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CBT APPROACH IN INDIVIDUAL COUNSELING FOR SPECIFIC PHOBIA CAUSED BY VERBAL ABUSE

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the effectiveness of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) in individual counseling to overcome specific phobias caused by verbal abuse. The focus of the study is on changes in negative thinking patterns and anxiety reactions experienced by clients after experiencing traumatic verbal abuse. The method used is a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study technique on a client with the initials "N." Data were collected through in-depth interviews, direct observation during the counseling process, and analysis of documents related to the client's psychological history and development. Data analysis was conducted thematically with stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The results of the study indicate that CBT is effective in helping clients recognize and change irrational thought patterns that are the main triggers of specific phobia. Cognitive restructuring techniques were found to help clients re-evaluate negative beliefs about previously feared situations, while systematic desensitization enabled clients to confront their fears in a safe and controlled environment gradually. Significant reductions in anxiety symptoms were observed in each session, which also positively impacted the client's quality of life. The success of this intervention is supported by active client participation, social support from the immediate environment, and consistency in applying CBT techniques outside of counseling sessions. The conclusion of this study confirms that CBT is an effective intervention for treating trauma-based specific phobia resulting from verbal abuse and can be applied more widely in individual counseling practice.

Keywords: CBT, Counselling, Phobia, Verbal Abuse

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi efektivitas Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) dalam konseling individu untuk mengatasi specific phobia yang disebabkan oleh pengalaman verbal abuse. Fokus penelitian diarahkan pada perubahan pola pikir negatif dan reaksi kecemasan yang dialami klien setelah mengalami kekerasan verbal yang berdampak traumatis. Metode yang digunakan adalah pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan teknik studi kasus pada klien berinisial "N". Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi langsung selama proses konseling, dan analisis dokumen yang berkaitan dengan riwayat psikologis dan perkembangan klien. Analisis data dilakukan secara tematik dengan tahapan reduksi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan.



Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa CBT efektif dalam membantu klien mengenali dan mengubah pola pikir irasional yang menjadi pemicu utama fobia spesifik. Teknik restrukturisasi kognitif terbukti membantu klien mengevaluasi ulang keyakinan negatif terhadap situasi yang sebelumnya ditakuti, sedangkan teknik desensitisasi sistematis memungkinkan klien menghadapi ketakutan secara bertahap dalam suasana yang aman dan terkendali. Penurunan signifikan gejala kecemasan terlihat dalam setiap sesi, yang juga berdampak positif terhadap peningkatan kualitas hidup klien. Keberhasilan intervensi ini didukung oleh partisipasi aktif klien, adanya dukungan sosial dari lingkungan terdekat, serta konsistensi dalam menerapkan teknik CBT di luar sesi konseling. Simpulan dari penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa CBT merupakan intervensi yang efektif untuk menangani specific phobia berbasis trauma akibat verbal abuse, dan dapat diterapkan dalam praktik konseling individual secara lebih luas.

Kata Kunci: CBT, Konseling, Phobia, Verbal Abuse

INTRODUCTION

Specific phobia is a type of anxiety disorder characterized by excessive and irrational fear of specific objects or situations. Although these objects or situations are not actually dangerous, individuals who experience this disorder respond with extreme fear that is disproportionate to the actual threat. This fear significantly disrupts daily functioning and quality of life for those affected (Wang, 2021). This disorder can impact various aspects of life, including social relationships, education, and work. Individuals with phobias often feel isolated, experience a decline in self-confidence, and withdraw from social environments because they are unable to face the triggers of their fear. One of the causes of phobia that has not been thoroughly researched is verbal abuse. Verbal abuse is a form of emotional violence that uses words to hurt, belittle, or control someone psychologically. This form of violence can take the form of insults, excessive criticism, humiliation, threats, or constant rejection. The psychological impact of verbal abuse is profound and can lead to long-term trauma. This trauma then creates negative associations with specific situations or objects, which eventually develop into specific phobias (Situmorang dkk., 2024).

