




POST-PANDEMIC ANXIETY: THE EFFICACY OF COGNITIVE-BEHAVIORAL THERAPY IN THE COGNITIVE RESTRUCTURING OF YOUNG ADULTS

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ABSTRACT

This article aimed to analyze the effectiveness of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy in cognitive restructuring for young adults experiencing anxiety after the COVID-19 pandemic. A qualitative literature review was carried out, selecting Brazilian studies published between, addressed interventions and outcomes related to cognitive restructuring techniques. The evidence indicated that the application of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy contributed to the reduction of anxiety symptoms, improving indicators of self confidence, perception of internal control and coping ability when facing adverse situations. The results also showed that this approach offers methodological flexibility, being applicable in both face to face and online contexts, with significant benefits for the reorganization of core beliefs and dysfunctional automatic thoughts. It is concluded that Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is an effective and feasible strategy for the mental health of young adults in the post pandemic period.

Keywords: Anxiety. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. Cognitive restructuring. Young adults. Pandemic.



1 INTRODUCTION

The COVID19 pandemic triggered an unprecedented health and emotional crisis, directly affecting young adults in multiple life contexts and imposing a subjective reorganization that impacted learning, productivity, and mental health processes, with a significant increase in anxiety symptoms that required new evidence-based therapeutic strategies such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy to promote cognitive and emotional adjustments that allowed the maintenance of well-being and psychosocial functionality (Vasconcelos and Martins, 2022).

Over the past few years, the Brazilian scientific literature has consistently described that exacerbated anxiety as a result of collective stressful events compromises functions such as attention, memory, and emotional regulation, factors that affect the ability of young adults to cope with daily demands and that make it essential to implement structured approaches such as cognitive restructuring to reduce thought distortions and minimize behavioral impairments (Castro, 2022).

Several studies indicate that quarantine, social distancing, and constant exposure to conflicting information potentiated diffuse fears, insecurities, and anticipatory concerns, phenomena observed in individuals predisposed to generalized anxiety disorder, a context in which cognitive-behavioral techniques such as Socratic questioning and the reassessment of dysfunctional beliefs demonstrated expressive results (Lorentz, Mendes, and Lopes, 2024).

The subjective impacts of the pandemic affected not only clinical populations, but also university students and workers at the beginning of their careers, revealing an increase in symptoms such as irritability, muscle tension, and mental fatigue, reinforcing the importance of psychological action based on models that promote the identification and modification of automatic thoughts and distorted interpretive patterns (Rodrigues et al., 2022).

The cognitivebehavioral approach, by proposing interventions centered on the present and aimed at the development of coping skills, proved to be a resource capable of expanding the perception of internal control and facilitating adaptation to uncertain contexts, favoring the construction of more flexible cognitive schemes that are less vulnerable to catastrophic interpretations of adverse events (Beck, 2022).

Recent studies indicate that cognitive restructuring is not restricted to the context of face-to-face individual psychotherapy, but can be adapted to remote and group



formats, expanding the reach to young adults impacted by movement restrictions and allowing effective interventions even in adverse conditions of access to health services (Lorentz, Mendes, and Lopes, 2024).

Continuous exposure to virtual environments and academic or professional demands has intensified processes of social comparison and self-criticism, elements that often feed negative automatic thoughts, and Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy is a methodological way to deactivate vicious cycles of derogatory self-reference and promote more adaptive resignifications (Silva et al., 2022).

Quantitative analyses carried out in Brazil with young university students confirmed an increase in the prevalence of symptoms of anxiety and depression, with emphasis on the need for brief and structured interventions that favor emotional regulation and planning skills, central areas worked on by the cognitive restructuring of CBT (Marcos, 2024).

Complementary research has identified that the combination of techniques such as psychoeducation, relaxation, and identification of distortions contribute to restoring the perception of personal effectiveness and the ability to deal with everyday pressures, validating Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy as an essential tool in the reconstruction of thought and emotion patterns in young adults in the post-pandemic period (Favaretto et al., 2023).

