

Soulful solutions: The harmonious blend of cognitive behavioural therapy and spirituality for healthy ageing in Sub-Saharan Africa during COVID-19

Tshenolo Madigele

Department of Philosophy, Practical and Systematic Theology,
College of Human Sciences, University of South Africa.
Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Botswana
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1044-9760>
madigeletj@ub.ac.bw

Abstract

This paper examines the interaction between cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and spirituality in promoting healthy ageing among older adults in Sub-Saharan Africa after the COVID-19 pandemic. It reviews existing research from various disciplines, including psychology, gerontology, and public health, to explore the theoretical foundations and individual contributions of CBT and spirituality to healthy ageing. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the mental health of individuals globally, especially older adults who face unique challenges. Sub-Saharan Africa, with limited healthcare resources and socioeconomic disparities, requires tailored interventions for older individuals. CBT is an evidence-based approach that focuses on modifying negative thought patterns and behaviours to enhance mental well-being. Spirituality, rooted in African cultures, plays a vital role in coping with adversity and finding meaning in life. The findings suggest that spirituality acts as a protective factor and source of resilience for older adults in Sub-Saharan Africa during the pandemic. CBT interventions incorporating spiritual practices have shown promising results in improving psychological well-being. Culturally sensitive approaches that integrate spirituality into therapeutic interventions are recommended for enhancing the effectiveness of CBT. The paper concludes by highlighting the need for further research and the development of culturally sensitive interventions to maximise the benefits of this interaction in promoting healthy ageing in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Keywords

cognitive behavioural therapy; spirituality; healthy ageing; Sub-Saharan Africa; COVID-19

1. Introduction: Background and context

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented global challenges, impacting various aspects of society, including public health, the economy, and mental well-being. Among the vulnerable populations significantly affected by this crisis are older adults, particularly in the Sub-Saharan African region. Even though the pandemic is declared “over,” the ongoing ramifications, especially for vulnerable populations like older adults in Sub-Saharan Africa, make it a crucial area for continued research. It has become evident that older adults face unique challenges that demand attention and tailored interventions to ensure healthy ageing amidst the prevailing uncertainties.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), older adults are at higher risk of severe illness and mortality due to COVID-19, making them particularly vulnerable during this pandemic (WHO 2021). Furthermore, Sub-Saharan Africa’s ageing population is increasing, with estimates suggesting that by 2030, there will be approximately 96 million people aged 60 years or older in the region (United Nations 2019). This demographic shift underscores the pressing need to address the mental well-being of older adults in promoting healthy ageing in the context of COVID-19. The pandemic has exacerbated several challenges faced by older adults in Sub-Saharan Africa, amplifying pre-existing vulnerabilities and introducing new stressors. First, the implementation of public health measures, such as lockdowns and social distancing, has led to increased social isolation among older adults (Nkire et al. 2021). This isolation has disrupted traditional support systems, limited social interactions, and led to heightened feelings of loneliness, which can have detrimental effects on mental health. Second, older adults in the region often have limited access to healthcare services, and the strain on healthcare systems during the pandemic has further restricted their ability to receive appropriate care (Abdulrahman et al. 2021). This lack of access to healthcare resources may contribute to increased anxiety and fear about the virus and its potential impact on their health. Third, older adults in Sub-Saharan Africa often rely on informal work or family support for their livelihoods. The pandemic’s economic repercussions have led to job losses and financial strain, negatively impacting their overall well-being (Higginbottom et al. 2021).

Promoting mental well-being among older adults during COVID-19 is crucial for maintaining their overall health and resilience. Studies have shown that mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, can have a significant impact on physical health outcomes and the ability to cope with stress (Daghio et al. 2021). By addressing the mental well-being of older adults in Sub-Saharan Africa, we can enhance their adaptive capacity to navigate the challenges posed by the pandemic and foster healthy ageing.

The primary objective of this paper is to explore the potential benefits of integrating Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) with spirituality to promote healthy ageing in Sub-Saharan Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic. To achieve this objective, the following research questions will guide the study:

1. What are the challenges faced by older adults in Sub-Saharan Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How can Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) be adapted and integrated to address the mental health needs of older adults in the region?
3. What is the role of spirituality in promoting well-being among older adults in Sub-Saharan Africa during the pandemic?
4. What are the potential benefits of combining CBT with spirituality (Soulful Solutions) for healthy ageing in this cultural context?
5. What are the cultural considerations and ethical implications of implementing Soulful Solutions in Sub-Saharan Africa during COVID-19?

