



Research Article

APPLYING COGNITIVE-BEHAVIORAL THERAPY (CBT) TO COUNSELING PSYCHOLOGICALLY TRAUMATIZED LGBT INDIVIDUAL: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is a common approach in counseling and psychotherapy for individuals with mental health disorders. In particular, this approach has been proven to be effective for individuals with LGBT gender orientation, a group of people who are psychologically vulnerable due to facing social challenges, stigma, and personal problems related to sexual orientation or gender identity. Through CBT, clients learn to identify and modify unhelpful thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, thereby reducing distress and improving quality of life. This article reviews theoretical and practical studies on the use of CBT therapy in counseling for LGBT people, especially those who have experienced mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, or psychological trauma. It synthesizes relevant theoretical frameworks and practice applications of therapy in the context of supporting LGBT people, to identify research directions and expand the application of this therapy in psychological research and practice in Vietnam.

Keywords: CBT; cognitive-behavioral therapy; LGBT orientation; mental health of LGBT people; psychological counseling

1. Introduction

Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is extensively utilized by researchers and practitioners in counseling and psychotherapy, and has been empirically validated as an effective psychological intervention for LGBT individuals, including those facing mental health challenges associated with gender identity and sexual orientation. This approach emphasizes identifying and modifying distorted or irrational beliefs, maladaptive behaviors, and unhelpful coping strategies in response to psychological stress, social pressure, discrimination, and stigma, with the ultimate aim of improving quality of life. Numerous international studies provide evidence that CBT can help LGBT individuals address mental health concerns such as anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, and difficulties with self-

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acceptance (Pachankis & Goldfried, 2013).

Psychological support for LGBT individuals who have experienced psychological trauma is both a critical and essential component of community mental health care. Such trauma can impair emotional well-being, self-esteem, and directly impact mental health. Members of the LGBT community frequently encounter discrimination, social isolation, and even violence, placing them at elevated risk for stress, anxiety, and depression (Dejun Su et al., 2016). A study by Ji Hyun Lee and colleagues involving 577 gay individuals revealed that those who experienced discrimination had higher rates of substance use disorders than those who had not (Lee et al., 2016).

Through psychological counseling, mental health professionals not only assist LGBT individuals in understanding and restoring their mental health but also provide a safe and affirming environment. Counseling enhances self-awareness, strengthens coping abilities, and builds resilience to navigate societal challenges.

LGBT individuals are those whose sexual orientation is non-heterosexual, encompassing lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgender individuals. Although societal perceptions have become more positive and open toward LGBT persons, a significant portion of society still lacks an adequate and evidence-based understanding (Pham Thu Hoa, 2015). Acts rooted in gender prejudice, such as stigma, mockery, hostility, social exclusion, and physical or emotional violence, remain prevalent and contribute to adverse mental health outcomes. These may include depression, anxiety disorders, substance abuse, suicidal ideation, and other psychological problems (Mongelli et al., 2019).

In recent years, mental health practitioners have shown increased concern for the psychological well-being of LGBT populations. Globally, many organizations have been established to raise awareness of sexual and gender diversity, advocate for LGBT rights, and provide support for those subjected to discrimination and violence. Such initiatives have been instrumental in enabling LGBT individuals to overcome psychological trauma (Mongelli et al., 2019).

In Vietnam, psychological counseling for traumatized LGBT individuals remains underexplored, despite its urgent necessity for improving mental health outcomes in this population. This article aims to review and synthesize the application of CBT for LGBT individuals with psychological trauma by reviewing relevant national and international studies on CBT and LGBT mental health.

2. Problem Statement and Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Framework and Context

The World Health Organization (WHO) and the American Psychological Association (APA) have affirmed that homosexuality, bisexuality, and heterosexuality are all natural variations of human sexual orientation. Sexual orientation, an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attraction, is one of several core aspects of human sexuality. These include:

Biological Sex: Assigned at birth based on chromosomal patterns (XX or XY), reproductive anatomy, and hormonal profiles. However, biological sex does not always align

with gender identity, the deeply held sense of one's own gender.