Therefore, the objective of this article is to analyze the effectiveness of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy in the cognitive restructuring of young adults in anxiety conditions after the COVID-19 pandemic.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 CONTEXTUALIZATION OF ANXIETY IN YOUNG ADULTS AFTER THE PANDEMIC

Anxiety manifests itself as an adaptive response of the body in the face of situations perceived as threatening, however, when intense and persistent, it compromises the psychological balance and social participation of young adults, especially after experiencing critical events such as the COVID19 pandemic, which aggravated preexisting vulnerability factors and established new emotional demands that altered daily functioning (Vasconcelos and Martins, 2022).

Studies show that the period of social distancing caused abrupt changes in the work and study routine, increasing levels of apprehension and making it difficult to



maintain face-to-face bonds, a condition that intensified feelings of insecurity and impaired fundamental cognitive processes for learning and solving practical day-to-day problems (Castro, 2022).

The data reveal that many young adults had anxiety attacks associated with uncertainty about their professional future, loss of loved ones, and constant worry about contagion, configuring a picture of emotional overload that directly impacted executive functions such as planning, working memory, and ability to concentrate (Rodrigues et al., 2022).

The national literature describes that post-pandemic anxiety is also linked to overexposure to social networks, negative news, and difficulty in setting limits on information consumption, factors that increased automatic thoughts of imminent danger and strengthened dysfunctional beliefs about personal control and safety (Barros and Floro, 2023).

The emotional vulnerability of young adults was accentuated in the absence of adequate preventive strategies, which generated ineffective coping patterns, such as avoidance, procrastination, and irritability, negatively affecting self-esteem and reinforcing the cycle of catastrophic thoughts characteristic of pathological anxiety (Rodrigues et al., 2022).

In the Brazilian context, research carried out in different regions has pointed to an increase in the rates of anxiety disorders among university students and workers at the beginning of their careers, demonstrating the need for public policies that consider brief and accessible psychological interventions to contain the evolution of these conditions (Marcos, 2024).

The economic difficulties and job instability generated by the pandemic have intensified symptoms of generalized anxiety, leading many young adults to experience persistent concerns about financial stability and prospects for social advancement, which increases the relevance of therapeutic approaches aimed at modifying cognitive patterns (Favaretto et al., 2023).

An increase in the demand for mental health services was also observed, revealing a greater awareness of the importance of psychological care, although there are still structural and cultural barriers that hinder access to specialized therapy for the young adult population (Lorentz, Mendes, and Lopes, 2024).



The impacts of the pandemic on mental health were not restricted to the moment of isolation, as they remain in the form of residual symptoms that manifest themselves in everyday situations, such as sleep difficulties, negative anticipation of events, and a feeling of constant threat, requiring interventions that promote the resignification of traumatic experiences (Lorentz, Mendes, and Lopes, 2024).

Patient reports and longitudinal survey data indicate that, even after the relaxation of sanitary measures, many young adults were unable to resume the same level of academic or professional performance, evidencing accumulated losses and the need for therapeutic techniques focused on reestablishing self-confidence and the perception of competence (Silva et al., 2022).

The psychological consequences of the pandemic are complex and interconnected with social and economic factors, demonstrating that post-pandemic anxiety must be analyzed from a multifactorial perspective, which justifies the use of integrative therapeutic approaches that consider the various dimensions of the human experience (Beck, 2022).

In addition to the factors already mentioned, health insecurity and the experience of successive losses have impacted grief and adaptation processes, causing young adults to experience feelings of powerlessness that make it difficult to develop future plans and maintain a realistic and balanced view of everyday challenges (Rodrigues et al., 2022).

Qualitative studies indicate that many young adults verbalize recurrent negative automatic thoughts, such as the expectation of imminent failure or disastrous situations, patterns that perpetuate the anxious state and compromise the quality of life, making it necessary to intervene directly in the cognitive structure of these thoughts (Marcos, 2024).

The pandemic also brought an increase in remote academic demands that required new self-management skills and emotional resilience, but the lack of adequate support led to feelings of overload and incapacity, reinforcing maladaptive cognitive schemas and fueling states of continuous anxiety (Favaretto et al., 2023).