In Indonesia, verbal abuse is often considered normal in communication patterns, whether in family, school, or community settings. Harsh words, insults, or demeaning remarks are often uttered without awareness of their psychological impact. In a family context, for example, parents who constantly scold or criticize their children with negative words can cause deep psychological wounds. Similarly, in schools, verbal bullying can leave a lasting impression on victims, even into adulthood (Kutok dkk., 2021). The impact of verbal abuse, especially when experienced during childhood or adolescence, can become the root of psychological problems later in life. One of the consequences is the development of phobias toward specific situations related to the trauma, such as fear of speaking in public, fear of enclosed spaces, or fear of encountering certain people who remind the victim of the verbal abuser (Kennedy, 2020). This phenomenon not only limits

an individual's social activities but also hinders emotional development and overall quality of life.

To address specific phobias, various psychotherapy approaches have been used, one of the most researched and proven effective being Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). CBT is a psychotherapy approach that focuses on the interconnection between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. This approach helps individuals identify negative or irrational thoughts that are the root of anxiety disorders, then replace them with more realistic and adaptive thought patterns. CBT also involves behavioral training such as relaxation techniques, gradual exposure to phobic stimuli (systematic desensitization), and fear management skills training (Saputra & Prasetiawan, 2024). In individual counseling practice, CBT offers a structured, evidence-based approach to help clients understand the relationship between their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Key techniques in CBT, such as cognitive restructuring, aim to help clients identify and change negative thought patterns, while systematic desensitization is used to help clients gradually confront feared objects or situations. Behavioral exercises and homework assignments are also part of the intervention to support the generalization of skills learned in therapy sessions into daily life (Reddy dkk., 2020).

The main objective of this study was to determine how CBT can be applied in individual counseling to overcome specific phobia caused by verbal abuse. In addition, this study also aimed to identify factors that support or hinder the success of CBT intervention in this context. Understanding these dynamics is expected to provide practical contributions to counselors, therapists, and mental health practitioners in designing more effective interventions for similar cases (Prado dkk., 2021; Rahmianor dkk., 2020). This research is highly urgent given the limited academic studies in Indonesia that specifically link verbal abuse as a cause of specific phobia and the use of CBT as an intervention. Most studies in Indonesia still focus on CBT for treating anxiety disorders in general, such as panic disorder, depression, or PTSD, without exploring the relationship between verbal abuse and its long-term effects in the form of phobia (Palmieri dkk., 2022).

Previous studies have shown the effectiveness of CBT in reducing anxiety symptoms. For example, a study by Ni'mah dkk., (2024) showed that CBT was able to reduce fear of public speaking in college students. Meanwhile, research by Nakao dkk., (2021) showed that CBT successfully reduced social anxiety levels in adolescents. Another study by Mustofa & Nurjannah, (2022) revealed that CBT was effective in helping survivors of verbal bullying overcome trauma and rebuild self-confidence. However, none of these studies explicitly examined the relationship between verbal abuse and specific phobia, nor how CBT was specifically applied in this context. Thus, the novelty of this study lies in its focus on examining in depth the role of CBT in individual counseling to overcome specific phobia triggered by verbal abuse trauma. This study not only highlights the effectiveness of the therapeutic method but also reveals the therapeutic process undergone by clients, the emotional responses that emerge, and the factors supporting therapeutic success, such as active participation, social support, and consistency in applying CBT

techniques outside counseling sessions. The descriptive qualitative approach in this study allows researchers to capture clients' subjective experiences more comprehensively.