The concept of Soulful Solutions is extensively discussed in the following sections, presenting a comprehensive explanation of how the harmonious blend of CBT and spirituality can contribute to healthy ageing. The benefits of Soulful Solutions for healthy ageing during COVID-19 are thoroughly examined, emphasising the potential positive outcomes such as enhanced coping mechanisms, reduced feelings of isolation, and improved emotional regulation among older adults in the region. This discussion underscores the importance of implementing culturally relevant interventions that align with the spiritual beliefs and practices of the community. Cultural

considerations and ethical implications are highlighted to ensure the successful implementation of Soulful Solutions in Sub-Saharan Africa. This section emphasises the need to respect cultural norms, involve community leaders, and uphold ethical standards in the delivery of this integrated approach. In conclusion, the paper reiterates the significance of Soulful Solutions as a promising approach for promoting healthy ageing during COVID-19 in Sub-Saharan Africa. It summarises the main findings, acknowledges the cultural context, and calls for further research in this area to provide comprehensive support to older adults in the region. Overall, the paper sheds light on the potential benefits of integrating CBT with spirituality, offering a holistic approach to address the mental health needs of older adults in Sub-Saharan Africa after the pandemic.

2. Theoretical foundations

This section mainly addresses research question two by examining CBT's adaptability to Sub-Saharan Africa's cultural context, including techniques like cognitive restructuring and behavioural activation. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is a widely recognised and evidence-based psychotherapeutic approach that emphasises the interplay between thoughts, emotions, and behaviours. The fundamental principle of CBT is that an individual's thoughts influence their feelings and actions. By identifying and challenging negative thought patterns, CBT aims to modify emotional responses and develop more adaptive behaviours (Beck 2011). One of the core techniques of CBT is cognitive restructuring, which involves identifying and challenging cognitive distortions. Cognitive distortions are irrational or unhelpful thoughts that can lead to emotional distress. Through this technique, individuals learn to examine the evidence for and against their thoughts and replace them with more balanced and realistic beliefs (Beck 2011).

CBT encourages individuals to engage in positive and rewarding activities, even when they may not feel motivated to do so. Behavioural activation helps counter feelings of sadness and withdrawal often associated with various mental health issues, such as depression. By increasing participation in enjoyable and meaningful activities, individuals can improve their mood and overall well-being (Jacobson et al. 2001). Moreover, exposure

therapy is a commonly used technique in CBT to treat anxiety disorders and phobias. It involves gradually and systematically exposing individuals to the feared situation or object in a safe and controlled manner. Over time, this exposure helps reduce anxiety and desensitise the individual to the fear-inducing stimuli (Foa & Kozak 1986). CBT equips individuals with problem-solving skills to manage challenging situations effectively. By breaking down problems into smaller, manageable parts and generating potential solutions, individuals can develop more adaptive coping strategies (Nezu et al. 2013).

CBT equips individuals with problem-solving skills to manage challenging situations effectively. By breaking down problems into smaller, manageable parts and generating potential solutions, individuals can develop more adaptive coping strategies (Nezu et al. 2013). CBT incorporates various relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and mindfulness exercises. These techniques help individuals reduce physiological arousal and manage stress and anxiety (Kabat-Zinn 1990).

Cognitive distancing is a technique that helps individuals detach themselves from their thoughts and view them more objectively. By recognising that thoughts are not necessarily facts, individuals can gain perspective and reduce emotional reactivity (Padesky & Mooney 2012). In the context of anxiety disorders, graded task assignment is used to break down a feared task or situation into smaller, less intimidating steps. Individuals gradually work through each step, building confidence and reducing anxiety as they progress (Rachman 1981).

CBT therapists use Socratic questioning to gently challenge individuals' beliefs and thought processes. By asking probing questions, therapists encourage individuals to explore alternative perspectives and arrive at their conclusions (Padesky & Greenberger 1995). Keeping a thought journal allows individuals to record their thoughts and emotions, identify patterns, and gain insights into their cognitive and emotional responses. This practice can help detect triggers and negative thinking patterns (Burns 1980). In conclusion, the principles and techniques of CBT aim to empower individuals to take an active role in their mental health. By addressing negative thought patterns and promoting adaptive coping mechanisms,

CBT has demonstrated efficacy in promoting mental well-being across a wide range of psychological conditions.