Faced with such a scenario, an in-depth understanding of the factors that maintain anxiety in young adults after critical events such as the pandemic is essential to direct effective therapeutic interventions, and Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy emerges as a



relevant tool to reorganize thought schemes and promote greater emotional balance (Vasconcelos and Martins, 2022).

2.2 FUNDAMENTALS OF COGNITIVE-BEHAVIORAL THERAPY IN COGNITIVE RESTRUCTURING

Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy has consolidated itself as a structured, evidence-based approach aimed at identifying and modifying patterns of thought and behavior that maintain dysfunctional emotional states, offering anxious young adults practical tools to recognize cognitive distortions and replace them with more realistic and functional interpretations (Beck, 2022).

This therapeutic model is based on the assumption that automatic thoughts directly influence emotions and behaviors, which means that by changing misinterpretations about oneself, the world, and the future, it becomes possible to reduce anxiety symptoms and increase the ability to face challenging situations with greater balance (Lorentz, Mendes and Lopes, 2024).

Cognitive restructuring is one of the central pillars of CBT, consisting of a systematic process in which the individual, with the help of the therapist, identifies negative core beliefs and rigid interpretive patterns, questions their validity, and builds cognitive alternatives that favor more adaptive emotional responses (Lorentz, Mendes, and Lopes, 2024).

This technique requires the therapist to meticulously work on psychoeducation, teaching the patient to understand the functioning of their mind, to recognize automatic thoughts, and to record situations that trigger anxious states, favoring the development of critical self-perception and coping skills (Castro, 2022).

Thought records and conceptualization diagrams are frequent tools in CBT, as they allow visualizing the relationship between event, thought, emotion, and behavior, offering a map that facilitates targeted intervention to modify distorted interpretations that perpetuate suffering (Rodrigues et al., 2022).

During the therapy process, young adults are encouraged to perform behavioral experiments to test the veracity of their beliefs, experiencing planned situations that challenge their catastrophic predictions, allowing the collection of concrete evidence that certain fears are not confirmed in reality (Marcos, 2024).



CBT also values the identification of dysfunctional cognitive schemas developed throughout the patient's life history, considering how past experiences have shaped core beliefs that influence the way of perceiving present events, which expands the depth of the intervention (Favaretto et al., 2023).

The Socratic questioning technique is often used to stimulate the patient's critical thinking, proposing questions that lead them to evaluate the consistency of their interpretations and seek new perspectives, reducing the cognitive rigidity associated with anxiety disorders (Rodrigues et al., 2022).

Cognitive restructuring is not limited to the office context, but can be applied in online interventions and therapeutic groups, expanding the reach of the approach and offering support to young people who, for geographical or financial reasons, have restricted access to face-to-face care (Barros and Floro, 2023).

The therapeutic process involves the construction of a collaborative bond, in which the therapist acts as a facilitator and guide, while the patient is invited to take an active role in their change, actively participating in the identification of thought patterns and the formulation of new cognitive strategies (Vasconcelos and Martins, 2022).

Research shows that the consistent application of cognitive restructuring techniques is associated with the reduction of physiological symptoms of anxiety, such as muscle tension and tachycardia, because by modifying the interpretation of events, it reduces the activation of the autonomic nervous system associated with fear (Lorentz, Mendes, and Lopes, 2024).

Another frequent resource in CBT is the use of exposure hierarchies, in which the patient is gradually put in contact with feared situations, while practicing the application of new interpretations, strengthening emotional resilience and expanding the coping repertoire (Marcos, 2024).

The literature shows that CBT promotes lasting gains, because by teaching critical analysis and thought modification skills, the patient develops autonomy to face future challenges, reducing the likelihood of relapse and strengthening their self-confidence (Castro, 2022).

However, the cultural adaptation of CBT is fundamental, including practical examples and language accessible to the public served, ensuring that the concepts of cognitive restructuring are understood and applied effectively in specific contexts (Rodrigues et al., 2022).



By integrating cognitive restructuring with other techniques such as relaxation and social skills training, CBT offers a robust set of interventions that complement each other, providing anxious young adults with a structured path to reorganize their interpretations and reestablish emotional balance in the face of post-pandemic challenges (Marcos, 2024).

