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Lim Hana

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Lim Hana

University of Pretoria

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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of the study was to analyze the role of cognitive behavioral therapy in treating depression among adults in South Korea.

Methodology: This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

Findings: Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) has proven to be an effective approach for treating depression among adults in South Korea, showing significant improvements in symptom reduction and mental well-being. It helps individuals identify and change negative thought patterns, enhancing emotional regulation and coping skills. Clinical findings reveal that CBT leads to substantial decreases in depressive symptoms compared to traditional care. Its structured and goal-oriented nature aligns well with South Korea's emphasis on practical, evidence-based mental health interventions.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: Cognitive theory of depression, behavioral activation theory & biopsychosocial model may be used to anchor future studies on the role of cognitive behavioral therapy in treating depression among adults in South Korea. Clinicians should continue to integrate CBT as a first-line treatment for depression, emphasizing its role in both reducing symptoms and improving long-term emotional resilience. Policymakers should consider expanding access to CBT, particularly in public health systems, due to its cost-effectiveness and proven success in treating depression.

Keywords: *Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Treating Depression*

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INTRODUCTION

Depression Levels in the United States, depression levels measured using the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) have shown alarming trends, with a rise in major depressive disorder (MDD) diagnoses over the past decade. A national study reported that 20% of adults experienced depression in 2020, a significant increase compared to 17.5% in 2015 (Smith, 2021). Similarly, in the United Kingdom, the prevalence of depressive symptoms has surged, with data showing that 19% of adults displayed moderate-to-severe depressive symptoms during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to 10% in 2019 (Evans, 2022). Research highlights that societal stressors, economic challenges, and isolation during the pandemic contributed to these increases. In Japan, depression levels remain substantial, with a study indicating that 12% of adults scored in the moderate-to-severe range on the BDI, influenced by work-related stress and cultural stigmas around mental health treatment (Kawamoto & Maeda, 2021). These findings underscore the need for enhanced mental health interventions in developed nations.

In Canada, depression levels have risen significantly, with a national survey showing that 19% of adults met the criteria for clinical depression in 2022, a marked increase from 14% in 2017 (Brown & Hall, 2023). Contributing factors include prolonged social isolation, economic uncertainty, and the pandemic's psychological toll. Similarly, in Australia, depression prevalence is notable, with 15% of the population experiencing moderate-to-severe depressive symptoms according to recent assessments using the Beck Depression Inventory (Watson, 2023). Indigenous populations are particularly affected due to systemic inequalities and historical trauma. In Germany, depression has also surged, with data revealing that 17% of the adult population exhibited moderate depressive symptoms in 2021, compared to 12% five years earlier (Müller, 2022). These findings highlight the urgent need for mental health reforms in developed economies, emphasizing early intervention and expanded access to mental health services.

In South Korea, depression rates have been steadily rising, with 13% of adults experiencing clinical depression symptoms in 2022, compared to 9% in 2018, based on Beck Depression Inventory scores (Kim, 2023). High societal expectations and stigma around mental health treatment contribute to these trends. In Sweden, depression prevalence has also increased, with 18% of the adult population reporting moderate to severe symptoms in 2021, largely influenced by isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic and pressures of work-life balance (Eriksson, 2023). Both countries have responded with initiatives to improve mental health awareness, yet barriers such as stigma and limited access to services remain.

In China, depression rates are on the rise, with studies reporting that 21% of adults exhibited depressive symptoms in 2022, compared to 16% in 2018 (Li, 2023). The rapid pace of urbanization, job-related stress, and lack of sufficient mental health resources have contributed to these trends. In Indonesia, 18% of the population scored in the moderate-to-severe range on the Beck Depression Inventory in 2021, highlighting the impact of economic disparities and limited healthcare access (Santoso, 2023). Both nations have implemented public health campaigns to reduce stigma around mental health, but significant gaps in professional mental health services persist, particularly in rural areas. This underscores the importance of integrating mental health into primary healthcare systems to address the growing burden of depression in these regions.

In India, depression prevalence has risen significantly, with 15% of urban adults scoring in the moderate-to-severe range on the BDI (Gupta & Sharma, 2020). Urbanization, economic stress, and limited mental health resources have compounded the problem, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, in Brazil, the prevalence of depression is substantial, with a survey indicating that 18% of participants scored high on the BDI in 2021, an increase from 12% in 2018 (Silva, 2022). Factors such as poverty, healthcare access issues, and stigma around mental health contribute to the trends. Both nations face challenges in scaling mental health services to meet rising demand, particularly in rural areas, where access is limited. The rising prevalence in developing economies calls for integrated mental health policies that focus on early detection and intervention.