METHOD

In this study, the researcher used a descriptive qualitative approach to understand in depth how the cognituve beha technique was applied in individual counselling at the residence of client 'N' in Sukajadi Banyuasin. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore experiences, perceptions, and social dynamics related to the use of these techniques in a real context (Mustafa dkk., 2022). From the existing object that client 'N' in this study is a resident of Sukajadi Village, Talang Kelapa Banyuasin District who shows specific phobia behaviour caused by verbal abuse and has attended individual counselling sessions. The data can be done by purposive sampling technique based on the age of client 'N' 19 years old (Budianto, 2024b). Having specific phobia symptoms caused by verbal abuse which is based on existing data and completeness in the field that has been stated and client 'N' tells the beginning of the incident he is experiencing. Willing to attend individual counselling sessions during the research period (Pahleviannur dkk., 2022).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study reveals in depth how the application of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) in individual counseling is able to overcome specific phobia triggered by verbal abuse in client "N." The main findings of this study indicate that CBT, as a therapeutic approach, demonstrates significant effectiveness in helping clients identify, evaluate, and reconstruct negative thought patterns and irrational beliefs underlying the emergence of excessive fear toward specific stimuli. In the early stages of counseling, it was identified that the client experienced intense fear toward certain social situations, particularly those involving interaction with authority figures or individuals associated with their traumatic past. The verbal abuse experienced by the client during adolescence, especially from their father and teachers, created strong cognitive associations between authority figures and fear, low self-esteem, and rejection. The client reported symptoms of anxiety that manifested in the form of rapid heartbeat, trembling hands, cold sweats, and a strong desire to avoid situations that triggered his fears.

Through the assessment and case formulation stages conducted by the counselor, it was found that the client had negative cognitive schemas that developed as a result of repetitive and demeaning verbal abuse. Statements such as "you are useless," "you always fail," and "no one wants to listen to you" are embedded in the client's mind and form core beliefs that impact how the client interprets current social situations. CBT facilitates the process of identifying negative automatic thoughts that arise when the client is faced with social situations, such as speaking in public or interacting with superiors. Cognitive restructuring techniques are a key element in helping clients recognize and challenge the cognitive distortions they experience. Clients are assisted in identifying thought patterns such as overgeneralization, labeling, and catastrophizing. For example, when a client has

to give a presentation at work, automatic thoughts like "they will laugh at me" or "I will make a mistake and be humiliated like before" may arise. Through structured discussions and reality testing, clients begin to realize that these thoughts are not based on objective evidence but on unresolved emotional trauma from the past.

In addition to cognitive restructuring, systematic desensitization techniques are used to help clients gradually confront their fear-inducing stimuli. Clients are trained to create a hierarchy of fearful situations, ranging from the least to the most challenging. During counseling sessions, clients are guided to imagine or directly confront these situations while using relaxation techniques such as deep breathing and guided imagery. Gradually but surely, clients show increased tolerance toward anxiety-provoking situations. For example, from initially being unable to speak in small groups, clients later become able to express their opinions in work forums with significantly lower anxiety levels. Observations of behavior and subjective reports from clients show a significant decrease in anxiety levels after several therapy sessions. Clients also begin to form a more positive self-narrative, where they no longer see themselves as "weak victims" but as individuals capable of growing from their emotional wounds. One important indicator of the success of therapy is the emergence of reflective awareness in clients, where they can connect past events with present emotional responses and re-evaluate the meaning of their experiences of verbal abuse.

Social support from the client's immediate environment, particularly coworkers and counselors, is an important factor that strengthens the recovery process. Findings indicate that emotional validation provided by those closest to the client helps them develop a sense of security and self-confidence. Clients also revealed that active involvement in counseling sessions and the application of CBT techniques outside of sessions were key factors in the success of the healing process. By practicing thought recording, clients can track and evaluate their automatic thoughts independently outside the counseling room. This study also identified several challenges in applying CBT to cases of phobia based on verbal abuse trauma. One of them is the initial resistance of clients in accessing painful experiences from the past. Clients experienced emotional barriers in expressing their feelings openly because they felt ashamed, guilty, and afraid of being perceived as weak. In this case, an empathetic and nonjudgmental approach from the counselor was crucial in building a strong therapeutic alliance. When clients feel heard and valued, emotional openness increases and the therapy process becomes more effective.