2.3 BRAZILIAN EVIDENCE ON CBT APPLIED TO ANXIETY IN YOUNG ADULTS

National research published in recent years points to a significant growth in the use of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy for anxiety management in young adults, highlighting the effectiveness of this approach in reducing symptoms and promoting cognitive restructuring that favors emotional adaptation after periods of crisis such as the pandemic (Vasconcelos and Martins, 2022).

In studies conducted at Brazilian universities, it was found that brief CBT-based interventions resulted in significant improvements in self-confidence levels and perceived self-efficacy, allowing participants to reorganize dysfunctional thought patterns and resume academic and professional activities with less emotional distress (Castro, 2022).

Research applied during the period of social distancing demonstrated that online CBT proved to be effective in providing results compatible with face-to-face care, allowing access to young adults who were isolated and had generalized anxiety, with noticeable gains in the management of intrusive thoughts (Favaretto et al., 2023).

Brazilian authors report that the use of techniques such as thought records and restructuring of intermediate beliefs enabled patients to understand the relationship between cognition and emotion, which contributed to the reduction of symptoms such as restlessness, fatigue, and concentration difficulties frequently reported after the pandemic (Marcos, 2024).

Qualitative studies conducted at university centers indicated that young adults undergoing CBT-based interventions developed stronger coping skills, expressing greater control over persistent worries and reduced ruminative patterns that intensified the anxious state (Favaretto et al., 2023).

The literature also points out that group CBT programs carried out in Brazilian educational environments obtained relevant results in reducing anxious symptoms, strengthening interpersonal bonds, and stimulating emotional learning processes that favored academic performance (Rodrigues et al., 2022).



Data presented in narrative reviews demonstrated that CBT, by acting directly on core beliefs of ineffectiveness and vulnerability, was responsible for profound changes in the perception that young adults had of themselves, providing more functional interpretations and favoring proactive behaviors in the face of daily challenges (Lorentz, Mendes, and Lopes, 2024).

The application of CBT in public health services in Brazil has shown that structured interventions can be implemented briefly and at low cost, reaching young populations from different socioeconomic contexts and reducing the prevalence of anxious symptoms in vulnerable communities (Rodrigues et al., 2022).

Another relevant finding is that the combination of CBT with guidance on sleep hygiene, diaphragmatic breathing, and relaxation techniques contributed to the reduction of physiological symptoms, such as palpitations and insomnia, amplifying the positive effects on emotional regulation in young adults (Barros and Floro, 2023).

Longitudinal studies indicate that the maintenance of the gains obtained with CBT is long-lasting, as patients internalize the techniques learned, such as Socratic questioning and the reformulation of automatic thoughts, applying them in new stressful situations and preventing relapses (Favaretto et al., 2023).

Thus, the effectiveness of CBT is associated with the active engagement of the patient and the use of accessible language by the therapist, which facilitates the understanding of the techniques and enhances the effects on the modification of maladaptive cognitive schemas (Castro, 2022).

Practical experiences reported in national articles reveal that young adults with a history of emotional difficulties obtained significant improvement in indicators of quality of life, motivation, and planning ability after cycles of CBT sessions aimed at cognitive restructuring (Marcos, 2024).

Results obtained in intervention programs applied to Brazilian university students showed a reduction in the frequency of catastrophic thoughts and an increase in the perception of internal control, indicating that CBT is effective in reestablishing cognitive patterns compatible with emotional balance (Favaretto et al., 2023).

Integrative reviews highlight that CBT remains one of the most studied interventions in the country, with a solid empirical basis and adaptability to the mental health demands of young adults, consolidating its role as a priority resource in coping with post-pandemic anxiety (Lorentz, Mendes, and Lopes, 2024).



Brazilian evidence demonstrates, therefore, that the systematic application of CBT, especially in the cognitive restructuring modality, is a robust strategy for reducing anxiety symptoms in young adults, contributing to the development of emotional skills that support greater autonomy and resilience in the face of future challenges (Vasconcelos and Martins, 2022).

3 METHODOLOGY

This study was structured as a qualitative literature review, with an exploratory and descriptive approach, with the objective of investigating the effectiveness of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy in the cognitive restructuring of young adults in situations of post-pandemic anxiety, in order to gather consistent evidence present in the national scientific literature.

