

Integrating Islamic Principles into Cognitive Behaviour Therapy: A Holistic Approach to Mental Health

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Abstract

This paper explores the integration of Islamic principles into Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) to enhance its cultural and spiritual relevance for Muslim clients. While CBT is evidence-based, its Western secular origins may limit its effectiveness in Islamic contexts. The proposed framework, grounded in Islamic psychology and concepts such as *tawakkul* (trust in God), *sabr* (patience), and *muraqabah* (self-awareness), aligns therapeutic techniques with Qur'anic teachings and prophetic traditions. The paper highlights the benefits of Islamically Integrated CBT (IICBT), including improved client engagement, holistic healing, and culturally sensitive care. Ethical considerations and implications for practice are also discussed.

Keywords: integration, cognitive, therapy, mental Health

Introduction

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) is a widely recognized psychotherapeutic approach focused on modifying dysfunctional thoughts, emotions, and behaviours. The CBT, though empirically validated, often lacks alignment with the religious and philosophical worldviews of Muslim populations. For Muslim clients, the standard CBT framework may benefit from cultural and spiritual adaptation to align with Islamic worldviews. The integration of Islamic principles in Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) has emerged as a promising approach to address the mental health needs of Muslim individuals.

Mental health care is most effective when it respects and integrates the values, beliefs, and cultural practices of clients. More so, contemporary mental health discourse increasingly recognizes the necessity of culturally sensitive therapeutic approaches. Literature abounds with lots of interventions by professional counselling psychologists meant to treat or correct mental ill health. Among such interventions is Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT). Aaron T. Beck is widely recognized as the father of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). He developed CBT in the 1960s and 1970s, revolutionizing the treatment of mental health disorders. Beck, a psychiatrist and

researcher, introduced a groundbreaking approach that focused on identifying and changing negative thought patterns, known as cognitive distortions, which contribute to emotional and behavioral issues. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) according to Field et al. (2015) is a form of psychotherapy that aims to reduce symptoms of various mental health conditions, primarily depression, PTSD and anxiety disorders. Dauda et al (2023) observed that the CBT is one of the most successful techniques appropriate for dealing with aggressive behaviour, stress, anxiety, depression, social phobia, school phobia, irrational thinking, eating disorder and anger management.

Recent research into Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) has explored various cultural adaptations (Eskici et al., 2023), yet studies integrating Islamic principles with CBT remain underexplored despite the potential for these principles to enhance therapeutic outcomes for Muslim populations. While previous works have laid a foundational understanding (Khan et al., 2022), they often overlook the nuanced ways in which Islamic beliefs can influence psychological interventions and outcomes. This approach therefore raises concerns about the efficacy and relevance of CBT when applied to cultures where Islam is deeply embedded in daily life. For Muslims, Islam is not merely a religion but a comprehensive way of life that shapes cognition, behaviour and emotional regulation. Conventional CBT, though evidence-based and widely used, was developed within a Western, secular framework that may not fully resonate with Muslim clients' lifestyle. In other words, dominant paradigms in psychotherapy, particularly Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT), were developed within a secular, individualistic Western framework that may inadequately address the spiritual and communal values central to Muslim patients. Historically, CBT has shown little or no attention to religion (Imawasa and Hays, 2018) though according to Sheik (2018) some clinicians have argued that the model is nevertheless more compatible with Islamic values than other approaches. Given the centrality of Islam in shaping worldview, identity and behaviour for many Muslims, integrating Islamic principles into CBT represents both a clinical necessity and a moral imperative. This has led to a growing interest in culturally and spiritually adapted therapies which is called Religiously Modified Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (RCBT) or Islamically Modified Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (iCBT). Religiously modified cognitive restructuring technique adhere to the same principles and styles of conventional CBT only that in Religiously Modified Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (RCBT) the explicit use of client's religious tradition is a major foundation in identifying and replacing unhelpful thoughts and behaviours to reduce aggression symptoms (Pearce, et al, 2015). Ahmed (2016) noted that Religiously Modified Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (RCBT) is a counselling technique that is widely used and acceptable by guidance counsellors, social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists and other professional helpers.

