

Can Behavioural Activation Strategies tackle the Mental Health Issues of Youth in Pakistan?

A qualitative study to
explore the perspectives
of Youth and Mental
Health Specialists

By: Aatik Arsh

Discussion paper produced under the
Youth Innovation Research Challenge

Key Insights/ Abstract

Pakistan, a developing country, where even basic health facilities are not available, mental health issues of youth are seldom considered in healthcare system. Due to workforce shortages and limited resources in Pakistan, it is not possible to manage mental health issues of youth through mental health specialists. Behavioural activation is a simple and flexible psychotherapy approach which can be used to tackle mental health issues in resource limited settings, nevertheless there is scarce literature available about its use for tackling mental health issues of youth in Pakistan. Therefore, we conducted a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews to identify facilitators and barriers for applying behavioural activation strategies to tackle mental health issues of youth in Pakistan. Interviews were conducted with youth (aged 18 to 29 years) and mental health specialists (psychologists and psychiatrists). Inductive thematic analysis method was used to identify themes from the collected data. The

findings of the study suggested that mental health issues among youth are often neglected in healthcare system. Furthermore, it was reported that mental health issues among youth are mostly associated with poor behavioural patterns and thus focusing on behavioural strategies may be the effective way to manage mental health issues in this population. The participants emphasized that involving youth in activities through behavioural activation strategies is cost effective approach to tackle mental health issues. It is pertinent to mention that majority of participants responded that physical activity & exercises is a preferred method to implement behavioural activation strategies to manage mental health issues in youth. The participants highlighted that physical activity & exercises has positive effect on mental health and thus behavioural activation strategies focusing on physical activity & exercises can have dual effects in improving mental health.

Research Context

Mental health issues are highly prevalent in young individuals, nevertheless, it has not received robust attention from researchers, clinicians, and policy makers (1-3). Pakistan, a developing country, where even basic health facilities are not available, mental health issues of youth are seldom considered in healthcare system. Evidence suggests that academic & social demands, family issues, lack of social support, violence and economic inequalities are some of the major risk factors for developing mental health issues in youth (4,5). The worse picture of this scenario is that if the mental health issues of young individuals are not considered, managed, and treated, it can lead to drug addiction and suicidal thoughts in these young individuals (6).

Due to workforce shortages and limited resources

in Pakistan, it is not possible to manage mental health issues of youth through mental health specialists (7,8). Behavioural activation is a simple and flexible psychotherapy approach which can be self-applied. Behavioural activation focuses on changing unhealthy habits (e.g., sleeping in a daytime, not going to work, not meeting with friends etc.) with healthy habits/ activities (going to work/ university, engaging with family, meeting with friends). This approach can be used to tackle mental health issues, nevertheless there is limited literature available about its use for tackling mental health issues of youth in Pakistan (1-3, 9). Therefore, we want to conduct current study to identify facilitators and barriers for using behavioural activation strategies to tackle mental health issues of youth in Pakistan.

Research Design

Study design and settings: A qualitative study was conducted using semi-structured interviews. The study will be conducted at Khyber Medical University Peshawar, Pakistan.

Participants: were youth and mental health specialists

Youth: Individuals, aged 18 to 29 years, were included.

Mental health specialists: Psychologists and psychiatrist were included.

Recruitment: The participants were identified and invited to participate in the study. Potential participants who fulfil the eligibility criteria were provided with participant information sheets and consent form. Purpose of the study and other relevant information were conveyed in local language. Where literacy levels allow, written informed consent were obtained. Otherwise, the study information sheet were read out by research staff, and a thumbprint signature was obtained to indicate consent.

Data collection: A total of 9 participants were included in the study. The interviews were conducted in local language and were audio-recorded with permission. Interviews were transcribed verbatim in the local language and after that were translated to English. The transcription and translation of the interviews were performed by researchers with proficiency in both English and local languages. The contents in the interview which can potentially disclose the identity of the participants were removed from the final transcripts.

Data analysis: Inductive thematic analysis method was applied for the analysis of collected data. Analysis of the data was performed right after the initial interviews which helped in monitoring the data saturation. NVivo Version 12 was used to assist in data analysis. Initial coding was performed by systematically evaluating the transcribed and translated data and categorizing the collected data. Themes and subthemes were identified accordingly.

Key Findings and Discussion

Targeting mental health needs of young people: All the participants including youth representatives and mental health specialists highlighted the fact that mental health issues are common among youth, however, it has seldom considered in healthcare system of Pakistan. The participants added that mental health issues among youth are often neglected and thus results in devastating outcomes such as chronic depression and suicides.

Need of customized interventions to manage mental health issues of youth: All participants, particularly mental health specialists emphasized that mental health issues of youth are unique and often challenging to manage in clinical settings.

In addition, it is also highlighted that conventional psychotherapy approaches may not be feasible and applicable in managing mental health issues of youth in Pakistan because of high costs associated with taking routine mental health sessions. Moreover, lack of mental health specialists is also a major barrier on focusing mental health issues of youth.