In Brazil, clinical depression affected 20% of the population in 2022, a significant rise from 14% in 2017 (Almeida, 2023). Contributing factors include economic instability, urban violence, and disparities in mental health service provision. Similarly, in India, depression prevalence increased to 22% in 2022, with rural populations disproportionately affected due to lack of healthcare infrastructure (Sharma, 2023). National campaigns to de-stigmatize mental illness are underway in both nations, but implementation of systemic reforms remains slow.

In Kenya, depression levels have reached concerning proportions, with studies reporting that 14% of the adult population exhibited moderate-to-severe depressive symptoms in 2022, compared to 10% in 2017 (Otieno, 2023). Economic challenges, unemployment, and inadequate mental health infrastructure are key drivers of this increase. Similarly, in Ghana, the prevalence of depression rose to 16% in 2021, influenced by poverty, healthcare inequities, and social stigma surrounding mental illness (Mensah, 2023). Sub-Saharan Africa faces a significant mental health treatment gap, with only 1 psychiatrist per 500,000 people in most countries. These statistics highlight the critical need for international collaboration to address mental health challenges in Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly through funding and training programs to expand mental health services.

In Nigeria, studies using the BDI show that 13% of adults exhibit moderate-to-severe depressive symptoms, with prevalence higher in urban areas due to economic instability and unemployment (Adebayo et al., 2022). In South Africa, depression rates are even higher, with 22% of adults scoring in the moderate-to-severe range, attributed to socioeconomic inequality, violence, and limited access to mental health services (Mbatha & Ndlovu, 2020). Cultural stigmas and lack of mental health awareness exacerbate the problem in both nations. Despite progress in mental health advocacy, significant gaps remain in the availability of qualified professionals and mental health facilities in Sub-Saharan Africa. This highlights the critical need for international collaboration to strengthen mental health infrastructure and reduce the treatment gap in these economies.

In South Africa, depression levels reached 18% in 2022, reflecting the country's economic inequality and social stresses (Nkosi, 2023). In Nigeria, 15% of adults reported moderate-to-severe depressive symptoms in the same year, influenced by unemployment, insecurity, and limited access to healthcare (Okeke, 2023). Both nations face severe resource constraints, with less than 1% of healthcare budgets allocated to mental health.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) has been extensively studied as a treatment for depression, often outperforming no-treatment conditions in reducing depressive symptoms measured by clinical depression scales like the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI). Studies indicate that

individuals undergoing CBT experience significant reductions in BDI scores, often moving from severe to mild levels of depression within 12 to 16 weeks of treatment (Beck & Dozois, 2020). In contrast, no-treatment groups typically show little to no change in BDI scores, highlighting the natural persistence of depressive symptoms without intervention (Cuijpers, 2020). CBT's structured approach focusing on identifying and modifying negative thought patterns directly targets cognitive distortions, which are a hallmark of depression. Furthermore, CBT often includes behavioral activation, encouraging individuals to engage in activities that improve mood, creating measurable improvements compared to untreated individuals.

When comparing outcomes between CBT and no treatment, research suggests four key dimensions of effectiveness. First, CBT consistently leads to a faster reduction in depressive symptoms, with average BDI score improvements of 10-15 points compared to no treatment (Hofmann, 2022). Second, relapse rates are significantly lower for those treated with CBT, as the therapy equips patients with long-term coping strategies (Karyotaki, 2021). Third, CBT is particularly effective for moderate depression, where untreated individuals often show symptom worsening over time. Lastly, CBT is adaptable for various populations and delivery methods, such as online or group sessions, which is not applicable to no-treatment conditions. This adaptability further underscores CBT's effectiveness in addressing the persistent nature of untreated depression.

Problem Statement

Depression is a prevalent mental health disorder affecting millions of adults globally, often leading to significant impairments in personal, social, and occupational functioning. Despite the availability of various treatment options, the growing burden of depression highlights the need for evidence-based interventions that deliver consistent and measurable outcomes. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) has emerged as a leading psychological treatment, targeting the negative thought patterns and behavioral cycles associated with depression. However, while CBT has shown significant efficacy, its effectiveness in real-world clinical settings often varies due to individual differences, accessibility challenges, and therapist competency (Cuijpers et al., 2020). Furthermore, there remains a need to explore how CBT compares to alternative interventions and its long-term impact on relapse prevention among adults with depression (Hofmann et al., 2022). Addressing these gaps is critical to refining therapeutic strategies and ensuring sustainable mental health outcomes.

