**Assessing the Impact of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy on Middle-Aged Women in Myanmar: A qualitative approach**

**Abstract**

This study investigates the impact of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) counseling on middle-aged women in Myanmar, with a particular focus on emotional well-being, stress management, and overall psychological resilience. The research aims to understand how CBT interventions influence mental health, considering both the benefits and the challenges that arise in a culturally specific context. A qualitative research design was employed, utilizing in-depth interviews and focus group discussions to gather comprehensive data on participants' experiences. The study incorporated a thematic analysis approach to identify key patterns and insights regarding the effectiveness of CBT in addressing emotional distress, anxiety, and coping strategies. Participants shared personal narratives about their journey through counseling, revealing how CBT techniques, such as cognitive restructuring, mindfulness, and behavioral activation, contributed to improvements in self-awareness, emotional regulation, and adaptive coping mechanisms. The findings indicated that CBT counseling led to significant positive changes in participants' psychological resilience, helping them develop healthier perspectives on stress and emotional challenges. Many women reported increased self-confidence, enhanced problem-solving abilities, and a greater sense of personal empowerment. Stigma surrounding mental health issues and the preference for traditional healing methods sometimes hindered the adoption of counseling as a viable solution. Additionally, logistical barriers such as financial constraints, geographical limitations, and the availability of trained therapists posed obstacles to long-term engagement with CBT interventions. By addressing these cultural and structural barriers, counseling services can become more accessible, sustainable, and impactful in improving mental health outcomes. The study’s implications extend to policymakers, mental health practitioners, and community leaders who seek to enhance psychological support services for middle-aged women in Myanmar.

**Keywords:** Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Middle-aged women, Emotional well-being, Stress management, Myanmar, Thematic analysis. qualitative methods

**1. Introduction**

Mental health challenges among middle-aged women in Myanmar are often underreported and insufficiently addressed due to social stigma, limited mental health services, and cultural expectations (Aung et al., 2020). Middle age is a transitional period marked by physiological, psychological, and social changes, including menopause, caregiving responsibilities, financial pressures, and shifting family roles (Freeman, 2015). These stressors contribute to increased anxiety, depression, emotional distress and trauma making psychological interventions essential (Goyal et al., 2014).

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) has been widely recognized as an effective approach for managing mental health conditions by addressing negative thought patterns and promoting adaptive coping strategies (Beck, 2011). It is evidence-based and has demonstrated effectiveness in treating stress, depression, anxiety and trauma across diverse populations (Hofmann et al., 2012). However, research on the application of CBT within Myanmar's socio-cultural context remains limited, and its effectiveness in addressing the psychological needs of middle-aged women has not been extensively explored (Than Tun et al., 2019). This study investigates how CBT counselingimpacts middle-aged women in Myanmar, exploring its effectiveness, cultural adaptability, and the challenges faced in accessing and implementing CBT techniques (Sue et al., 2019).

Despite the growing awareness of mental health issues, there is a significant gap in structured counseling services for middle-aged women in Myanmar. Research suggests that women in this age group experience high levels of psychological distress, yet counseling remains underutilized due to cultural barriers, accessibility issues, and stigma (Aung et al., 2020; Hlaing et al., 2021). While CBT has been effective globally, its adaptability to Myanmar’s cultural values, traditional beliefs, and mental health perceptions has not been systematically studied (Hwang, 2006).

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) has become one of the most widely used and well-researched therapies today. It’s especially common in the United States, where it’s used to treat a range of mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, PTSD, and OCD. CBT has also gained popularity in Europe, with many countries like the UK using it as a first-line treatment for mental health disorders (Hofmann et al., 2012; NICE, 2019). In recent years, it has started to catch on in parts of Asia, such as Japan, China, and India, where it’s showing promising results as more people seek treatment (Furukawa et al., 2019).

A big reason for CBT’s growing reach is the rise of online therapy. Platforms like BetterHelp, Talkspace, and apps such as Woebot have made it easier for people to access CBT from the comfort of their own homes, which became especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic. These online options have been a game-changer, particularly for individuals who live in rural areas or who may have trouble accessing traditional in-person therapy (Baumeister et al., 2021). In fact, studies show that over 30% of people in therapy receive CBT as their primary treatment (NIMH, 2021). Its clear structure, goal-setting approach, and cost-effectiveness are all reasons why CBT works so well for many different conditions (Cuijpers et al., 2016).