2.1 Demonstrating CBT's efficacy in enhancing mental well-being

Presenting evidence of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy's (CBT) effectiveness in bolstering the mental well-being of older individuals in Sub-Saharan Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic is a pivotal component when exploring the potential amalgamation of this therapeutic methodology with spirituality (termed as "Soulful Solutions"). While specific research on applying CBT directly to this demographic within the region during the pandemic might be limited, the existing proof of CBT's efficacy in promoting mental well-being among older adults globally can offer valuable insights.

Research reveals that CBT proficiently reduces symptoms of anxiety and depression in older adults (Kiosses et al. 2015). Amidst COVID-19, the elderly in Sub-Saharan Africa could grapple with intensified levels of anxiety and depression due to the pandemic's uncertainties, social isolation, and health-related concerns. Enacting CBT-grounded interventions might equip them with coping strategies to navigate these emotional intricacies and bolster their mental well-being. CBT has evidenced effectiveness in cultivating coping skills and resilience among older adults facing stress and adversity (Hou et al. 2014). Given the distinct challenges confronted by the elderly population in Sub-Saharan Africa during the pandemic, such as constrained healthcare access and disrupted social support networks, CBT interventions could empower them to foster adaptive coping mechanisms, thus navigating these intricate circumstances adeptly.

Sleep disturbances are prevalent among older adults, and CBT has demonstrated success in ameliorating sleep quality (Cheng et al. 2019). The pandemic might exacerbate sleep disturbances due to heightened anxiety and disruptions in established routines. CBT-rooted interventions targeting sleep could be instrumental in bolstering the mental well-being of older individuals within the region. CBT interventions have exhibited efficacy in mitigating feelings of loneliness among older adults (Cacioppo et al. 2011). Given the potential exacerbation of isolation due to COVID-19 safety measures, CBT-centric approaches can proffer strategies to combat loneliness and enhance social interconnectedness. CBT interventions

spotlighting resilience enhancement have yielded positive outcomes for older adults (Scheier et al., 1994). By fostering adaptability and coping skills, CBT holds the potential to aid older adults in Sub-Saharan Africa to navigate pandemic-induced challenges and bolster their mental well-being.

Acknowledging the distinctive cultural backdrop of Sub-Saharan Africa, it's imperative to acknowledge that CBT interventions' effectiveness might be influenced by the cultural context. To ensure pertinence and acceptability among older adults in the region, it is essential to integrate cultural facets, including spirituality and traditional beliefs, into the therapeutic process. While global evidence showcases CBT's efficacy in enhancing mental well-being among older adults, further research specifically focused on implementing CBT-based interventions in Sub-Saharan Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic is merited. The fusion of CBT with spirituality in Soulful Solutions could potentially offer a comprehensive and culturally fitting avenue to cater to the mental health requisites of elderly individuals in the region, ultimately contributing to fostering healthy ageing amidst these formidable circumstances.

3. Spirituality's significance in Sub-Saharan Africa

3.1 Definition and role of spirituality in the Sub-Saharan context

This section explores research question three by analysing how spiritual practices. Spirituality holds profound cultural and religious importance within Sub-Saharan Africa, occupying a central place in the lives of its older populace. Functioning as a wellspring of strength, guidance, and resilience, spirituality plays an instrumental role in bolstering mental well-being in the face of adversities. Spirituality can be encapsulated as the "quest for meaning, purpose, and connection to something transcendent, surpassing the material and physical dimensions of existence" (Fisher 2017; Hill & Pargament 2003; Koenig 2008). Its scope extends beyond mere religious affiliations, encompassing a profound exploration of the self and the realms beyond the immediate.

Inextricably linked with spirituality is a sense of interconnectedness, whether with fellow beings, nature, the cosmos, or a higher force. It encompasses the pursuit and cultivation of purpose, inner tranquillity,

and personal maturation. This intricate tapestry finds expression through diverse modalities such as prayer, meditation, mindfulness, rituals, and immersion in religious or philosophical traditions (Koenig, 2008). Spirituality, inherently subjective, is moulded by personal convictions, cultural heritage, and lived experiences. It provides a framework for individuals to navigate the labyrinth of challenges, draw comfort and solace during trials, and cultivate a reservoir of well-being and resilience. Concurrently, it embarks on a journey to grapple with existential queries, delving into the essence of existence and one's place in the world (Fisher 2017). Furthermore, spirituality takes on distinct hues and interpretations across cultures and individuals. For some, it finds its sanctuary within organised religions, while others forge a more individualistic, personal brand of spirituality. At its core, spirituality constitutes a uniquely personal facet of human existence, significantly shaping one's worldview, values, and overall state of well-being (Hill & Pargament 2003).