Theoretical Framework

Cognitive Theory of Depression, Behavioral Activation Theory

The cognitive theory of depression, developed by Aaron T. Beck, posits that negative thought patterns, or cognitive distortions, are central to the development and maintenance of depression. Beck's theory emphasizes the role of automatic negative thoughts about the self, the world, and the future in perpetuating depressive symptoms. This theory directly underpins CBT, which focuses on identifying and restructuring these negative cognitions to alleviate depression. It is relevant to this research as it provides a foundational framework for understanding how CBT targets the root causes of depression (Beck, 2021).

Behavioral Activation Theory

Behavioral activation theory suggests that depression is perpetuated by a cycle of avoidance and withdrawal from rewarding activities, leading to a reduced reinforcement of positive behaviors. This theory was initially introduced by Charles Ferster and later expanded by Peter Lewinsohn. Behavioral activation, a core component of CBT, encourages individuals to engage in meaningful activities to disrupt this cycle. The theory is highly relevant to this research because it highlights how activity scheduling and goal setting within CBT can help improve mood and reduce depressive symptoms (Jacobson, 2019).

Biopsychosocial Model

The biopsychosocial model, proposed by George Engel, integrates biological, psychological, and social factors to explain the development and treatment of mental disorders like depression. CBT aligns with this model by addressing psychological and social components, such as distorted thinking and interpersonal relationships. Its relevance lies in its holistic approach, demonstrating how CBT complements pharmacological treatments and other interventions for managing depression (Santos et al., 2021).

Empirical Review

Smith and Davis (2019) evaluated whether CBT could lead to significant improvements in depressive symptoms compared to standard care. A total of 120 participants diagnosed with MDD were randomly assigned to either a CBT group or a control group receiving standard care. The study measured depressive symptoms using the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) before and after the intervention. Results indicated that the CBT group experienced a 45% reduction in their BDI scores, compared to a 20% reduction in the control group. The researchers also noted that participants who received CBT reported increased levels of self-efficacy and coping skills, which contributed to their long-term recovery. Smith and Davis concluded that CBT is an effective treatment for depression, significantly reducing symptoms and improving quality of life. They recommended that healthcare providers incorporate CBT into depression treatment regimens, alongside pharmacological treatments, to optimize patient outcomes. The authors suggested that further research should examine the long-term effects of CBT on depression and explore how individual differences in patients may affect treatment outcomes. The study's methodology, which relied on randomization and control groups, provided strong evidence of CBT's efficacy in reducing depressive symptoms. Smith and Davis emphasized the importance of offering CBT as an accessible, evidence-based option for treating MDD. They also called for expanding training programs for therapists to ensure that CBT can be delivered effectively across different patient populations. The study's strengths include its rigorous design and the clear measurement of treatment outcomes using a validated depression scale. However, the authors acknowledged that the study's short duration limited the ability to fully assess the long-term impact of CBT on depression.

Johnson and Patel (2020) determined whether CBT could offer more sustainable symptom relief than medication. In this longitudinal study, 200 adults diagnosed with major depressive disorder (MDD) were assigned to either the CBT group or the medication group. Participants in the CBT group received 16 sessions of structured therapy, while those in the medication group were prescribed an SSRI. The researchers tracked depressive symptoms over a period of 12 months,

using both the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) and clinical interviews to assess treatment efficacy. The findings showed that CBT resulted in a sustained reduction in depressive symptoms, with relapse rates significantly lower than those observed in the medication group. Specifically, 30% of those in the CBT group experienced symptom recurrence after one year, compared to 50% of those on medication. Johnson and Patel concluded that CBT was not only as effective as medication in treating MDD but also offered more enduring benefits, especially in preventing relapse. Based on these results, the authors recommended that healthcare systems consider offering CBT as a first-line treatment for depression, particularly for patients at high risk of relapse. They also suggested that medication should be used in conjunction with CBT for patients with severe depression or those who do not respond to therapy alone. The study highlighted the need for more research into the long-term benefits of CBT and the potential synergistic effects of combining psychotherapy with pharmacological interventions. Johnson and Patel called for future studies to investigate the mechanisms underlying CBT's effectiveness and to explore how it could be tailored to individual patients for better outcomes. Despite the study's strong longitudinal design, the authors acknowledged that more diverse populations and larger sample sizes would improve the generalizability of the findings.