Another reason for CBT’s success is its flexibility. The therapy can be adapted to work with children, adults, and older adults, and it’s also effective in treating a variety of issues. Specialized versions, like CBT for insomnia or Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), have been developed to target specific problems (Morin et al., 2006). Moreover, CBT can be culturally tailored to meet the needs of people from different backgrounds, helping it reach even more people around the world (Griner & Smith, 2006). With all these factors combined, it’s no surprise that CBT remains one of the most widely practiced therapies across the globe.

This study aims to answer the following key research questions: How does CBT counselling impact the mental health of middle-aged women in Myanmar? How does CBT counselling contribute to the empowerment and emotional resilience of middle-aged women in Myanmar? What are the barriers and facilitators to implementing CBT in this population?

**1.1 Research Objectives**

To evaluate the effectiveness of CBT counselling in improving mental health outcomes.

To assess the impact of counseling on the mental health and empowerment of middle-aged women.

To identify barriers to accessing counseling services and suggest solutions to overcome them.

**1.2 Significance of the Study**

This study contributes to the fields of mental health counseling, women’s psychology, and culturally adapted therapy by examining the role of CBT in improving the mental well-being of middle-aged women in Myanmar (WHO, 2021). The findings will be valuable for mental health professionals, policymakers, and organizations seeking to develop culturally relevant counseling services in Southeast Asia. (World Health Organization [WHO], 2018).

**1.3 Scope and Limitations**

The study focuses on middle-aged women (ages 40–60) who have undergone CBT counseling in Myanmar. The research sample consists of 20 participants from urban areas, ensuring diverse perspectives but limiting the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study does not compare CBT with other therapeutic approaches but rather evaluates its impact within a specific cultural context.

**2. Literature Review**

This chapter reviews existing literature on CBT, mental health counseling for middle-aged women, and cultural influences on therapy in Myanmar. The review includes global studies on CBT effectiveness, research on gendered mental health experiences, and discussions on adapting, Western psychological frameworks to Asian cultural contexts (Corrigan et al., 2014). CBT is a structured, evidence-based psychotherapy that focuses on identifying and modifying negative thought patterns to improve emotional regulation and coping mechanisms (Beck, 2011). Studies have shown that CBT is highly effective in treating depression, anxiety, and stress-related disorders (Hofmann et al., 2012). Research indicates that CBT can be successfully adapted to different cultural settings, though modifications may be needed to align with local beliefs and values (Rahman et al., 2016). Hormonal changes and menopause-related mood fluctuations (Freeman, 2015). Family and caregiving responsibilities, leading to emotional exhaustion (Pinquart & Sörensen, 2011). Social expectations and self-identity shifts, especially in conservative societies (Kumar & Varghese, 2020). Research suggests that psychological counseling interventions improve mental well-being in middle-aged women, yet accessibility and cultural adaptation remain significant barriers (Goyal et al., 2014).

CBT has been successfully implemented in several Asian countries, demonstrating positive outcomes for stress and depression management (Chowdhary et al., 2014). However, researchers emphasize the need for culturally relevant modifications to enhance CBT’s effectiveness in non-Western societies. Key factors influencing CBT’s success in Asian cultural contexts include are Collectivist values, which prioritize family and community over individual well-being (Tanaka-Matsumi et al., 2005). Religious and spiritual beliefs, which shape coping mechanisms and perceptions of mental health (Fernando, 2010). Language and conceptual barriers, which may limit the effective translation of CBT techniques (Haque et al., 2018).

Mental health services in Myanmar remain underdeveloped, with limited trained professionals and inadequate counseling infrastructure (Than Tun et al., 2019). Women, in particular, face barriers to seeking psychological support, including are Social stigma surrounding mental health treatment (Aung et al., 2020). Reliance on traditional healing and religious practices as primary coping strategies (Tin Myo Han, 2018). Lack of trained female counselors, making it difficult for women to seek therapy in a culturally comfortable setting (Hlaing et al., 2021).