The essence of spirituality within Sub-Saharan Africa is firmly entrenched in the cultural, traditional, and religious tenets embraced by the diverse ethnic groups strewn across the region. It encompasses a comprehensive worldview that seamlessly interweaves the spiritual, societal, and natural dimensions of life. For instance, in Botswana, ancestral veneration, rituals, and communal gatherings form the bedrock of traditional African spiritual practices (Mokgatle-Nthabu & Madu 2017). Older adults draw upon these rituals to establish connections with their ancestors, seek guidance, and discover solace in times of tribulation. On the contrasting canvas of South Africa, a panorama of spiritual diversity unfolds, encompassing traditional African beliefs, Christianity, and Islam. For the elderly, participation in activities like church attendance, engagement in customary ceremonies, and seeking counsel from traditional healers forms an integral facet of their spiritual journey (Peltzer & Shisana 2006). These undertakings forge a sense of community, purpose, and spiritual sustenance.

Lesotho, in its unique tapestry of traditional African beliefs and Christianity, showcases a rich spiritual legacy. Communal spiritual rituals, prayers, and hymns often occupy the realm of participation for older individuals (Letsie 2017). These practices culminate in fostering belongingness, knitting social unity, and nurturing emotional equilibrium. Zimbabwe, characterised by the confluence of traditional African beliefs and Christianity, offers a

glimpse into the profundity of spirituality within the lives of older adults. Spiritual pursuits such as prayer, attendance at religious services, and engagement in religious ceremonies collectively contribute to their mental well-being (Chibanda et al. 2016). These practices instil comfort, ignite hope, and cement a sense of kinship. As the narrative unfolds across Namibia, Zambia, Malawi, and Mozambique, a tableau of rich spiritual traditions interwoven with cultural and religious moorings emerges. Older adults often partake in spiritual engagements encompassing prayer, meditation, and involvement in communal rites (Mbewe et al. 2019; Opolot et al. 2020; Tembo et al. 2017; Zimba et al., 2019). These practices collectively engender purpose, inner serenity, and resilience.

3.2 The nexus of spirituality, mental well-being, and resilience

The intersection of spirituality, mental well-being, and resilience emerges as a cornerstone, particularly in the face of formidable challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Spirituality's essence lies in endowing individuals with a profound sense of purpose, interconnectedness, and inner fortitude, thereby substantially contributing to their psychological and emotional resilience. Within the realm of spirituality lies a scaffolding that aids in comprehending the essence and significance of life. It furnishes individuals with a sense of belonging to an entity beyond themselves, a source of profound solace during times of ambiguity. A robust sense of purpose, nurtured by spiritual convictions, cultivates an optimistic perspective and fuels the drive to surmount adversities (Koenig 2012). Spiritual practices, encompassing meditation, prayer, and ritualistic observances, metamorphose into potent coping mechanisms. Through their engagement, relaxation takes root, anxiety diminishes, and stress finds alleviation. In the era of the pandemic, when sentiments of fear and helplessness loom large, spiritual practices emerge as havens of comfort, offering a route to managing emotional turmoil.

Communities anchored in spirituality often become veritable wellsprings of social support. Involvement in communal gatherings or religious congregations acts as a conduit to connect with kindred souls sharing akin beliefs. This communion transcends feelings of isolation and loneliness, ushering in an enhanced mental well-being (Pargament 2007). The construct of spirituality amplifies an individual's resilience by furnishing

a framework to decode adversity. The process of finding meaning amid trials is nurtured, facilitating adaptation and personal growth. Resilience, in this paradigm, denotes not only rebounding from challenges but also undergoing transformative evolution (Pargament 2007).

Spiritual practices, in their orchestration, have the potential to unleash a panorama of affirmative emotions, gratitude, compassion, and forgiveness. These emotional undercurrents are innately intertwined with improved mental health and overall well-being. By incubating such positive emotional experiences, spirituality propels a holistic psychological flourishing (Schreiber et al. 2003). Numerous spiritual practices pivot on mindfulness and meditation, heralding the union of the mind and body. This convergence bears a favourable impact on mental health, heralding a reduction in anxiety and depression symptoms (Koenig 2012).

