

The Use of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy with ABC Model and Safety Plan for Client with Self-harm Behavior

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Abstract: Self-harm could potentially happen in children and adolescents. Especially if they are facing adjustment in a new environment and have difficulties expressing their overwhelming emotions. The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) is used to test the result of the treatment, it is conducted before and after the treatment. The client is one of the students with low scores in all aspects of the questionnaire, cutting marks appear on the client's hand and leg, and had difficulty with sleepiness during learning time in class. The research is focused on how cognitive-behavior therapy helps the client with maladaptive coping mechanisms. This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study method for one single client with self-harm behavior. The intervention uses ABC model from REBT to explore the client's problem and self-harm ideation, art therapy, and Safety Plan. The collected data is through interviews, observation, documentation, and psychological assessment results. This intervention is facing challenges through the process that it recommended to develop suitable methods and a longer period.

Keywords: Self-harm, Self-injury, Boarding School, Adjustment issue

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1. INTRODUCTION

Boarding school is a type of school that provides accommodation, meals, education, and other supporting activities for students. Students will live in the dormitory, meaning they will live together with other students and without their families. A guardian (*wali asuh*) is provided to supervise and guide the students. Students living in boarding school environments often face socio-emotional challenges, particularly during the early stages of adjustment. Separation from family, unfamiliar social settings, and academic environments can lead to feelings of loneliness and homesickness [1]. This emotional challenges could manifest in maladaptive coping strategies, such as academic disengagement and even self-harm behaviors [2].

This study aim on a student with socio-emotional challenges in a boarding school. Characterized by difficulty in adapting to new environment, intense longing for family, and emotional distress that disrupt daily function. The client in this case expressed a desire to return home, cried at night due to overwhelming sadness, and experiencing fatigue during classes. The client also engaged in self-harm activities by making cuts on her wrist and leg using sharp objects, which indicated need for immediate psychological support. According to Samantha Woodley, [3] self-harm could deliver feelings of relief, even some reported positive or euphoric feelings after doing self-harm. In this study, client said that self-harm release the burden feelings.

Based on the result of research conducted by Saputra, 30% of the students in boarding school in Lhoksumawe, Aceh Province experiencing psychosocial problems [4]. According to Affandi [5] research on 273 new students in Islamic boarding school in East Java, there are 53% of the students with low scores in self-adjustment assessment. Students with self-adjustment problems tend to low academic achievement, academic anxiety, likely experiencing problems. In Endi et al study, the research result shows 53,09% of 10th grade student in Pondok Pesantren Nurul iman Bandung had high levels of homesickness. Homesickness in students has relation with students struggling with a adaptation. Factors like high academic and behavioral demands, strict

schedules and rules, and insufficient social support is contributing to homesickness in students in boarding school [6]

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy can quickly help client learn about their problems and cope with particular challenges. CBT is effective in reducing the incident of self-harming behaviors, has fewer sessions and structured, suitable technique to deal with emotional challenges [7]. The client is classified as adolescents, adolescents often experiencing difficulties in expressing their emotional experiences. This could obstruct therapeutic process during the intervention implementation. Therefore, modification to the CBT techniques is needed to suit their cognitive and emotional developmental stage [8]. In another study that use CBT in children and adolescent with anxiety disorder, it recommended to develop treatment plan that fit the needs of the client [9]. This study use multimethod including ABC model from REBT, art supplies to help the client express their emotion freely, and safety plan [10-13].

ABC model is originally from Albert Ellis's developed therapy REBT or Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy. REBT is the pioneering predecessor to Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy, and ABC model is often used in a CBT interventions. This study use ABC model to map client's problems, to help client classifying the activating events 'A', the beliefs 'B', and emotions or consequence 'C'. The use of art supplies in this intervention is to help client engage in sessions of interventions, since the client tend to feel sleepy during treatment. Safety plan is commonly used in self-injury thought and behavior cases, it can be used as reminder for the client when relapse happening or as communication card with the school counselor if crisis happens. In safety plan, there is sections that need to be written by the client, including Triggers, What Should I Do, Where do I can ask for help, Emergency number, and '*Alasan aku bertahan*' or reasons I'm staying.