Sexual Orientation: The capacity to experience emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attraction to individuals of the same gender, a different gender, or multiple genders. Those attracted to the same gender are described as homosexual, to a different gender as heterosexual, and to both genders as bisexual.

Gender Identity: A person's deeply felt internal sense of gender, which may or may not align with their sex assigned at birth. It includes self-perception of the body (which may involve altering physical appearance or function through medical or other means) and gender expression (clothing, speech, mannerisms). Individuals whose gender identity does not align with their assigned sex are often referred to as transgender.

Gender Expression: The outward manifestation of gender identity through physical appearance, behavior, and mannerisms—presenting in ways perceived as “masculine,” “feminine,” or “androgynous” (Lương Thế Huy & Phạm Quỳnh Phương, 2015).

Beck (1963, 1967) pioneered the **Cognitive Therapy (CT)** approach while researching depression. From this perspective, psychological distress does not stem from rare or pathological conditions but from distorted thinking patterns and ineffective information processing. Common factors contributing to psychological problems include cognitive distortions, premature conclusions based on limited information, and difficulty distinguishing between reality and imagination. Beck's therapy focuses on helping individuals identify and modify maladaptive thoughts to improve mood and behavior (Corey, 2017).

Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT), developed by Albert Ellis, shares many principles with Beck's approach, emphasizing the role of beliefs, evaluations, and decision-making in emotional and behavioral functioning. REBT targets irrational and maladaptive beliefs that generate negative emotions and unhealthy behaviors.

Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) emerged from the integration of Beck's CT and Ellis's REBT, enriched by contributions from other behavioral researchers. CBT focuses on the dynamic interplay between thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Clients learn to identify and challenge irrational or inaccurate thoughts, adjust emotional responses, and adopt more adaptive behaviors. The therapy also equips clients with skills and strategies to address current concerns while fostering healthier thinking patterns.

2.2. *Research methodology*

The present study is a literature review, systematically synthesizing literature from national and international studies on the use of CBT in counseling LGBT individuals with psychological trauma or closely related applications addressing mental health concerns in this population.

From a **systemic perspective**, research on LGBT mental health is conceptualized as a process involving theoretical frameworks, empirical foundations, and case studies, allowing for longitudinal tracking of mental health changes. This approach facilitates the identification of risk and protective factors while considering multidimensional influences

such as individual characteristics, social contexts, and living environments, thus providing a comprehensive understanding of LGBT mental health.

From a **historical perspective**, while LGBT-related mental health research has a long-standing tradition globally, studies in Vietnam have predominantly focused on sexual orientation or stigma, with limited exploration of trauma and intervention. Thus, this review adopts an integrative approach, summarizing both theoretical and empirical issues from domestic and international literature relevant to the topic.

2.3. International research on psychologically traumatized LGBT populations

2.3.1. General research directions

In recent years, the number of scholarly investigations into the experiences of LGBT individuals has increased markedly. Research consistently shows that this population faces disproportionately high rates of mental health problems. Notable examples include:

Mallory et al. (2017), in a study conducted in Georgia (USA), demonstrated that stigma and discrimination against LGBT individuals in professional, educational, and family environments have significant adverse effects on mental health. Such discrimination was associated with reduced productivity and elevated turnover rates among LGBT employees.

The 2018 U.S. Youth Risk Behavior Survey revealed that many high school students who self-identified as LGBT reported being bullied on school property (33%) and experiencing cyberbullying (27.1%). Concerns for personal safety also contributed to school absenteeism among LGBT students (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018).

Despite the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1997, LGBT individuals in China still face stigma and discrimination. Cultural expectations such as filial duty to produce heirs and the historical “one-child” policy have placed intense pressure on LGBT individuals, especially only children, contributing to psychological distress, depression, anxiety, and in some cases, suicidal behavior (Wang et al., 2019).