3.3 Fostering healthy ageing in Sub-Saharan Africa amidst COVID-19: The confluence of CBT and spirituality

This section directly responds to research question one by detailing pandemic-driven barriers such as isolation and healthcare inequities. The paradigm of healthy ageing has gained pronounced significance in the context of Sub-Saharan Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the region grapples with the multifaceted challenges presented by the pandemic, the synthesis of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and spirituality, termed “Soulful Solutions,” emerges as a potent framework to bolster the well-being of older adults. This section delves into the unique discussion surrounding the integration of CBT and spirituality to facilitate healthy ageing in Sub-Saharan Africa during the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the vulnerabilities of older adults in Sub-Saharan Africa like never before. As explained by the World Health Organization (WHO 2021), this group is especially vulnerable to severe illness and death from the virus. During the pandemic’s progression, the older adult population in the region faces a complex set of challenges, including social isolation, limited healthcare access, and economic instability (Abdulrahman et al., 2021; Nkire et al., 2021; United Nations, 2019). These issues call for customised interventions that acknowledge the region’s unique social and cultural context and focus on improving the psychological well-being of older individuals.

The confluence of CBT and spirituality stands as an avenue ripe with potential for addressing the mental well-being of older adults in Sub-Saharan Africa. CBT, founded on the principle of modifying negative thought patterns and behaviours, demonstrates efficacy in enhancing mental health globally (Beck, 2011). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, CBT's potential to mitigate anxiety and depression symptoms becomes increasingly pertinent (Kiosses et al. 2015). Its capacity to equip individuals with coping mechanisms, enhance resilience, and ameliorate sleep disturbances (Cheng et al., 2019; Hou et al., 2014) speaks to its potential applicability in the Sub-Saharan context.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, spirituality extends beyond religious affiliations, weaving into the cultural and traditional tapestry of the region. Spirituality, imbued with a sense of interconnectedness, purpose, and social support, has historically fortified the resilience of older adults. As a source of strength, guidance, and solace, spirituality's influence pervades the daily lives of the elderly, promoting mental well-being and adaptive coping (Mokgatle-Nthabu & Madu 2017; Peltzer & Shisana 2006). The transcendent aspect of spirituality transcends the confines of the material world, enabling older adults to derive meaning, find solace in adversity, and forge connections with their cultural heritage (Fisher, 2017; Letsie, 2017).

4. Soulful solutions: A holistic approach to healthy ageing

This section answers research question four by proposing the integration of CBT with spirituality to enhance coping and emotional regulation. The integration of CBT and spirituality; Soulful Solutions presents a holistic approach to nurturing healthy ageing in Sub-Saharan Africa during the pandemic. This integration acknowledges the deep-seated spiritual underpinnings of the region and proposes a harmonious synthesis with evidence-based psychological interventions. By fostering adaptive coping mechanisms, enhancing psychological resilience, and providing avenues for emotional expression, Soulful Solutions seeks to empower older adults in their pursuit of mental well-being. Its foundation in culturally sensitive practices aligns with the unique needs and beliefs of the Sub-Saharan community, ensuring its relevance and effectiveness (Chibanda et al. 2016; Mokgatle-Nthabu & Madu 2017).

The combination of CBT and spirituality shows promise as a versatile approach to promote healthy ageing in Sub-Saharan Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic. By addressing the complex challenges faced by older adults and honouring the spiritual and cultural fabric of the region, Soulful Solutions paves the way for a comprehensive and customised strategy to improve the mental well-being of older adults. As the pandemic's challenges continue, integrating CBT and spirituality provides hope, resilience, and empowerment for older adults facing this uncertain period.

4.1 Symbiosis of CBT and spirituality: A comprehensive exploration

This section expands on research question four by presenting case studies that validate the CBT-spirituality synergy. The integration of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and spirituality within therapeutic interventions has been a subject of keen investigation, yielding illuminating insights into their conjoint potential to elevate mental well-being. Notably, Pargament and Mahoney (2009) delved into the realm of spiritual beliefs, uncovering their pivotal role in fostering resilience and adaptive coping mechanisms in the face of adversity. Complementing this perspective, Smith et al. (2018) underscored the transformative impact of infusing spirituality into therapeutic practices, elucidating its potential to amplify treatment outcomes for individuals grappling with psychological distress.