The selection of sources was carried out on recognized academic platforms, including SciELO, PePSIC, LILACS and Google Scholar, published in peer-reviewed journals, thus ensuring the timeliness and relevance of the data collected for the proposed analysis.

The terms post-pandemic anxiety, Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy, cognitive restructuring, and young adults, as well as combinations of these keywords, were adopted as the main descriptors, in order to cover a broad spectrum of national studies that addressed psychological interventions applied to this specific audience.

The inclusion criteria involved fully available Brazilian scientific articles that presented the results of empirical research or systematic reviews on the subject, while the exclusion criteria eliminated duplicate works, foreign publications without a national profile, and texts without a clear description of the applicable methodology and results.

Each selected article was submitted to a thorough reading, seeking to identify methodological procedures, samples studied, instruments used and main conclusions, and was later organized into thematic files that facilitated the synthesis of information and the construction of the article's topics.

The categorization of the data was developed based on the theoretical foundations of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy, distributing the evidence found in thematic axes related to the manifestation of post-pandemic anxiety, cognitive restructuring techniques and results of interventions applied to the young adult public.



The analysis of the selected articles allowed us to evaluate the convergences and divergences between the researches, ensuring greater rigor and clarity in the presentation of the information obtained.

To ensure the reliability of the analyses, the information extracted was checked in duplicate, reviewing all the data and confronting the information with the original content of the articles, minimizing the risk of misinterpretation or loss of details relevant to the theme.

The research followed ethical principles applicable to bibliographic reviews, respecting the intellectual integrity of the cited authors and ensuring the presentation of data in an impartial and transparent manner, without any type of manipulation or distortion of the results described in the original texts.

At the end of the methodological process, the organized evidence allowed the construction of a critical and in-depth discussion, offering theoretical and practical subsidies to understand the relevance of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy as an effective resource in the cognitive restructuring of young adults who faced intensification of anxious symptoms after the pandemic.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results obtained from the analysis of the articles demonstrated that Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy showed consistent efficacy in reducing anxiety symptoms in young adults, especially when applied with a focus on identifying automatic thoughts and replacing distorted beliefs with more balanced and rational interpretations, a fact evidenced in reviews that highlighted the relevance of such techniques after the pandemic period (Vasconcelos and Martins, 2022).

The presence of symptoms such as constant restlessness, sleep changes, and chronic fatigue was less frequent among participants who completed CBT intervention cycles, indicating that cognitive restructuring acted as a protective factor by reorganizing risk assessment patterns and future expectations, reinforcing the perception of internal control (Castro, 2022).

It was also observed that the application of Socratic thought and questioning records led to a process of critical reflection on one's own interpretations, promoting self-knowledge and developing greater coping skills in the face of uncertain situations, reducing the intensity of physiological anxiety responses (Favaretto et al., 2023).



Studies included in the analysis showed that young adults with a history of academic difficulties showed an increase in performance after CBT interventions, as the management of worries and the resignification of beliefs about failure allowed them to resume study and work activities with greater serenity and planning (Rodrigues et al., 2022).

The comparison between data from face-to-face and online interventions showed that, even in a remote format, CBT obtained compatible results in terms of symptom reduction and expansion of cognitive abilities, an important fact for young populations that faced access barriers during the pandemic and continued to enjoy the techniques safely (Marcos, 2024).

Several studies have highlighted that the introduction of relaxation and breathing training techniques, integrated with cognitive restructuring, has amplified the therapeutic effect by reducing somatic anxiety responses, such as tachycardia and sweating, contributing to a more stable emotional state (Favaretto et al., 2023).

The findings also pointed out that CBT favored the development of metacognitive skills, allowing patients to recognize automatic mental processes and more clearly assess the consequences of their thoughts, strengthening autonomy in emotional management (Lorentz, Mendes, and Lopes, 2024).

It was identified that young adults undergoing CBT programs showed significant changes in the way they interpret social events, no longer attributing threatening meanings to everyday situations and adopting more assertive postures in interpersonal relationships, which had a positive impact on their general well-being (Barros and Floro, 2023).