2. METHOD

This study use qualitative approach using a single case study design to explore the socio-emotional problems in a boarding school. This study use explanatory case study type, this type of case study is to explain the link of the program implementations with program effects [14]. The program in this study took the form of individual counseling sessions for the participant. The researcher observed and documented the counseling process, including the techniques used, the participant's responses, and the changes that occurred over time. The participant is chosen according to her Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) result and the school counselor report. The intervention is focused on to help the client discovering the link between her feeling and behavior, evaluate the negative thoughts, and developing adaptive coping mechanism. The intervention is to prevent the self-injury thoughts and behaviors, with safety plan and art therapy. The research step is started from observation and assessment, analyzing the test result, plan the intervention program, intervention implementation, documentating, and writing the report.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study employed **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)** as the primary intervention, with a **Safety Plan** used as a supporting medium in the final counseling session. According to Kamil (2024), CBT can be effectively applied to clients with self-injurious behavior [15]. CBT targets maladaptive thoughts and behaviors to improve emotional regulation and daily functioning in adolescents [16]. In this study, CBT was implemented using the ABC technique to help identify stressors, examine the relationship between thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, assess the risk of self-harm, and develop adaptive coping strategies tailored to the client.

The intervention was conducted over a total of **six meetings**, consisting of **one pre-intervention meeting** with the school counselor and **five counseling sessions** with the client. Each counseling session lasted **60 minutes**, followed by an additional **30-minute evaluation and discussion with the school counselor** to monitor the client's progress and ensure safety. The pre-meeting with the school counselor aimed to gather initial information about the client's condition, including behavioral reports, risk factors, and previous handling of self-harm tendencies.

During the intervention, the counselor (researcher) acted as a facilitator who guided the client through structured CBT activities, encouraged self-reflection, and provided emotional support. The school counselor played a complementary role in monitoring the client's daily behavior in the boarding school environment, limiting access to harmful objects, and reinforcing strategies discussed during sessions. Each session followed a

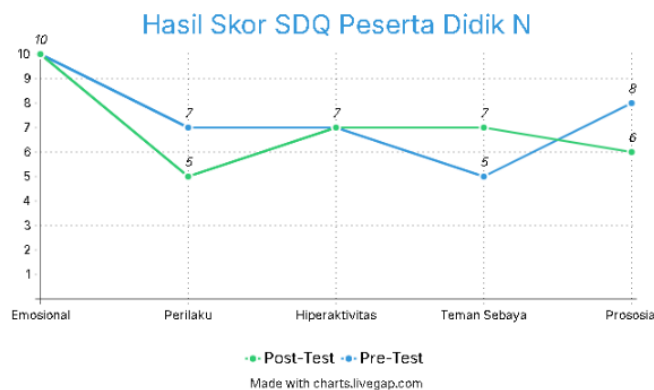
structured sequence: (1) emotional check-in, (2) review of previous progress or incidents, (3) core CBT activity (e.g., ABC analysis or cognitive restructuring), and (4) reflection and session closure.

The client was a seventh-grade student in a government boarding school who experienced socio-emotional difficulties and developed self-harm behavior due to adjustment issues in a new environment. Being away from home and experiencing strong homesickness contributed to overwhelming emotions. Observations at the school indicated that peer relationships were not well-established at the beginning of the research. The client perceived her peers as less supportive, as reflected in her statement: “...Diolesi balsam sama teman-teman. Dipaksa biar enggak barcode lagi.” (Translation: The client reported that her friends tried to stop her from engaging in self-harm—“barcode,” or slashing her wrist—by applying hot balm to her hand, causing a stinging sensation.) Additionally, the school counselor reported ongoing self-injury thoughts, including attempts to find sharp objects to harm herself. Preventive actions were taken by removing such objects from her environment. Although self-harm thoughts and behaviors may not fully disappear, they can decrease in frequency and intensity over time [17].