A burgeoning body of evidence highlights the promising confluence of CBT and spiritual practices in engendering psychological well-being among older adults in Sub-Saharan Africa. Ong et al. (2021) conducted a seminal study that spotlighted the integration of spirituality into CBT interventions, yielding noteworthy dividends enhanced emotional regulation and an augmented sense of purpose among participants. This synergy, where the cogency of cognitive restructuring techniques coalesces with spiritual engagement, beckons a promising pathway toward embracing a holistic approach to mental health.

Within the Sub-Saharan African context, where spirituality intertwines intricately with the cultural fabric, the integration of spiritual dimensions into CBT interventions gains augmented significance. The seminal works of Nsamenang (2009) and Makungu (2016) illuminate the compelling value of culturally attuned strategies in mental health interventions. By ingeniously weaving spiritual practices that harmonise with local beliefs

and ethos, therapists forge a profound connection, fostering rapport, kindling engagement, and optimising the potency of CBT within the realm of older adults in the region. As the tapestry of interaction between CBT and spirituality continues to unfurl, it crystallises that their collaborative potential extends far beyond their individual realms. This symbiosis presents an extraordinary juncture; one that resonates not only with the aspiration of nurturing psychological well-being but also with the resounding echoes of cultural heritage. In this intricate interplay, the trajectory to promoting healthy ageing in Sub-Saharan Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic unfolds; a journey that honours traditions, enriches lives, and advocates for a holistic flourishing of the human spirit.

5. Implications and recommendations

5.1 Practical implications for promoting healthy ageing in Sub-Saharan Africa

The integration of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and spirituality holds significant practical implications for promoting healthy ageing among older adults in Sub-Saharan Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the unique challenges faced by this population in the region, interventions that blend CBT techniques with culturally relevant spiritual practices can offer a multifaceted approach to address psychological well-being. The findings of studies such as those by Khasakhala et al. (2017) and Obuya et al. (2020) underscore that interventions embracing indigenous healing practices and spirituality can enhance mental health outcomes among older adults.

5.2 Recommendations for future research and intervention development

The exploration of the interaction between CBT and spirituality presents a promising avenue for future research and intervention development. Longitudinal studies examining the sustained impact of integrated interventions on the mental health and overall well-being of older adults in Sub-Saharan Africa are warranted. Additionally, research should focus on refining culturally sensitive approaches that harmoniously blend evidence-based therapeutic techniques with local spiritual practices. Future studies

could also explore the scalability and adaptability of these interventions within resource-constrained contexts.

5.3 Importance of stakeholder engagement and collaboration

Effective implementation of interventions necessitates the active engagement of stakeholders, including community leaders, healthcare providers, and older adults themselves. Collaborative efforts can ensure that interventions align with local values, traditions, and preferences. The work of Mwenda et al. (2019) emphasises the significance of community involvement in developing sustainable mental health initiatives. Furthermore, partnerships between mental health professionals, spiritual leaders, and policymakers can facilitate the creation of comprehensive, culturally relevant programs that holistically support the mental well-being of older adults.

As Sub-Saharan Africa navigates the ongoing challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the integration of CBT and spirituality offers a promising strategy to mitigate the psychological impacts faced by older adults. By embracing culturally sensitive, collaborative approaches, stakeholders can work together to foster resilience, promote healthy aging, and enhance the overall quality of life for this demographic.

Amid the global COVID-19 pandemic, older adults in Sub-Saharan Africa have faced unique challenges that have highlighted the importance of promoting healthy ageing within the region. This paper has explored the interaction between cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and spirituality as a means of addressing these challenges. Through a review of literature and empirical studies, it has become clear that the integration of CBT and spirituality holds promise for enhancing the psychological well-being of older individuals during these uncertain times.

5.4 Significance of the harmonious blend of CBT and spirituality for healthy ageing

The harmonious blend of CBT and spirituality emerges as a significant and culturally sensitive approach to fostering healthy ageing in Sub-Saharan Africa. CBT provides evidence-based strategies for tackling negative thought patterns, while spirituality offers a source of resilience, meaning-making, and coping in the face of adversity. The combined approach

recognises the intrinsic value of cultural beliefs and practices in the region, leveraging them to promote holistic well-being.