Evidence abounds in literature on the efficacy of religiously modified cognitive restructuring technique on various behavioural problems. Findings of one of the studies are reported here:

The study of Dauda et al (2023) investigated the efficacy of religiously modified cognitive restructuring counselling technique on aggressive behaviour among the pupils of Almajiri integrated schools in Gombe Metropolis. The study was guided by two null hypotheses and it employed a quasi experimental design. The sample of the study comprised 111 pupils randomly drawn from the 5,961 pupils of five *Almajiri* integrated schools in Gombe Metropolis. The Buss-Perry Aggressive Questionnaire (Hausa version) translated by Dauda and Adepoju (2022) was

used to collect data. The data collected were analyzed using a paired t-test statistics to test the hypotheses. The result indicated that religiously modified cognitive restructuring counselling technique had significant effect in reducing aggressive behaviour among the *Almajiri* pupils. It further showed that *almajiris* exposed to the religiously modified cognitive restructuring counselling technique had significantly lowered level of aggressive behaviour in comparison to those not exposed to the intervention. Against this background, this article proposes a theoretically grounded and clinically viable model for incorporating Islamic principles into CBT. It draws on the epistemological underpinnings of Islamic psychology, classical Islamic texts, and contemporary psychotherapeutic methodologies to offer a framework for a holistic, spiritually attuned approach to mental health care.

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy: Strengths and Limits

CBT is a structured, short-term, and goal-directed therapy that posits a bidirectional relationship between thoughts, emotions, and behaviours. It has demonstrated efficacy in treating a wide range of psychological disorders. CBT is grounded in the idea that maladaptive thoughts lead to emotional distress and behavioural issues. It involves identifying negative thought patterns and replacing them with more realistic and constructive ones. CBT is structured, goal-oriented, and typically short-term, focusing on the “here and now.” However, CBT often adopts a value-neutral stance, emphasizing individual autonomy and rationality, which can conflict with the theological determinism and communal ethos prevalent in Islamic societies.

Islamic Psychology: A Holistic Paradigm

According to NeuroLaunch editorial team (2024) at the heart of Islamic psychology lies the *Quran*, which contains divine guidance for all aspects of life including mental and emotional wellbeing. The Qur’anic approach to psychological health is holistic emphasizing the interconnectedness of the mind, body and soul. The prophetic traditions further enrich the foundation. The prophet’s teachings on mental health were remarkably advanced for his time. He spoke about positive thinking, the healing power of prayers etc.

Islamic psychology, derived from classical sources such as Al-Ghazali, Ibn Sina, and contemporary scholars like Malik Badri, conceptualizes the human psyche through a model. Ghazali (1986), an eleventh-century Islamic scholar as quoted by Cucchi (2022) suggested that human nature comprises of four interconnected elements: the “*aql*” (intellect), the “*qalb*”, (heart), the “*nafs*” (self) and the “*ruh*” (spirit).

- The “*aql*” is believed to be the logical part of human beings, that part that is mostly concerned with rationality and logical thinking (comparable to CBT’s cognitions)
- *Nafs* (the self or ego): often associated with desires and impulses. It has gradations from the base (*ammarah*) to the purified (*mutma'innah*).
- *Qalb* (the heart): the seat of emotion and moral discernment. The spiritual heart, the locus of divine intuition and ethical perception.

- **Ruh** (the spirit): the divine essence or soul, connected to God. A divine trust that connects the human to the Creator.

Whilst the role of the “*aql*” was believed to be that of filtering out maladaptive thoughts and unhelpful behavioural inclinations, the “*qalb*” was believed to perform and oversee regulatory functions for all the elements of the psyche (Kemahli, 2017). Therapists are reminded that unless the “*qalb*” (the emotions), is addressed in therapy, real change won’t happen as the “*aql*” alone is believed not to be sufficient to initiate long-lasting healing (Rothman, 2018). This multidimensional view of the psyche calls for an integrative approach that addresses cognitive distortions, emotional deregulation, and spiritual dissonance. The balance among these elements is central to mental and spiritual well-being. Unlike Western models, which often separate spirituality from psychology, Islam views mental health as inseparable from spiritual health.

Bridging CBT and Islamic Principles

Integrating Islamic principles into CBT can be done through the following:

i. **Cognitive Restructuring through Islamic Beliefs:** CBT teaches that thoughts influence emotions. Integrating Islamic teachings can involve reframing negative thoughts using Qur’anic verses and Prophetic traditions. For example:

- **Catastrophizing** which is a cognitive distortion where an individual assumes the worst-case scenario often exaggerating the consequences of a situation. This condition can be countered with verses promoting *Tawakkul* (trust in Allah); “*And whosoever puts his trust in Allah, then He will suffice him*” (Qur’an 65:3). “*Indeed, there is for him no authority over those who have believed and rely upon their Lord*” (Qur’an 16:99). The principle of *Tawakkul* highlights the significance of entrusting one’s faith in Allah (Sabki et al., 2019), while simultaneously taking action for mental wellness. *Sabr*, or patience, is emphasized as a fundamental virtue, representing resilience and perseverance during life’s challenges (Uyun & Witruk, 2017).
- **Hopelessness** is a state of despair characterized by negative thoughts about the future, oneself and the world. These distortions can lead to feelings of helplessness, despair and a lack of motivation. However, Islamic principles of *Tawakkul* (trust in Allah), *sabr* (patience and perseverance), *shukr* (gratitude) and *tafakkur* (reflecting on Allah’s mercy, wisdom and power) can inspire hope and positivity. Some of these verses can be used to reframe the negative thoughts; “*Indeed, with hardship [will be] ease*” (Qur’an 94:6) and “*Do not despair of the mercy of Allah.*” (Qur’an 39:53). The prophet said “*Be hopeful of that which benefits you. Seek the help of Allah, and do not be helpless.*” (Sahih Muslim).

The above quoted verses and *hadith* can be used as cognitive coping statements during therapy. Clients can be guided to replace maladaptive cognitions with Qur’anic affirmations that reflect a balanced understanding of divine justice, mercy and human agency. Cognitive restructuring is adapted with an Islamic lens, aiding clients in addressing negative thoughts and focusing on hope and the fleeting nature of life (Rothman & Coyle, 2020).

ii. Behavioural Activation and Spiritual Practices

Behavioural activation, a key component of CBT, can be contextualized within the Islamic framework of regular acts of worship. Islam encourages consistent daily actions (Daily ritual prayers, remembrance of Allah (*dhikr*), fasting, and charity) that promote discipline and

structure—core tenets of behavioural activation. Encouraging clients to re-engage with religious practices can serve dual purposes of spiritual fulfillment and psychological well-being.

Examples:

- Establishing regular *Salat* (ritual prayers) routines during depressive episodes may enhance both spiritual connection and behavioural momentum. It can also improve time management and mindfulness.
- Engaging in *Zakah* and *Sadaqah* (voluntary charity) fosters community engagement and positive emotions.

Therapists can collaborate with clients to integrate these practices into treatment plans, aligning behavioural goals with spiritual aspirations.

iii. Faith-Based Mindfulness: *Muraqabah* and *Tafakkur*

Mindfulness, a key CBT tool, finds a parallel in Islamic practices such as *muraqabah* (self-watchfulness) and *tafakkur* (deep contemplation about creation and self). In other words, Mindfulness-based strategies in CBT can be aligned with Islamic spiritual practices:

- ***Muraqabah***: Self-awareness in the presence of God, akin to mindfulness with a theocentric orientation.
- ***Tafakkur***: Reflective contemplation of God's signs in creation, fostering gratitude and existential awareness.

These practices help clients develop present-moment awareness with a spiritual anchor. Therapists may introduce mindfulness exercises to the clients by engaging in guided *dhikr* or reflective journaling on Qur'anic verses, facilitating both emotional regulation and spiritual attunement. Islamic mindfulness and *dhikr* techniques foster serenity and clear-headedness, enabling clients to find peace through God's remembrance (Tamin, 2016).

iv. Addressing the Concept of Suffering

In CBT, suffering is understood as a result of maladaptive thought patterns, behaviours and emotional responses to life's challenges. CBT focuses on identifying and changing negative thoughts, cognitive distortions and unhelpful behaviors that contribute to suffering. However, in Islam, suffering is viewed as a test or purification process. This theological perspective can help clients find meaning in adversity—a key component of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), which aligns well with CBT. Clients can be guided to reframe suffering as an opportunity for spiritual growth, drawing from *Hadiths* such as:

“How wonderful is the case of a believer; there is good for him in everything, and this applies to no one but a believer. If prosperity attends him, he expresses gratitude to Allah and that is good for him; and if adversity befalls him, he endures it patiently and that is better for him.” (Sahih Muslim).

In another hadith, the prophet was reported to have said said “*No fatigue, nor disease, nor sorrow... befalls a Muslim, but that Allah expiates some of his sins for it.*” (Sahih Bukhari).

Objectives of Islamic Integrated Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (IICBT)

The main objectives of Islamic Integrated Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (IICBT) should be:

- i. To apply *Shari'ah* compliant Islamic approach based on the *Qur'an* and *Hadith*
- ii. To apply cognitive and behavioral restructuring based on the principles in the *Qur'an* and *hadith* that promote mental and spiritual health
- iii. To provide a structured intervention that can also be used for research development in managing Muslim patients with depression/chronic medical illness.