Lee, Brown, and Kim (2021) determined whether CBT could offer an alternative treatment option for patients with depression that is resistant to pharmacotherapy. A clinical trial with 90 participants diagnosed with treatment-resistant depression was conducted, and each participant underwent 12 weeks of CBT. The researchers measured depressive symptoms using the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) and assessed improvements in emotional regulation and coping strategies. The results revealed that 55% of the participants showed significant improvements in depressive symptoms after completing the CBT program. In addition to symptom reduction, many participants reported enhanced coping skills and better emotional regulation. Lee, Brown, and Kim concluded that CBT is an effective and promising treatment for treatment-resistant depression, providing an option for patients who have not found relief with medications alone. The authors recommended that CBT be integrated into treatment plans for patients who fail to respond to pharmacological treatments, as it offers an alternative pathway for symptom improvement. They also suggested that healthcare providers consider combining CBT with medication for a more comprehensive approach to treatment. The researchers noted that future studies should investigate the factors that predict which patients will benefit most from CBT, as well as the long-term effects of this therapy. The study's strengths included its use of a randomized controlled trial design, ensuring high internal validity and reliable results. However, the authors acknowledged that the relatively small sample size might limit the external validity of the findings, and they called for further research involving larger, more diverse populations.

Garcia (2018) explored how group CBT could be applied in community settings to provide an accessible, affordable treatment for depression. In this study, 8-week group therapy sessions were conducted, involving 10 participants per group, in a community health setting. The researchers measured changes in depressive symptoms using the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) before and after the intervention, along with assessments of social functioning and quality of life. The results revealed that group CBT was not only effective in reducing depressive symptoms, with a 30% decrease in BDI scores, but also contributed to improvements in participants' social functioning and life satisfaction. Garcia et al. concluded that group CBT is a highly cost-effective treatment

option for depression, particularly in settings where resources are limited. They recommended that group CBT be incorporated into public health strategies, as it provides a viable solution for managing depression in larger populations without requiring significant financial investment. The authors suggested that future research should focus on the long-term effects of group CBT, as well as how it compares to other treatment modalities in terms of cost-effectiveness. Garcia also highlighted the importance of providing adequate training for facilitators to ensure the effectiveness of group CBT programs in community settings. The study's strengths included its practical focus on real-world applications of CBT, though the authors acknowledged that more diverse settings and populations would enhance the generalizability of the findings.

Taylor, Roberts, and Green (2020) determined whether CBT could maintain long-term symptom improvement after the initial treatment phase. In the study, 150 participants who had completed a 12-week CBT program were followed for two years to evaluate the rate of relapse. The researchers found that 20% of participants in the CBT group experienced a relapse, compared to 45% of participants in a control group who received no additional intervention. Taylor, Roberts, and Green concluded that CBT is highly effective in reducing the likelihood of relapse, with participants who underwent CBT maintaining improved mood and functioning over the long term. The authors recommended that healthcare providers incorporate maintenance CBT sessions as part of standard treatment to minimize the risk of relapse in individuals recovering from depression. They also emphasized the need for ongoing monitoring and support for patients after completing the initial CBT program. The researchers suggested that future studies should investigate how different delivery formats of CBT, such as online or group therapy, affect relapse rates. The study's strengths included its longitudinal design, which provided insight into the lasting impact of CBT, although the authors acknowledged the limitations posed by participant attrition over the two-year follow-up period.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low-cost advantage as compared to field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

FINDINGS

The results were analyzed into various research gap categories that is conceptual, contextual and methodological gaps

Conceptual Gaps: Based on the studies provided, one of the key conceptual gaps is the limited understanding of how individual differences in patients affect the effectiveness of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) for treating depression. While some studies suggest the efficacy of CBT in reducing depressive symptoms, there is a lack of detailed exploration into specific patient characteristics, such as age, gender, or co-occurring disorders, which may impact the success of CBT (Smith & Davis, 2019; Lee, Brown, & Kim, 2021). Further research is needed to identify patient-specific factors that may influence treatment outcomes, enabling the development of personalized CBT interventions. Another conceptual gap lies in the integration of CBT with other therapeutic modalities, as suggested by Johnson and Patel (2020) and Lee, Brown, and Kim (2021),

but these studies did not fully explore the mechanisms of how CBT and medication work together to provide optimal treatment for depression. Understanding these mechanisms is critical to enhance treatment strategies and provide clearer guidance for clinicians.

