obstructive thinking, CBT psychotherapists or counsellors bring about long-lasting adjustment in mood and behaviour (Beck, 2021). This is said for all kind of mental disorders.

2. Statement of the problem

All over the world, psychological disorders are an important and often overlooked root of distress that affect people's condition and capacity to attain their realization. Psychological distress arouses widespread concern throughout societies worldwide due to its effects on the life of the individuals. It manifests itself like worry, unhappiness, bad temper, depression, and emotional vulnerability; it is powerfully linked with physical disorder, weakened quality of life, diminished life span, augmented uptake of health services, impatience, sorrow, anxiety, desperateness, and defencelessness (Ozoemena, Agbaje, Ogundu, Ononuju, Umoke, Iweama, Kato, Isabu & Obute, 2021). Psychological suffering could be consequently linked to the occurrence of psychiatric disorders which can go to the extent of depression and suicidal ideation. Individuals with psychological distress need appropriate coping strategies in order to avoid its harmful consequences. Evidence has suggested that negative coping styles may be related to subsequent psychological distress (Wang, Xia, Xiong, Li, Xiang, Yuan, Liu & Li, 2020).

Psychological distress, being symptomatic of damaged psychological wellbeing and reflecting some disorders such as depression and anxiety, affects many people generally and most especially the youth. It needs to be taken serious because of its consequences on the youth. These, when there are under psychological distress, cannot contribute, as they ought to, to their own development, that of their respective families and countries. It is well known that psychological distress is at the root of many problems. It can have deleterious impacts on different categories of people, primarily the youth. A psychological intervention is of great help to assist people with emotional, behavioural and interpersonal problems improve the quality of their lives (Ezeakor, Okpala, Ebere & Eze, 2019). There should be a treatment process by which individuals challenged identify, explore, and deal with psychological distress, on both intellectual and emotional level, through discussions with the therapist. This process is called psychotherapy. In theory, psychotherapy denotes a variety of actions which enable the treatment of mental health difficulties, emotional problems, and some psychiatric ailments and several others (Grohol, 2019). Henceforth, psychotherapy is a valuable means which helps to develop mental wellness. It is one of the important tools necessary to enable wellness of life, leading people to live fulfilling lives (Ezeakor, Okpala, Ebere & Eze, 2019). It aims at helping the impaired individual by influencing his or her emotional process, his or her evaluation of himself and others, his/her evaluation of and his /her manner of coping with the problems of live. As a process, it occurs between two or more individuals in which one (the therapist), by virtue of his/her position and training, seeks to apply psychological knowledge and interventions in an attempt to understand, influence and modify the psychic experience, mental function and behaviour of the patient or client (Salami, 2018).

Psychotherapy is an effective means of advocacy, in which is perceived as on-going creation of awareness. Advocacy is active promotion of a cause or principle, which involves actions that lead to the achievement of a selected goal (Breitrose, 2018). Similarly, the present research highlights that significant commitment with psychotherapy offers great assistance to people confronted with psychological distress particularly the youth. The study considers the issue of context in developmental psychology, with the position of peculiarities in different regions of the world which make young people different in different social contexts. However, the issue of universality in developmental psychology posits that young people can have similar challenges when they are in the same stage of life. This study addresses all young people irrespective of their region. There are unifying factors such as age-range, stage of life, developmental tasks, developmental milestones and challenges

common to the youth. Through advocacy, psychotherapist supports the youth to realise the emptiness in their lives in order to get a help from what has bothered or affected them, aid them have more life fulfilment, and experience better relationships and choices (Ezeakor, Okpala, Ebere & Eze, 2019). Therefore, psychological distress requires psychotherapeutic intervention for the wellness of the individuals challenged.

For individuals without psychiatric disorders, psychological distress usually occurs following one or more traumatic events. It is a process in which signs of stress and anxiety appear. Its manifestations are physical (insomnia, fatigue, muscle pain, migraines), cognitive (attention problems, difficulty concentrating), emotional (anger, irritability, sadness, excitability) and behavioural (social isolation or alcohol abuse, for example). Psychological distress observed among the youth may have serious far-reaching consequences on their physical health, mental wellness, schooling, quality of work life, productivity, marriage and family life, social relationships and life satisfaction. There is dearth of researches in this area to develop treatment package in CBT to manage psychological distress among the youth. This study therefore developed a Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Package for the management of psychological distress among the youth.