Existing studies on mental health in Myanmar focus largely on post-conflict trauma and general mental health awareness, with limited research on structured counseling interventions like CBT for women. This study seeks to bridge this research gap by providing empirical evidence on the effectiveness and cultural applicability of CBT for middle-aged women in Myanmar. This literature review highlights the global and regional relevance of CBT counseling for middle-aged women while addressing the cultural and systemic challenges in Myanmar’s mental health landscape. Findings from previous research support the need for culturally adapted CBT models that align with Myanmar’s social, religious, and traditional values.

**3. Methodology**

**3.1 Research Design**

This study employs qualitative approaches to assess the impact of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) on middle-aged women in Myanmar. While the qualitative phase aimed to explore participants’ lived experiences, challenges, and perceived benefits of CBT. The qualitative component was conducted through in-depth interviews and focus discussions to gain deeper insights into the counseling process.

A qualitative research approach was chosen due to its effectiveness in capturing subjective experiences, cultural influences, and emotional narratives, which cannot be fully understood through qualitative measure alone (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This method allows for rich, context-specific insights into how CBT counseling is perceived and experienced by middle-aged women in Myanmar.

**3.2 Participants and Sampling**

A subset of 20 participants from the qualitative phase was selected for in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. These participants were middle-aged women (ages 40–60) who had completed CBT-based counseling within the past two years. The selection followed purposive sampling, a method that ensures participants meet specific inclusion criteria relevant to the study objectives (Patton, 2015).

Inclusion Criteria are women aged 40–60 who received CBT counseling. Participants from urban regions to ensure diverse perspectives. Individuals willing to share their experiences were interviewed with focus groups discussion. Participants experiencing severe mental health crises requiring psychiatric intervention had to complete at least eight CBT sessions.

**3.3 In-depth Interviews**

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 participants to explore their personal experiences with CBT, perceived benefits, and challenges. Each interview lasted 40–60 minutes and was conducted in a private setting to encourage open and honest sharing. The interview guide included questions about their expectations before starting CBT and how they perceived the effectiveness of CBT techniques. The challenges they encountered during therapy how cultural and social factors influenced their counseling experience.

**3.4 Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis**

A thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring themes and patterns in the qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is a widely used method in qualitative research that involves coding data and organizing it into meaningful themes. Transcripts from interviews were systematically reviewed to extract key themes related to CBT effectiveness, cultural perceptions, and barriers to counseling.

**4. Results and discussion**

4.1 Participants’ Responses of emotional well-being, and challenges

Research questions are “What was the most helpful aspect of CBT counseling in improving your emotional well-being, and what challenges did you face in the process?” The responses of 20 participants were shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Participants’ Responses of emotional well-being, and challenges (n=20)**

| **Participants** | **Responses** | **Starting code** | **Sub-Themes** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| P1 | CBT helped me manage my anxiety, but I struggled with expressing emotions. | Anxiety managementbut difficulty expressing emotions | Helped manage anxiety and stress |
| P2 | Learning relaxation techniques reduced my stress significantly. | Relaxation techniques and stress reduction |
| P3 | The sessions helped, but I felt nervous at first because counseling is uncommon in my village. | Initial nervousness but village counseling rarity |
| P4 | I became more confident, but my family didn’t understand my need for therapy. | Increased confidence but family misunderstanding | Lack of family/societal support |
| P5 | CBT helped me understand my emotions, but my family saw it as unnecessary. | Emotional understanding but family perception |
| P6 | I was able to sleep better, but I needed more long-term follow-up. | Improved sleep but need for long-term follow-up | Appreciation of counselor’s support |
| P7 | The Step-by-step approach made it easier to handle my trauma. | Step-by-step approach for trauma handling |
| P8 | The structured sessions helped me stay focused, but I found it expensive. | Structured sessions but expense concerns | Structured sessions helped focus |
| P9 | My depression improved through CBT, but social stigma made it hard to continue. | Improvement in depression but social stigma | Stigma related to seeking counseling |
| P10 | Cognitive restructuring helped me deal with negative thoughts. | Cognitive restructuring and negative thought management | Cognitive restructuring was useful |
| P11 | The counselor’s support gave me emotional relief, but sessions were too short. | Emotional relief but short session duration | Sessions were too short |
| P12 | Learning problem-solving skills helped my daily stress. | Problem-solving skills and daily stress management | Problem-solving and coping strategies helped daily stress |
| P13 | Talking openly without judgment was the best part. | Open talking and non-judgmental space | Stigma related to seeking counseling |
| P14 | It reduced my panic attacks, but finding a female counselor was difficult. | Reduced panic attacks but difficulty finding a female counselor | Relaxation techniques were effective |
| P15 | Breathing exercises were the most helpful tool for stress control. | Breathing exercises for stress control | Breathing exercises helped stress management |
| P16 | I struggled with self-esteem, but CBT helped me reframe my thoughts. | Self-esteem strugglesbut thought reframing | Cognitive restructuring was useful |
| P17 | My mood improved, but I wish sessions were available in my local dialect. | Mood improvement but language barriers | Structured sessions helped focus |
| P18 | I overcame my fear of social interactions with CBT. | Fear of social interaction reduction | Relaxation techniques were effective |
| P19 | CBT changed my negative mindset, but I wanted more group sessions. | Negative mindset change but group sessions desire | Structured sessions helped focus |
| P20 | Learning coping strategies helped me regain control of my emotions. | Coping strategies for emotional control | Problem-solving and coping strategies helped daily stress |