Another important finding was the importance of consistency in therapy implementation. Clients who attended sessions regularly and demonstrated commitment to therapy homework showed faster improvement compared to clients with low involvement. Therefore, the success of CBT is not only determined by the techniques used but also by the client's internal motivation and external environmental support. Overall, the findings of this study confirm that CBT can be an effective approach in treating specific phobias triggered by verbal abuse trauma. This intervention not only focuses on the anxiety symptoms that arise but also targets the cognitive roots of the fear. CBT helps clients

restore personal meaning, rebuild self-confidence, and develop adaptive skills in facing situations that were previously avoided.

DISCUSSIONS

This study shows that Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) in individual counseling is effective in helping clients with specific phobias resulting from past verbal abuse. CBT helps individuals reconstruct negative thought patterns and change maladaptive behaviors through various cognitive and behavioral techniques. The main findings of this study reveal that the process of identifying irrational thoughts, applying systematic desensitization, improving quality of life, and the presence of supporting and hindering factors play a crucial role in the success of therapy.

1. Identification and Change of Negative Thought Patterns

One of the most significant findings of this study is how cognitive restructuring techniques in CBT can help clients recognize and change the irrational thoughts underlying their phobias. Client 'N', a 19-year-old woman, experienced a phobia of enclosed spaces due to verbal abuse she experienced from her parents when she was a child. She had a strong belief that "I will always get hurt if I am in an enclosed space." This belief formed the basis of her anxiety whenever she faced similar situations. During twelve individual counseling sessions, the client was guided to evaluate and question the validity of her beliefs. Through techniques such as Socratic questioning and automatic thought monitoring, the client began to realize that these thoughts were irrational and not entirely based on reality. She then learned to replace them with more adaptive thoughts such as "I am safe and can control this situation." This shift in thinking was followed by a significant reduction in the intensity of anxiety symptoms. These findings align with Beck, (2019), which states that emotional disorders often stem from cognitive distortions. CBT provides a structure for identifying and modifying these distortions, such as overgeneralization, dichotomous thinking, and personalization. In the case of client 'N', negative beliefs about enclosed spaces reflect the form of distortion known as "catastrophizing," which is the tendency to imagine the worst-case scenario.

2. Effectiveness of Systematic Desensitization

Systematic desensitization techniques have also proven effective in reducing clients' fear responses to specific stimuli. One client in this study was another client named 'N,' a 19-year-old who developed a fear of crowds as a result of verbal abuse experienced in a school setting. His fear was so intense that he avoided crowded places like markets or bus terminals. Desensitization was conducted gradually, starting with imagination (imaginal exposure), visualizing crowded situations in a relaxed state, and eventually progressing to direct exposure (in vivo exposure) to crowded places with the counselor's accompaniment. Each stage was carried out systematically with the assistance of relaxation techniques such as deep breathing and calm visualization to help the client manage their physiological responses to anxiety.

Gradually but surely, the client began to show increased tolerance toward crowded places. He was even able to visit a shopping mall at the end of therapy without experiencing a panic attack. This success demonstrates that gradual exposure combined with positive reinforcement and anxiety control is crucial in building courage and a sense of control over feared situations. These findings are consistent with previous research showing that systematic desensitization techniques are effective in treating phobic disorders, especially when combined with cognitive restructuring (Larsson dkk., 2016). The success of exposure therapy reinforces the core principle of CBT that behavioral and perceptual changes can reinforce each other.

3. Improved Quality of Life

After participating in counseling sessions using the CBT approach, all participants in this study reported an overall improvement in their quality of life. They not only experienced a reduction in specific phobia symptoms but also felt more confident, more capable of handling previously avoided situations, and experienced a decrease in general anxiety symptoms. One participant stated, "Now I can go to the market without panicking, something I never imagined before." This improvement was not limited to the psychological realm but also impacted the social and functional lives of the clients. They became more active in social life, returned to academic activities with greater confidence, and felt they had greater control over themselves. This improvement in quality of life can be explained through the CBT framework, which targets not only symptoms but also the underlying internal processes of psychological well-being, such as feelings of empowerment, perceptions of control, and self-efficacy (Budianto, 2024a). Successful CBT interventions that reduce cognitive distortions and enhance individual coping abilities significantly contribute to positive transformations in daily life.