The data also revealed that CBT contributed to the development of healthier coping strategies, replacing avoidance and isolation behaviors with proactive and engaged practices, which favored the resumption of personal and professional goals more safely (Favaretto et al., 2023).

In programs applied in Brazilian universities, a decrease in anxiety symptoms and an increase in the ability to solve problems were observed, demonstrating that intervention based on cognitive restructuring can be adapted to educational contexts and generate broad benefits in the life of young adults (Castro, 2022).

Critical analysis of the evidence also revealed that, when reassessing core beliefs about failure or inadequacy, participants reported a reduction in feelings of hopelessness



and fear of the future, elements that previously paralyzed initiatives and compromised long-term plans (Rodrigues et al., 2022).

Included studies highlighted that CBT enabled a change in the perception of physical symptoms of anxiety, because by understanding the relationship between body and mind, individuals began to interpret physiological signals in a less threatening way, reducing the feedback loop of fear (Marcos, 2024).

The discussion of the findings showed that CBT is flexible and can be adapted to the cultural and social characteristics of the Brazilian population, making it a viable strategy even in resource-limited settings, which expands its applicability and impact on public mental health (Favaretto et al., 2023).

The results reinforced that the continued use of techniques learned in CBT sessions, such as recording thoughts and critical self-assessment, contributes to preventing relapses and maintains therapeutic gains over time, even in the face of new stressful events (Lorentz, Mendes, and Lopes, 2024).

In general, the synthesis of the data analyzed confirms that Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy, through cognitive restructuring, represents a solid and grounded intervention, capable of reducing anxious symptoms, promoting self-knowledge, and facilitating the adaptation of young adults to post-pandemic challenges, strengthening their resilience and expanding their emotional repertoire (Vasconcelos and Martins, 2022).

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The analysis carried out allowed us to understand that the anxiety experienced by young adults after the COVID19 pandemic has become a multifaceted phenomenon that requires planned and grounded interventions, and Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy has proven to be a structured and effective response by offering practical tools to reorganize thoughts and emotions in a functional and adaptive way.

The data studied showed that cognitive restructuring applied in a continuous and well-guided way promoted consistent results in the reduction of anxiety symptoms and in the strengthening of emotional balance, which translated into greater time management capacity, resumption of personal goals and more active participation in academic and professional life.

It was possible to verify that throughout the therapeutic process the individuals achieved greater clarity about their core beliefs and interpretative patterns, learning to



evaluate and challenge dysfunctional thoughts autonomously, which generated lasting changes and increased the perception of control in the face of adverse situations.

The reflection obtained through the mapping of the studies reinforced that CBT, when used with consistent methodologies, allows young adults to develop an internal repertoire of emotional and cognitive skills that contribute to facing periods of uncertainty without resorting to harmful strategies such as avoidance or social isolation.

The evidence gathered shows that CBT interventions, when applied in a culturally sensitive and accessible way, are suitable for different contexts, whether clinical, educational or corporate, ensuring benefits to an audience that has experienced significant changes in their routines and interpersonal relationships.

It is concluded that CBT offers a structured therapeutic space that favors the construction of new meanings about traumatic or challenging experiences, allowing the individual to reconstruct a more positive personal narrative that is coherent with their potentialities and values, thus expanding their quality of life.

The impact observed in the studies indicates that the process of cognitive restructuring contributes not only to the management of immediate symptoms, but also to the prevention of future crises, since the patient acquires internal tools to recognize and modify thought patterns before they evolve to more severe conditions.

This approach has also proven relevant by integrating relaxation techniques, social skills training, and psychoeducation, creating a set of practices that are not limited to treatment, but also act as preventive and strengthening measures for the psychological well-being of young adults.

The understanding of the results obtained reveals that CBT has the potential to be expanded and adapted to public health programs, serving as a large-scale intervention strategy for young populations affected by scenarios of emotional instability resulting from global events such as the pandemic.

Therefore, it is possible to say that Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy applied to post-pandemic anxiety is a robust, accessible, and transformative therapeutic resource, capable of providing not only symptomatic relief, but also a path of self-knowledge and personal development for young adults in search of emotional balance and new perspectives on life.



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