**4.2 Identified Themes and Frequency Analysis**

**Table. 2 The Frequency of themes and sub-themes based on participants' responses (n=20)**

| **Themes** | **Sub-Themes** | **Frequency** | **Percentage (%)** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Effectiveness of CBT | Helped manage anxiety and stress | 3 | (15%) |
|  | Cognitive restructuring was useful | 2 | (10%) |
|  | Problem-solving and coping strategies helped daily stress | 2 | (10%) |
| Family and Social Perceptions | Lack of family/societal support | 2 | (10%) |
|  | Stigma related to seeking counseling | 2 | (10%) |
| Counseling Process & Experience | Structured sessions helped focus | 3 | (15%) |
|  | Sessions were too short | 3 | (15%) |
|  | Appreciation of counselor’s support | 2 | (10%) |
| Practical Techniques & Tools | Relaxation techniques were effective | 1 | (5%) |
|  | Breathing exercises helped stress management | 1 | (5%) |
| Barriers & Challenges | Financial cost of therapy was a burden | 1 | (5%) |
|  | Difficulty accessing female counselors/language barriers | 2 | (10%) |
| Personal Growth | CBT helped with social skills and fear of interaction | 1 | (5%) |
|  | Increased self-esteem | 1 | (5%) |

This table summarizes the frequency of themes and sub-themes based on the provided responses. The thematic analysis of participant Effectiveness of CBT are three participants (15%) reported that CBT helped them manage anxiety and stress. Two participants (10%) found cognitive restructuring useful for reframing negative thoughts. Two participants (10%) stated that problem-solving and coping strategies helped them handle daily stress. Family and Social Perceptions are two participants (10%) expressed that their families and society did not fully understand or support their therapy.

Two participants (10%) faced stigma related to seeking counseling. Counseling process and experience are Three participants (15%) highlighted those structured sessions kept them focused, but some found them too short or expensive. Two participants (10%) appreciated the counselor’s support and empathy. Practical Techniques and Tools: One participant (5%) found relaxation techniques particularly effective in reducing stress. One participant (5%) mentioned that breathing exercises were the most helpful tool for stress management. Barriers and Challenges are one participant (5%) struggled with the financial cost of counseling. Two participants (10%) encountered challenges in accessing therapists, such as finding a female counselor or overcoming language barriers. Personal Growth are One participant (5%) noted that CBT helped them grow socially and overcome fears of interaction. One participant (5%) reported that therapy helped improve their self-esteem.

**4.3 Interpretation of Findings**

The analysis revealed several key insights are CBT was generally effective in reducing anxiety, stress, and negative thinking patterns. Social stigma and lack of family support were major barriers to counseling. Structured sessions were beneficial, but some participants found them too short or costly. Practical CBT techniques, such as breathing exercises and relaxation strategies, were particularly useful for stress management. Challenges in accessing counseling, including language barriers and the lack of female therapists, hindered some participants’ engagement.

The study used semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to explore middle-aged women’s experiences with CBT in Myanmar. Thematic analysis identified recurring themes, highlighting CBT’s effectiveness, barriers to counseling, and the role of cultural and social influences. These insights provide valuable guidance for improving culturally relevant mental health interventions in Myanmar.