Behavioural strategies to tackle mental health issues of youth: The findings of the study highlighted that mental health issues among youth are often associated with poor behavioural patterns and thus focusing on behavioural strategies may be the effective way to manage mental health issues of youth.

Behavioural activation is feasible and applicable

in Pakistani settings: The hypothetical explanation of behavioural activation was presented to the participants. The participants agree that mental health issues lead to reduction in activities and reduced activities again lead to poor mental health. If not treated, this vicious cycle (mental health issues leading to reduction in activities and reduced activities in turn leading to worse mental health) repeats itself, resulting in devastating outcomes.

The participants emphasized that breaking this vicious cycle is important to manage mental health issues of youth. The participants added that involving youth with mental health issues in

activities through behavioural activation strategies is an effective method to manage mental health issues.

Physical activity & exercise is a cost effective and preferable method to implement behavioural activation strategies:

It is pertinent to mention that majority of participants mentioned that physical activity & exercise is a preferred method to implement behavioural activation strategies to tackle mental health issues. The participants highlighted that physical activity & exercises has positive effect on mental health and thus behavioural activation strategies focusing on physical activity & exercises can have dual effects in improving mental health..

Policy Recommendations

The research study forms the basis for introducing the concepts of behavioural activation for managing mental health issues of youth in Pakistan. Based on the findings of the study, we present following recommendations;

- Mental health issues among youth are on the rise and it is necessary to timely tackle this pandemic. Current practices and policies do not give adequate attention to mental health issues among youth and thus concrete measures are required to tackle mental health issues of youth. It is recommended that national and regional policies should be introduced to tackle the challenges associated with mental health issues of youth in Pakistan.
- Behavioural patterns play an important role in developing mental health issues and thus behavioural strategies can help in managing mental health issues of youth. To promote positive behaviours among youth, behavioural activation is a feasible and applicable approach in resource limited settings. It is recommended that behavioural activation approaches should be introduced at policy levels.
- The findings of current study highlighted that

physical activity & exercises is a cost effective and applicable approach to introduce behavioural activation approaches on large scale. It is recommended that physical activity & exercises should be introduced as a preferred method of behavioural activation to tackle mental health issues of youth in Pakistan.

Research recommendation: Based on the findings of current study, a large scale project can be proposed

- To co-design an intervention based on behavioural activation and physical activity for the treatment of mental health issues in youth.
- To conduct a feasibility trial to assess the feasibility and applicability of the intervention based on behavioural activation and physical activity for the treatment of mental health issues in youth.
- To conduct a clinical trial to assess the clinical and cost effectiveness of the intervention based on behavioural activation and physical activity for the treatment of mental health issues in youth.

References

1. Pass L, Lejuez CW, Reynolds S. Brief behavioural activation (Brief BA) for adolescent depression: A pilot study. *Behavioural and cognitive psychotherapy*. 2018 Mar;46(2):182-94.
2. Jacob M, L. Keeley M, Ritschel L, Craighead WE. Behavioural activation for the treatment of low-income, African American adolescents with major depressive disorder: A case series. *Clinical psychology & psychotherapy*. 2013 Jan;20(1):87-96.
3. Tindall L, Mikocka-Walus A, McMillan D, Wright B, Hewitt C, Gascoyne S. Is behavioural activation effective in the treatment of depression in young people? A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*. 2017 Dec;90(4):770-96.
4. Hamdani SU, Huma ZE, Tamizuddin-Nizami A. Debate: Child and adolescent mental health services in Pakistan; Do we need in-patient mental health facilities for children and young people?. *Child and adolescent mental health*. 2021 May;26(2):182-3.
5. Ali N, McLachlan N, Kanwar S, Randhawa G. Pakistani young people's views on barriers to accessing mental health services. *International Journal of Culture and Mental Health*. 2017 Jan 2;10(1):33-43.
6. Ali TM, Gul S. Community mental health services in Pakistan: Review study from Muslim world 2000-2015. *Psychology, Community & Health*. 2018 Aug 3;7(1).
7. Ly KH, Janni E, Wrede R, Sedem M, Donker T, Carlbring P, Andersson G. Experiences of a guided smartphone-based behavioral activation therapy for depression: a qualitative study. *Internet Interventions*. 2015 Mar 1;2(1):60-8.
8. Stathopoulou G, Powers MB, Berry AC, Smits JA, Otto MW. Exercise interventions for mental health: a quantitative and qualitative review. *Clinical psychology: Science and practice*. 2006;13(2):179.
9. Gathright EC, Vickery KD, Ayenew W, Whited MC, Adkins-Hempel M, Chrastek M, Carter JK, Rosen RK, Wu WC, Busch AM. The development and pilot testing of a behavioral activation-based treatment for depressed mood and multiple health behavior change in patients with recent acute coronary syndrome. *Plos one*. 2022 Feb 3;17(2):e0261490.