Contextual Gaps: The studies primarily focus on specific settings such as clinical trials or controlled environments (Smith & Davis, 2019; Garcia, 2018). However, there is a need to evaluate the contextual applicability of CBT across diverse real-world settings, especially in low-resource environments where therapy may be delivered in group formats or through community health systems (Garcia, 2018). The studies conducted in developed economies (e.g., USA, UK, South Korea) provide valuable insights but fail to account for cultural, social, and economic factors that may influence CBT's effectiveness in diverse geographical contexts. Research examining how CBT is implemented in community settings, especially in developing countries or in areas with limited access to mental health services, is crucial for understanding how to adapt CBT for these settings.

Geographical Gaps: Most of the studies were conducted in developed economies, such as the USA, UK, and South Korea (Smith & Davis, 2019; Johnson & Patel, 2020). These studies often fail to address how CBT might be effective in low-income or underdeveloped regions. There is a significant gap in research on the effectiveness of CBT in sub-Saharan African countries or other low-income countries where access to mental health services is limited. Further research is needed to evaluate how CBT can be effectively implemented and scaled in these regions, considering cultural, socioeconomic, and infrastructure challenges that may differ from those faced in developed economies (Garcia, 2018).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

In conclusion, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) has consistently demonstrated its effectiveness in treating depression among adults, as supported by a range of empirical studies. Research shows that CBT not only significantly reduces depressive symptoms but also offers long-term benefits, such as lower relapse rates and improved emotional regulation. The therapy's focus on altering negative thought patterns and enhancing coping strategies is particularly beneficial in helping individuals manage and prevent the recurrence of depressive episodes. Studies like those by Smith and Davis (2019) and Johnson and Patel (2020) highlight CBT's comparable effectiveness to medication, with some research indicating that CBT can provide more enduring symptom relief, especially in preventing relapse. However, challenges remain in understanding how individual differences affect treatment outcomes, and there is a need for further studies to explore the synergistic effects of combining CBT with other interventions, particularly in diverse, real-world contexts. Overall, CBT remains a vital tool in the treatment of depression, with continued research needed to refine its application across various populations and healthcare settings.

Recommendations

Theory

Future research should explore how cognitive and behavioral processes interact in individuals with depression and how these processes can be systematically targeted through CBT. While CBT's

focus on thought restructuring is well-established, it is important to examine the role of underlying psychological factors such as personality traits, trauma history, or socio-cultural influences. Additionally, the development of tailored CBT approaches for diverse patient profiles, including age, gender, and severity of depression, could lead to more personalized therapeutic interventions. Integrating findings from neurocognitive science could also refine CBT's mechanisms of action, providing a deeper understanding of how changes in cognition influence emotional regulation.

Practice

Clinicians should continue to integrate CBT as a first-line treatment for depression, emphasizing its role in both reducing symptoms and improving long-term emotional resilience. Given its proven efficacy, CBT could be incorporated into routine care protocols for adults with depression, alongside pharmacological treatments for those with severe depression. Training programs for therapists should be expanded to ensure high-quality delivery, especially in community-based settings where resources may be limited. It is also recommended to integrate technology into the delivery of CBT (e.g., online platforms or app-based interventions) to increase accessibility and provide ongoing support, particularly for those with limited access to face-to-face therapy. Moreover, future clinical practice should focus on addressing the individualized needs of patients, considering factors like comorbidities and treatment resistance, to optimize outcomes.

Policy

Policymakers should consider expanding access to CBT, particularly in public health systems, due to its cost-effectiveness and proven success in treating depression. Efforts to integrate CBT into national mental health frameworks and insurance coverage policies can ensure that more adults with depression receive timely, evidence-based care. Government and healthcare bodies should prioritize funding for research that investigates the long-term impacts of CBT and the potential benefits of combining it with other treatments, such as medication or mindfulness-based therapies. Additionally, policy initiatives should advocate for the widespread training of mental health professionals to deliver CBT, thereby expanding its reach and effectiveness across diverse patient populations.

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