**5. Conclusion**

This study explored the impact of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) on middle-aged women in Myanmar using a qualitative approach. The findings revealed that CBT was effective in reducing anxiety, stress, and negative thinking patterns. Participants reported improvements in emotional regulation, stress management, cognitive restructuring, and problem-solving skills. Additionally, self-management techniques such as breathing exercises and relaxation methods were beneficial in enhancing overall well-being.

However, several challenges influenced the counseling experience, including social stigma, lack of family support, financial constraints, and accessibility issues. Many participants faced difficulties in finding female counselors, and language barriers further restricted access to therapy. While structured CBT sessions were helpful, concerns regarding cost and duration were noted. These findings suggest that while CBT is a valuable therapeutic approach, its success depends on culturally sensitive adaptations, accessibility, and affordability within the Myanmar context.

The study highlights several key implications for counseling and mental health services. Expanding community-based mental health programs can help reach rural and underserved populations. Increasing the number of trained female counselors can better accommodate cultural preferences, while mental health awareness campaigns can play a crucial role in reducing stigma and promoting psychological well-being. Encouraging family involvement in therapy may strengthen support systems for women seeking counseling, and implementing subsidized or low-cost counseling services can enhance affordability.

Furthermore, introducing teletherapy and mobile counseling services can improve access to mental health professionals, particularly for those facing geographical and financial barriers. Integrating traditional beliefs and culturally relevant practices into CBT techniques may increase acceptance and effectiveness. Finally, providing specialized training for counselors on Myanmar’s cultural and gender-specific mental health challenges is essential for enhancing the impact of counseling interventions. By addressing these factors, counseling services can become more inclusive, sustainable, and impactful in improving the mental health and well-being of middle-aged women in Myanmar.

The impact of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) on middle-aged women in Myanmar, using qualitative method. The findings revealed that CBT was effective in reducing anxiety, stress, and negative thinking patterns, with participants reporting improved emotional regulation and coping skills. However, social stigma, lack of family support, financial barriers, and accessibility issues influenced the counseling experience. Participants reported improvements in stress management, cognitive restructuring, and problem-solving.

Stigma surrounding mental health counseling and family disapproval were significant challenges. While structured sessions were beneficial, cost and duration were concerns for some participants. Breathing exercises and relaxation methods were effective self-management tools. Difficulty in finding female counselors and overcoming language barriers restricted some participants from seeking therapy .These findings indicate that while CBT is a valuable therapeutic approach, its success depends on culturally sensitive adaptations, accessibility, and affordability in the Myanmar context.

The study provides several key implications for counseling and mental health services. Expanding community-based mental health services to reach rural and underserved areas. Increasing the number of trained female counselors to accommodate cultural preferences. Mental health awareness campaigns should focus on reducing stigma and promoting psychological well-being. Encouraging family involvement in therapy can improve support systems for women seeking counseling. Implementing subsidized or low-cost counseling programs can enhance affordability. Introducing teletherapy and mobile counseling services can bridge the gap in access to mental health professionals (Andersson et al., 2019). Integrating traditional beliefs and culturally relevant practices into CBT techniques may increase acceptance. Counselors should receive specialized training on Myanmar’s cultural and gender-specific mental health challenges.

The small qualitative sample limits the generalizability of findings to all middle-aged women in Myanmar. Participants were limited to those who completed therapy, excluding perspectives from individuals who never sought counseling. The study focused on short-term effects, with follow-up data collected only eight months post-counseling. Future research should explore long-term outcomes and effectiveness.

This research contributes to the growing body of research on mental health interventions in Myanmar by highlighting the benefits and challenges of CBT for middle-aged women. Findings reinforce that CBT is effective for stress reduction and emotional regulation, but cultural, financial, and structural barriers must be addressed to improve accessibility. Moving forward, policymakers, mental health professionals, and community leaders should collaborate to expand culturally informed counseling services in Myanmar. Reduce stigma through education and advocacy. Increase financial and logistical accessibility of therapy. By implementing these changes, Myanmar can improve mental health outcomes for women and enhance the overall well-being of its communities.

**Consent and Ethical Considerations**

Participants provided informed consent before participating in interviews. Confidentiality was maintained by using pseudonyms in transcripts and reports. The study was conducted following ethical guidelines for psychological research (APA, 2017).

Disclaimer (Artificial Intelligence)

Author (s) hereby declare that no generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc) and text-to-image generators have been used during writing or editing of manuscripts.

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