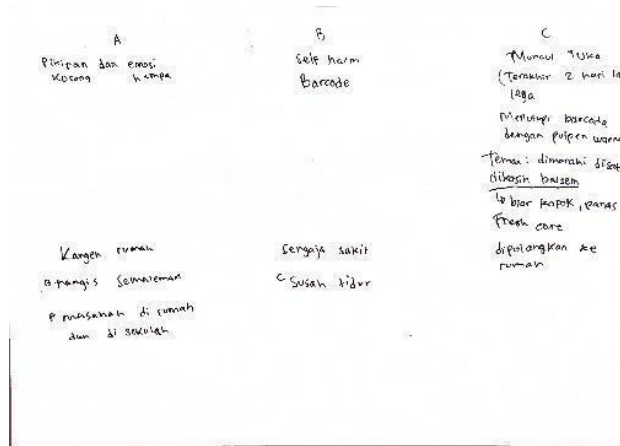
The intervention process consisted of five structured sessions. **Session 1 (Rapport Building):** The counselor focused on establishing trust and creating a safe space. The client initially showed reluctance to share personal experiences; therefore, engagement strategies such as art materials and informal conversation were used. **Session 2 (Problem Identification):** The client reported sleep disturbances due to frequent crying at night caused by homesickness, which also affected her academic performance. At this stage, she had refrained from self-harm for five days. The counselor introduced the ABC model and guided the client in identifying activating events, beliefs, and consequences. **Session 3 (Cognitive Exploration):** The ABC assessment was completed, revealing that homesickness and unhealthy peer relationships were the primary contributing factors. Strict boarding school regulations limiting communication with family further intensified the client’s distress. The counselor facilitated cognitive restructuring by helping the client evaluate and reframe maladaptive thoughts.

Session 4 (Coping Strategy and Safety Planning): The counselor guided the client in developing adaptive coping strategies and collaboratively constructed a Safety Plan to manage self-harm urges. The Safety Plan included identifying warning signs, internal coping strategies, social support contacts, and steps to reduce access to harmful objects. Despite a gap between Session 3 and Session 4 due to external factors, the client demonstrated improvement in forming healthier peer relationships, indicating the development of a more supportive environment. **Session 5 (Termination):** The counselor reviewed progress, reinforced coping strategies, and discussed future self-management. As this study was conducted within the limited timeframe of an internship, the intervention was not sufficient to fully resolve the client’s difficulties. Pre- and post-assessment results did not show significant improvement, suggesting that longer intervention duration and more intensive or varied approaches are needed to effectively address self-injury thoughts and behaviors.

The result of SDQ Assessment (Before & After the Treatment)



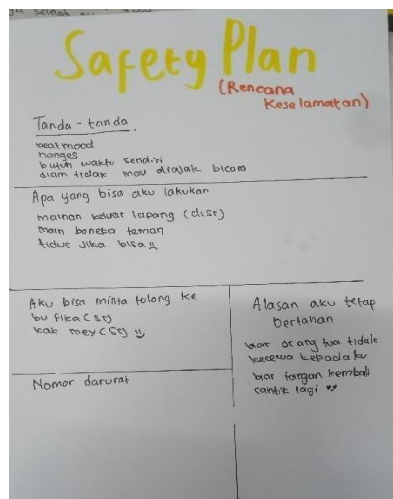
ABC model to explore client’s problem



The use of art supplies to help client keep engaged with the session



Safety Plan



4. CONCLUSION

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) can be used for client with self-injury thought and behavior. CBT defining maladaptive thought into adaptive thought, helping the client to function their daily life better. In the end of the intervention, the client had development in social relationship and stabilizing her emotion. The client had a thought for the future and concern about her self-harm thought and behavior. This research facing challenges in intervention methods and period and client personal situation that might not stable. Developing methods according to the client's personal situation and developmental stages is suitable for future study.

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