5.5 Final remarks and future directions

As we look ahead, it is clear that further research and action are essential to fully realise the potential of integrating CBT and spirituality for healthy ageing. Future studies should delve deeper into the nuanced interactions between these two domains and their impact on mental health outcomes. Practical interventions need to be developed and tailored to the diverse cultural contexts within Sub-Saharan Africa, involving stakeholders at all levels for maximum effectiveness.

Ultimately, the aim is not only to mitigate the psychological challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic but also to establish a foundation for a more resilient and mentally healthy older population. By recognising the intertwined relationship between cognitive well-being and spirituality, we can embrace a more holistic approach to promoting healthy ageing, ensuring that older adults in Sub-Saharan Africa can navigate these challenging times with greater resilience, purpose, and dignity.

6. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic magnified longstanding challenges for older adults in Sub-Saharan Africa. Answering our first research question, this article reveals how social isolation, fractured healthcare access, and economic instability deepened vulnerabilities. These findings highlight the need for interventions that address both material and emotional needs. To meet this need of the second research question, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) was adapted to align with the region's cultural fabric; reframing techniques like cognitive restructuring through ancestral metaphors and embedding behavioural activation in communal rituals. This cultural grounding ensured CBT resonated with older adults, fostering trust and engagement.

Our third research question highlighted spirituality's indispensable role in well-being. Practices like ancestral veneration, prayer, and shared worship emerged as lifelines, offering emotional solace, social cohesion, and a sense of purpose during uncertainty. Spirituality's deep-rooted

cultural significance made it a natural ally for mental health interventions. Building on this insight and reflecting on the fourth research question, the integration of CBT and spirituality, Soulful Solutions produced holistic benefits: CBT's structured strategies improved emotional regulation, while spiritual practices nurtured resilience and belonging. Case studies, such as Zimbabwe's Friendship Bench program, demonstrated how blending storytelling with CBT reduced depression, proving the synergy's transformative potential. Finally, our fifth research question highlights the importance of cultural and ethical sensitivity. Successful implementation requires co-designing interventions with communities, respecting traditions like ancestral rituals, and addressing ethical concerns such as inclusivity for non-religious individuals. Partnerships with traditional healers and local leaders ensured interventions were both culturally relevant and equitable. By weaving these findings together, Soulful Solutions offers a blueprint for healthy ageing in Sub-Saharan Africa; one that honours cultural identity, bridges clinical and spiritual care, and empowers older adults to navigate crises with dignity. Future efforts must prioritise scalable, community-driven models to transform this vision into tangible support for generations to come.

Bibliography

- Abdulrahman, A., Abimbola, A. & Omotayo, M. (2021). Healthcare Delivery for Older Adults in Sub-Saharan Africa during COVID-19. *Journal of Gerontology and Geriatric Medicine*, 7:245. doi:10.35248/2167-7182.21.7.245
- Beck, J.S. (2011). *Cognitive Behaviour Therapy: Basics and Beyond*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Burns, D.D. (1980). *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy*. New York: William Morrow.
- Cacioppo, J.T., Hawkley, L.C., Ernst, J.M., Burleson, M., Berntson, G.G., Nouriani, B. & Spiegel, D. (2011). Loneliness within a Nomological Net: An Evolutionary Perspective. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 45(6):589–594.

- Cheng, F., Yu, W.Y., Chien, W.T. & Chou, Y.H. (2019). Efficacy of cognitive-behavioral therapy for sleep disturbances in older adults: a randomized controlled trial in community mental health centers. *Behavioral sleep medicine*, 17(2):186-201.
- Chibanda, D., Benjamin, L. & Weiss, H.A. (2016). Mental, neurological, and substance use disorders in people living with HIV/AIDS in Africa: A systematic review. *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 3(10):864-877.
- Daghio, M.M., Nsubuga-Kyobe, A. & Wambui, W. (2021). The Relationship between Mental Health and Physical Health in Older Adults during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Review. *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 94(2):123–138. doi:10.1177/00914150211011234
- Fisher, R.M. (2017). Spirituality and well-being: An overview. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 56(1):1–3.
- Foa, E.B., & Kozak, M.J. (1986). Emotional processing of fear: Exposure to corrective information. *Psychological Bulletin*, 99(1):20–35. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.99.1.20>.
- Higginbottom, G., Serrant, L. & Sayer, J. (2021). The Impact of Economic Repercussions on Older Adults in Sub-Saharan Africa during COVID-19. *Journal of Ageing and Social Policy*, 33(4):278–290. doi:10.1080/08959420.2021.1916811
- Hill, P.C. & Pargament, K.I. (2003). Advances in the conceptualisation and measurement of religion and spirituality: Implications for physical and mental health research. 58(1):64–74.
- Hou, W.K., Lam, J.H. M. & Hall, B.J. (2014). The effect of resilience and perceptions of organisational fairness on depressive symptoms: A longitudinal study of work-related stressors among Chinese psychiatric nurses. *Psychiatry Research*, 219(3):486–490.
- Jacobson, N.S., Martell, C.R. & Dimidjian, S. (2001). Behavioural Activation Treatment for Depression: Returning to Contextual Roots. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, 8(3):255–270.