Mongelli et al. (2019) systematically reviewed literature from 2014–2018, affirming that the minority stress model offers a compelling explanation for mental health disparities among LGBT populations. They found higher prevalence rates of depression, anxiety disorders, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation in LGBT individuals compared to heterosexual counterparts, and emphasized the need for supportive policies and targeted interventions to mitigate minority stress.

Ryan et al. (2020) examined 245 LGBT young adults (aged 21–25) to assess the mental health consequences of SOCE initiated by parents during adolescence, via religious interventions or therapy. Results indicated significantly higher rates of depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and lower educational attainment among those exposed to SOCE compared to those who were not.

Tan and Kelly (2020) explored tensions between religious beliefs and LGBTQ-affirmative values among Christian mental health practitioners, offering evidence-based practice guidelines and continuous self-reflection strategies to support LGBT clients.

Schott (2021) authored the *LGBTQI Workbook for CBT*, integrating empirically

supported CBT strategies into clinical practice for LGBT populations, focusing on self-assessment, cognitive activation, psychoeducation, and resource provision.

Harkness and Pachankis (2022) investigated supervision and consultation frameworks to enhance the delivery of CBT for LGBT clients. Their work proposed models such as online, group, and individual supervision to address the specific needs of practitioners working with this population.

Scheer et al. (2023) examined CBT adaptations for sexual minority women, highlighting the importance of respecting gender diversity, addressing non-binary identities, and incorporating feminist perspectives to improve therapeutic outcomes.

Overall, these international studies confirm that LGBT individuals face a significantly higher risk of depression, anxiety, and suicidal behavior than heterosexual individuals. They reinforce the minority stress model as a robust theoretical framework and identify CBT as a promising intervention to reduce psychological distress. However, gaps remain—particularly in exploring protective factors, resilience, and cultural context variations across countries. Lessons learned underscore the need to develop CBT-based interventions that reduce stressors, enhance protective factors, and equip LGBT individuals with coping skills for mental health challenges.

2.3.2. Application of CBT in supporting psychologically traumatized LGBT individuals

CBT has been widely used to treat depression, anxiety, and other psychological disorders, and more recently, it has been adapted for minority populations, including LGBT individuals, who are at elevated risk due to social stigma and discrimination. Representative studies include:

Hall et al. (2019) developed *Being Out With Strength* (BOWS), a group CBT intervention for LGBT youth. Surveys from nine mental health experts and 79 LGBT youths revealed high rates of clinical depression (nearly 50%), with both experts and participants endorsing BOWS as an acceptable and potentially effective intervention.

Foy et al. (2019) examined LGBT adults' experiences with psychological therapy services in the UK. Findings revealed persistent barriers and biases, particularly affecting bisexual clients, who were less likely to disclose their sexual orientation. The study noted therapists' limited understanding of LGBT-specific issues, sometimes overemphasizing or underestimating the role of sexual orientation in therapy, potentially compromising treatment effectiveness.

Wandrekar and Nigudkar (2019) documented the *SAAHAS* program in Mumbai—an open, free monthly queer-affirmative CBT group for LGBT individuals. Over one year, participants reported reduced stress, decreased isolation, and improved skills for addressing challenges, illustrating an effective, low-cost therapeutic framework.

Lothwell et al. (2020) reviewed mental health care principles for LGBT adolescents, noting heightened vulnerability to depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and suicidality. The minority stress hypothesis explained much of this risk, while protective factors such as family acceptance and safe school environments were found to significantly improve

outcomes.

Pachankis et al. (2022) evaluated an 11-week online training program for mental health providers in LGBT-affirmative CBT, spanning 20 U.S. states and international sites. Participants reported substantial gains in cultural competence and knowledge, supporting this as a scalable, cost-effective training model.

De Leyer-Tiarks (2024) authored *CBT Groups with LGBT Youth*, detailing therapeutic techniques such as cognitive restructuring, emotional regulation, behavior modification, and problem-solving, all adapted to the developmental and contextual needs of LGBT adolescents exploring their gender identity.