Benefits of Integrating Islamic principles into Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)

Integrating Islamic principles into Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) can offer several benefits, including:

1. **Cultural Relevance:** It will make therapy more relatable and accessible to Muslim clients, increasing engagement and effectiveness.
2. **Spiritual Support:** Utilizes Islamic values and practices as a source of strength, resilience, and motivation for clients thereby acknowledges the importance of Islamic values and practices in shaping mental health experiences.
3. **Promotion of Holistic Well-being:** This approach addresses both psychological and spiritual needs, fostering a more comprehensive understanding of mental health. In other words, it addresses the spiritual, emotional, and psychological aspects of an individual's well-being.
4. **Increased Client Comfort:** It allows clients to discuss their faith and spiritual struggles openly, fostering a stronger therapeutic relationship.
5. **Enhanced Coping Mechanisms:** Draws on Islamic teachings and practices, such as prayer, gratitude, and forgiveness, to help clients cope with challenges.
6. **Improved Mental Health Outcomes:** Can lead to better treatment outcomes by incorporating faith-based interventions that resonate with Muslim clients.
7. **Respect for Client Values:** Demonstrates cultural sensitivity and respect for clients' values, promoting a more effective therapeutic alliance.

By integrating Islamic principles into CBT, therapists can provide more tailored and effective care for Muslim clients, acknowledging the importance of faith in their lives.

Ethical Considerations and Therapeutic Boundaries

Integrating Islamic principles into CBT requires both cultural competence and ethical discernment. When integrating Islamic principles into CBT, therapists must avoid:

1. **Acting as Religious Authorities Unless Appropriately Trained:**
Therapists should recognize the limits of their expertise and avoid providing religious guidance unless they have received proper training in Islamic theology or have collaborated with a qualified Islamic scholar. This ensures that clients receive accurate and respectful spiritual guidance.
2. **Imposing Religious Interpretation or Invalidating a Client's Personal Understanding of Faith:**
Therapists should respect clients' individual interpretations of Islam and avoid imposing their own understanding or biases. Invalidating a client's personal faith can be harmful and undermine the therapeutic relationship. Instead, therapists should work within the client's framework, exploring how their faith can be a source of strength and support.
3. **Assuming Homogeneity within the Muslim Population:**
Therapists should be aware of the diversity within the Muslim population, including differences in sects, cultural backgrounds, and personal beliefs. Assuming homogeneity can lead to

misunderstandings and ineffective treatment. Therapists should strive to understand each client's unique experiences, values, and perspectives, tailoring their approach to meet individual needs. By avoiding these pitfalls, therapists can effectively integrate Islamic principles into CBT, providing culturally sensitive and spiritually informed care that respects clients' individuality and promotes their well-being. A collaborative approach is essential, where clients define the extent to which faith is incorporated into therapy. Therapists should receive training in both CBT and Islamic psychology or work in partnership with qualified religious scholars when needed.

Implications for Practice and Research

The integration of Islamic principles in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) presents several opportunities:

1. Development of Faith-Sensitive Therapeutic Manuals:

Integrating Islamic principles into CBT can lead to the creation of therapeutic manuals that are tailored to the spiritual and cultural needs of Muslim clients. These manuals would incorporate Islamic values, concepts, and practices, making therapy more relatable and effective for Muslims. This approach acknowledges the importance of faith in the healing process and provides a framework for therapists to address spiritual concerns.

2. Creation of Assessment Tools for Islamic Spiritual Distress and Growth:

Islamic CBT integration enables the development of assessment tools that measure spiritual distress and growth in Muslim clients. These tools would evaluate the client's spiritual struggles, such as feelings of guilt, shame, or spiritual doubt, and assess their progress in developing a stronger faith. This would help therapists identify areas where clients need spiritual support and track the effectiveness of Islamic CBT interventions.

3. Training Programmes for Therapists in Islamic Psychology:

The integration of Islamic principles in CBT creates a need for training programs that equip therapists with the knowledge and skills to practice Islamic psychology effectively. These programmes would cover topics such as:

- Islamic psychology principles and theories
- Cultural and spiritual sensitivity
- Faith-sensitive therapeutic techniques
- Assessment and treatment of spiritual distress

By providing therapists with specialized training, they would be better equipped to address the unique needs of Muslim clients and deliver culturally sensitive care.

These opportunities highlight the potential for Islamic CBT integration to enhance mental health services for Muslims, promoting more effective and culturally relevant care.

Conclusion

The integration of Islamic principles into Cognitive Behaviour Therapy offers a culturally and spiritually congruent model of mental health care for Muslim clients. By aligning evidence-based psychotherapeutic techniques with the metaphysical, ethical, and spiritual dimensions of Islam, practitioners can foster deeper therapeutic engagement, client empowerment, and holistic healing. This model not only honors the sacred traditions of Islamic thought but also advances the global movement toward culturally responsive psychological care.

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