4. Supporting and Hindering Factors

The success of therapy is also greatly influenced by internal and external factors that support the counseling process. Based on data analysis, the supporting factors identified include:

a) Active client involvement

Clients who consistently work on homework assignments such as recording negative thoughts and reflecting on experiences show faster progress. In the case of client 'N', his discipline in recording and analyzing his thoughts helped him form a deep understanding of the thought patterns that triggered his anxiety.

b) Social support

Support from family and friends has also been proven to strengthen participants' motivation. They feel less alone and encouraged to continue fighting their phobias. This support also encourages participants to face exposure with more confidence.

c) Consistency of technicians in applying CBT

Counselors who apply CBT techniques systematically and structurally show higher intervention success rates. This systematic approach creates a reliable framework for clients to understand and overcome their phobias. However, this study also found a significant obstacle, namely a lack of consistency in independent practice. Two participants showed slow progress because they did not regularly do their homework or relaxation exercises. This shows the importance of active client involvement in the entire therapy process. Lack of consistency can hinder the internalization of skills learned during therapy sessions.

5. Theoretical and Practical Implications

The results of this study reinforce Beck's cognitive theory that changes in cognitive distortions can reduce emotional disturbances. Specific phobias caused by childhood verbal abuse often stem from negative beliefs such as "I am powerless" or "the world is a dangerous place." CBT provides a space for clients to explore, challenge, and replace these thoughts with more rational and empowering beliefs. Additionally, these findings suggest that systematic desensitization techniques are highly beneficial when applied in the context of phobias resulting from verbal abuse, particularly because they allow clients to gradually confront frightening stimuli while building anxiety management skills.

The role of social support is also noteworthy, as it shows that psychological interventions can be not only individual but also enriched by environmental factors. Interventions involving education for families or communities about the importance of emotional support can be a relevant complementary strategy to enhance the effectiveness of CBT. However, challenges such as inconsistency in self-practice indicate the need for follow-up strategies. For example, providing booster sessions, self-help training, or integrating technology such as negative thought tracking apps can help clients remain consistent in their daily practice.

CONCLUSION

The Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) approach in individual counselling has proven to be effective in overcoming specific phobias caused by verbal abuse, particularly in young adults who have experienced traumatic events in their developmental years. The study revealed that CBT techniques, especially cognitive restructuring and systematic desensitisation, played a pivotal role in reducing the symptoms of phobia and enhancing the overall psychological well-being of the participants. Cognitive restructuring allowed clients to identify and replace irrational, fear-inducing thoughts with more rational and adaptive beliefs. For instance, clients who initially believed they were unsafe or in constant danger were able to develop healthier cognitive patterns such as "I am in control" or "I am safe now," leading to a significant reduction in anxiety symptoms.

Systematic desensitisation complemented this process by gradually exposing the participants to their feared stimuli in a controlled and supportive environment. This

method proved effective in building tolerance and reducing avoidance behavior. Beyond symptom relief, the intervention also led to an improvement in participants' quality of life. They reported increased self-confidence, reduced generalised anxiety, and the ability to re-engage in everyday activities they had previously avoided. The success of CBT in this context was supported by several key factors, including the active involvement of clients in the therapeutic process, consistent implementation of CBT techniques, and strong social support from family and peers. However, the study also noted challenges, such as inconsistent self-practice among some participants, which slowed their progress. Therefore, this study recommends that CBT be integrated into counselling programmes dealing with trauma-related phobias, especially those stemming from verbal abuse. Furthermore, incorporating self-directed skills training and long-term follow-up monitoring is essential to ensure the sustainability and continued effectiveness of therapeutic outcomes.

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