Across these applications, CBT not only reduces symptoms of depression and anxiety but also equips LGBT clients with skills to navigate stigma, discrimination, and life challenges, fostering self-acceptance and resilience, and ultimately enhancing quality of life.

2.4. Vietnamese research on psychologically traumatized LGBT populations and professional support measures

In Vietnam, research on the psychological trauma experienced by LGBT individuals remains limited. Most existing studies focus on societal attitudes toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender populations, rather than examining the direct psychological impacts or designing targeted interventions. Key findings from representative domestic studies include:

Luong and Pham (2015), in their study *Is It Because I'm LGBT?*, documented pervasive stigma based on sexual orientation and gender identity across Vietnam. Data from 2,363 LGBT individuals in all 63 provinces, supplemented by 10 in-depth interviews and 2 focus group discussions, revealed high frequencies of discrimination in families, schools, and workplaces. Manifestations ranged from verbal insults, humiliation, and physical violence to denial of employment opportunities, forced appearance changes, sexual harassment, and denial of access to public services. Such acts were found to significantly compromise mental health, increasing social withdrawal, depression, anxiety, reduced academic or occupational functioning, and suicidal tendencies. The study called for comprehensive anti-discrimination laws alongside public education to foster equality and respect for gender diversity.

A joint study by Save the Children and the Institute of Medical and Sociological Research (IMS) (2015) reported alarming rates of school-based discrimination. Among LGBT students surveyed in Ho Chi Minh City, 53.8% experienced bullying or verbal harassment from peers, while 23% experienced such treatment from teachers or staff. Furthermore, 20.4% were forced to change uniforms, and 29.3% were required to alter hairstyles, gestures, or mannerisms to conform to traditional gender norms. These discriminatory practices inflicted deep psychological harm, undermining healthy development and heightening risks for depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation.

Tran (2018), in a mixed-methods study with 800 university students, found that 25.9% considered homosexuality to be a psychological disorder; 9.2% described same-sex lifestyles

as deviant and in need of elimination; and 14.5% viewed same-sex relations as perverse. The study concluded that a substantial proportion of students still hold prejudiced views toward LGBT people, largely due to a lack of accurate knowledge.

Pham et al. (2022) conducted a cross-sectional study at Hanoi Medical University Hospital with 183 MSM participants. Findings revealed that 23.5% exhibited depressive symptoms, with the most common being low mood (96%), loss of interest (100%), fatigue (88%), pessimism (72%), sleep disturbances (56%), low self-esteem (52%), and impaired concentration (44%). The authors concluded that depression is a prevalent mental health concern among MSM in Vietnam.

Beyond research, several initiatives in Vietnam have aimed to improve awareness and psychological support for the LGBT community:

The Vietnam Women's Academy organized the workshop *Preventing Stigma and Discrimination against the LGBT Community*, fostering dialogue between LGBT individuals, researchers, and advocates to promote gender equality and empower marginalized groups.

The Center for Research and Psychological Counseling (CRISP), in collaboration with PFLAG Vietnam, launched a training program, *Psychological Counseling for the LGBT Community*, designed to strengthen practitioners' skills in applying CBT techniques to support LGBT clients, with a focus on addressing minority stress and enhancing resilience.

In summary, Vietnamese studies have exposed a concerning picture of psychological trauma within the LGBT community. Despite incremental legal and social progress, LGBT individuals remain vulnerable to stigma, discrimination, and violence, contributing to significantly higher rates of depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues compared to the general population. Current research is limited by a narrow scope, underrepresentation of diverse subgroups, and insufficient focus on intervention outcomes. There is a pressing need for comprehensive, culturally sensitive studies to identify risk factors, mechanisms of psychological distress, and targeted counseling strategies for LGBT individuals across age groups, regions, and socio-economic contexts. Such evidence is essential for designing effective counseling protocols, intervention programs, and integrated mental health services for this population in Vietnam.