3. Objective of the study

Using CBT, the aim of the study is to prepare a treatment package for the management of psychological distress among the youth for sustainable counselling interventions towards personal and social adjustment.

4. Research Methodology

Case study research design was chosen for the purpose of this study. This choice was informed by the nature of the study which is qualitative. Note case study research is normally defined as a form of qualitative research different from quantitative research that emphasizes on numerical data and uses statistics to answer research questions.

5. Key findings

5.1. Treatment package for managing psychological distress among the youth

CBT can be carried out with a therapist in one-to-one sessions or in groups. The length of the therapy depends on a variety of factors including the therapist, client, and venue. Some issues are more suitable even for brief CBT like adjustment, anxiety, and depressive disorders, psychological distress, etc. In brief CBT, the attention is on particular interventions for a restricted number of the clients' complications. Brief CBT is an approach which help in increasing the efficacy of CBT interventions including adjusting personal interventions to a group format, self-help tools and bibliotherapy, and computer-assisted treatment programmes (Hazlett-Stevens & Craske, 2002).

The following is an outline package of brief CBT adapted from Cully, Dawson, Hamer & Tharp (2020) whereby eight sessions are conducted for managing psychological distress among the youth:

Session one

- Establishing relationship: The therapist ought to create a good rapport with the client and both of them get to know each other better.
- Identifying the problem: Here the client narrates the story of his or her issue to the therapist.
- Introducing Cognitive Behavioural Therapy: the client is introduced on CBT.
- Introducing the Cognitive-Behavioural Model whereby the association between thoughts, feelings and behaviours is explained.
- Describing problem in context of mode. Here the client selects the problem he or she would like to solve. The therapist should enquire from the client situations on which he or she feels distressed.

- Setting goals: the goals have to be measurable, observable and achievable. They should be related to behavioural and cognitive adjustments significant to the client's challenge. To set a goal gives hope to client.
- Receiving feedback from the client: This is about how the client felt during the whole session.

Session two

- Checking the client's disposition or mood.
- Introducing and practicing progressive muscle relaxation: this is to be planned for twice a week. It is about the psychotherapeutic methods to ease stress, tension, anxiety, worry, etc. these methods include imagery, deep and slow breathing, etc.
- Setting homework. This is an important element of brief CBT. For the fact that the sessions are reduced, there is a need of giving assignments including readings, practice of some techniques, controlling behaviours, etc. Assignments to be done at home help the client to acquire skills, comply with the intervention, and reduce the symptoms by trying to integrate into everyday life what is learnt during each the sessions.
- Receiving feedback from the client. It is from this feedback that the therapist know what happened between the sessions and how is the progress.

Session three

- Checking the mood of the client.
- Reviewing progressive muscle relaxation.
- Introducing and practicing imagery. This reduces tension, stress and anxiety by altering thoughts and emotions by bringing to mind positive thoughts. The client is encouraged to remember good moments he or she has had in life. This techniques is very effective to ease tension in order to promote wellbeing.
- Assignment to be done at home:
 - One exercise on progressive muscle relaxation
 - One exercise on imagery
- Receiving the remarks from the client on how has been the session

Session four

- Checking the mood of the client.
- Reviewing the exercise on imagery and the client narrates to the therapists the good moments remembered.
- Introducing three columns in a table for recording thoughts and ideas of "hot thought." The first three columns: Situation (What really took place? What, Where? When? How?), Automatic thought(s) (What thought(s) went through your mind? How much did you believe it? (1-100)), and Emotion(s) (What emotion (s) did you feel at the time? The client should rate the thoughts (1-100).
- Practicing events from past week.
- Assignment to be done at home by the client:
 - One exercise on relaxation technique
 - Recording thoughts and ideas in the three columns and rating them.
- Receiving the comments from the client about the session.

Session five

- Checking the mood of the client.
- Discussing about the progress of treatment and its termination. The process of terminating the therapy is collaborative procedure between the client and the therapist. It is helps to assess whether the client is ready to end the treatment in order to move beyond relying on the therapist while applying skills learnt.
- Reviewing homework.

- Introducing the idea of errors in thinking or distortions in cognition. Perceiving errors in thinking or cognition in the record of the client's thought, it is helpful for the therapist to plan an intervention. A client frequently has some forms of obstructive thinking. Recognising these forms of thoughts helps the client detect them when they occur and offers a therapist an occasion to step in on thought prompted in various situations. Hence, altering a peculiar thought belonging to an unhelpful thinking pattern has various profits for the client.
- Completing three-column again in a table, and ask the client to indicate hot thought or the thought bordering him or her. The three more columns consist of: Evidence for and against thought (What made you to accept as true the thought?), Alternative response (What made you to ascertain that the thought is false?), and new rating of emotion (What is the alternative approach of this thought?).
- Introducing the notion of challenging hot thought. Negative spontaneous reactions are the targets of CBT. Techniques and skills for recognising negative thoughts and their accompanying feelings ought to be learnt by the client to inspire optimism of adjustment after detecting challenging thinking patterns.
- Giving assignment:
 - two relaxation techniques are given to the client
 - 1 three-column thought record
- Receiving feedback from client.

Session six

- Checking the mood of the client.
- Reviewing homework.
- Introducing challenging thoughts and seven-column thought record. Completing seven-column in session. The last column is on mood rating in percentage.
- Introducing concept of challenging hot thought.
- Homework to be done at home:
 - 2 relaxation techniques
 - Recording hot negative thought in the more three-columns
- Getting the feedback about the session from client.

Session seven

- Checking the mood of the client.
- Reviewing assignment done at home.
- Completing the seven columns: the three first and second columns together with the rating.
- Homework to be done at home:
 - two relaxation techniques are given to the client
 - Recording thought and completing the seven columns
- Getting the feedback about the session

Session eight

- Checking the client's mood.
- Reviewing homework given to be done at home.
- Reviewing development of therapy.
- Completing relapse prevention. Various clients are normally afraid of not being able to manage their future mental issues or psychosocial stressors without the help of treatment. While planning to end the therapy, the therapist together with the client anticipate eventual stressors and their indications and make plans of: 1) tools the clients have learnt in treatment which they may use for specific stressors and their indications, and 2) when clients should seek help from a therapist (for instance when having the idea of committing suicide).

- Introducing and scheduling self-administered sessions.
- Assignment: self-administered session

6. Contribution of the study

The study has contributed in developing a treatment package of brief CBT to be conducted in eight sessions for managing psychological distress among the youth.

7. Recommendations and suggestions

Based on the present study, the undermentioned recommendations and suggestions are worth to be indicated:

1. The professional counselling psychologists in their work or role of assisting clients with varied challenges, in order for them to reach their optimum level of psychosocial functioning, should utilise the above treatment package. Also adolescent and youth counselling and pastoral counsellors can use this treatment package for their clients to help resolve negative patterns, prevention of suicide, rehabilitation and improving quality of life. With CBT, qualified counsellors are able to assist their clients to discover goals and possible solutions to difficulties that generate emotional disorder, strive for the improvement of communication and coping abilities, reinforce self-esteem and encourage behaviour modification and optimal psychological wellbeing.
2. Governments, in their role of supporting health and well-being of the people entrusted to them, should promote the usage of CBT in public and private universities, special homes and psychiatric centres in their respective countries. They should help professional counsellors to utilise their capacities in order to attend to individuals in need of their help for wellness. The appeal is addressed in a special way to African countries whereby people in general and youth in particular are mostly victims of psychological distress due to different challenges of life like poverty, wars, social instability, trauma, adverse childhood experiences, to name but a few.
3. Non-governmental organisations can use the brief CBT for psychological distress among the youth in collaboration with national and international agencies, and of course professionally trained counselling psychologists to help young people manage their distress and be at vantage positions for gainful employment, entrepreneurship and political opportunities, while also preventing crimes and substance abuse.
4. Officials in correctional centres or prisons in different countries can adopt this psychotherapeutic treatment in the remediation, rehabilitation and reformation of inmates in order to foster desistance and prevent recidivism. Correctional centres can partner with youth counsellors who are well trained to work in various settings such as correctional facilities, hospitals, schools, residential homes, detention centres, clinics, homeless shelters, and many more.
5. Researchers with the aim of reducing psychological distress and its enormous consequences of crimes, self-injury, substance abuse, suicidal thought, self-destruction, suicide violence, homicide, terrorism and militancy can make use of the above treatment package to answer research questions and test hypotheses and then come up with recommendations that will be workable, practicable and sustainable in all societies that have young people as part of their populace.

8. Conclusion

From the foregoing, psychological distress is indicative of mental health problem which reflects mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety. It affects most especially the youth. An individual in the situation of psychological distress should go for psychotherapy or psychological treatment. CBT is the most indicated psychotherapy for psychological distress especially among the youth.

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