3. Conclusion and research recommendations

Overall, the mental health of LGBT populations has garnered substantial scholarly attention worldwide, particularly within the framework of positive psychology. Numerous studies have demonstrated that LGBT individuals face higher risks of psychological disorders such as depression, anxiety, trauma-related conditions, and suicidal behaviors compared to heterosexual individuals. These findings underscore the importance of developing and implementing specialized counseling interventions tailored to the unique needs of this population. Among the available therapeutic modalities, CBT has emerged as an evidence-based and effective approach for helping LGBT individuals overcome psychological trauma. CBT works by identifying and modifying distorted cognitions,

irrational beliefs, and maladaptive behavioral patterns, thereby fostering healthier emotional regulation and adaptive coping strategies. For members of the LGBT community, CBT is particularly relevant for addressing challenges related to gender identity and sexual orientation, equipping them to cope with stigma, discrimination, internal conflicts, and societal pressures.

In Vietnam, a developing country, research on the psychological trauma of LGBT individuals remains scarce, and specialized psychological interventions have yet to be widely implemented. While societal attitudes are becoming more open, prejudice and discrimination persist, continuing to negatively affect the mental health and quality of life of LGBT individuals. Consequently, the application of CBT in counseling traumatized LGBT clients presents a promising direction, with both practical and scientific significance, contributing to the enhancement of mental health and overall well-being in this marginalized group. In summary, both domestic and international research has shed light on the extent of psychological trauma and the challenges faced by LGBT populations. However, the number of studies examining counseling processes, structured intervention programs, and particularly the implementation of CBT, remains limited. Developing and deploying CBT-based intervention programs will not only alleviate psychological burdens for LGBT individuals but also improve their quality of life, promote social integration, and contribute to building an inclusive environment that respects gender diversity.

Conflict of Interest: Authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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ỨNG DỤNG LIỆU PHÁP NHẬN THỨC – HÀNH VI (CBT) ĐỂ THAM VẤN CHO NGƯỜI CÓ XU HƯỚNG LGBT BỊ TỔN THƯƠNG TÂM LÝ: MỘT NGHIÊN CỨU TỔNG THUẬT

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TÓM TẮT

Liệu pháp nhận thức – hành vi (CBT) là một hướng tiếp cận phổ biến trong tham vấn, trị liệu tâm lý cho các cá nhân có rối nhiễu tâm lý hoặc rối loạn sức khỏe tâm thần. Đặc biệt, liệu pháp này được chứng minh có hiệu quả đối với cá nhân có xu hướng LGBT, nhóm đối tượng dễ bị tổn thương về tâm lý do phải đối mặt với các thách thức xã hội, sự kỳ thị, và các vấn đề cá nhân liên quan đến xu hướng tính dục hoặc bản dạng giới. Thông qua liệu pháp nhận thức – hành vi, thân chủ có thể nhận thức và điều chỉnh các suy nghĩ, cảm xúc và hành vi tiêu cực, từ đó giảm thiểu các tổn thương tâm lý và cải thiện chất lượng cuộc sống. Bài viết này tập trung vào các nghiên cứu lý luận và thực tiễn về việc áp dụng liệu pháp nhận thức – hành vi trong tham vấn tâm lý cho người LGBT, đặc biệt là những người đã trải qua các vấn đề sức khỏe tâm thần như lo âu, trầm cảm, hoặc sang chấn tâm lý. Các khung lý thuyết và ứng dụng của liệu pháp trong bối cảnh hỗ trợ người LGBT sẽ được tổng hợp và giới thiệu nhằm xác định hướng nghiên cứu và mở rộng khả năng áp dụng liệu pháp này trong các xu hướng nghiên cứu và thực hành Tâm lý học tại Việt Nam.

Từ khóa: CBT; liệu pháp nhận thức – hành vi; xu hướng LGBT; sức khỏe tâm thần của người có xu hướng LGBT; tham vấn tâm lý