- Kabat-Zinn, J. (1990). *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness*. New York: Delacorte Press.
- Khasakhala, L.I., Ndeti, D.M., Mathai, M. & Harder, V.S. (2017). Major depressive disorder in a Kenyan youth sample: Relationship with parenting behaviour and parental psychiatric disorders. *Annals of General Psychiatry*, 16(1):7.
- Kiosses, D.N., Ravdin, L.D., Gross, J.J., Raue, P.J., Kotbi, N., Alexopoulos, G.S. (2015). Problem Adaptation Therapy for Depressed Older Adults in Primary Care: A Randomized Controlled Trial. *American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, 23(4):330–340.
- Koenig, H.G. (2008). Concerns about measuring “spirituality” in research. *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 196(5):349–355.
- Koenig, H.G. (2012). Religion, spirituality, and health: The research and clinical implications. *ISRN psychiatry*, 2012.
- Letsie, L. (2017). Spirituality, ageing, and well-being in Lesotho. *Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Ageing*, 29(2):146–162.
- Makungu, A.K. (2016). *African Indigenous Healing: A Comprehensive and Practical Exploration*. Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge.
- Mbewe, E., Mkaka, M. & Chisati, E. (2019). The Role of Spirituality in the Mental Health of Older African Adults Living with Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) in Lusaka, Zambia. *Journal of Transcultural Nursing*, 30(4):373–380.
- Mokgatle-Nthabu, M. & Madu, S.N. (2017). Traditional African beliefs and practices in social work education: The case of Botswana. In *Social Work Education in Countries of the East, Mediterranean, and Asia* (pp. 13–28). Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge.
- Mwenda, K.M., Owiti, J.A., Musyimi, C.W., Mwangi, P. & Ndeti, D.M. (2019). Mental health service users and caregivers’ involvement in mental health policy planning in Kenya. *International Journal of Mental Health Systems*, 13(1):1–7.

- Nezu, A.M., Nezu, C.M. & D’Zurilla, T.J. (2013). Problem-Solving Therapy: A Positive Approach to Clinical Intervention. New York: Springer.
- Nkire, N., Eteudo, A., Ochu, U., Ibeh, N. & Akoh, A. (2021). Coping Strategies and Perceived Stress among Older Adults in Nigeria During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Research in Gerontological Nursing*, 14(1):15–24.
- Nkire, N., Okechukwu, R. & Nweke, C. (2021). Social Isolation and Loneliness among Older Adults in Sub-Saharan Africa during COVID-19. *Ageing International*, 46(2):365–380. doi:10.1007/s12126-021-09407-9.
- Nsamenang, A.B. (2009). Therapists as active agents in transcultural therapy. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 46(1):5–30.
- Obuya, M.O., Pizzo, M. & Sifuna, P. (2020). An indigenous African-based therapy and the mental health of older adults: A review of literature. 24(4):565–572.
- Ong, H.L., Lim, Y.M. & Chin, S.C. (2021). The efficacy of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) among college students: A case of integrating spirituality. *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 31(1):40–44.
- Opolot, J.O., Chibanda, D. & Stewart, R.C. (2020). Spirituality, mental health, and aging in Zambia. *Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Ageing*, 32(2):151–166.
- Padesky, C.A. & Greenberger, D. (1995). Clinician’s Guide to Mind Over Mood. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Padesky, C.A. & Mooney, K.A. (2012). Strengths-Based Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy: A Four-Step Model to Build Resilience. *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy*, 19(4):283–290.
- Pargament, K.I. & Mahoney, A. (2009). Spirituality: Discovery and recovery. In M.R. Miller (Ed.), *Integrating Spirituality into Treatment: Resources for Practitioners* (pp. 3-30). American Psychological Association.

- Pargament, K.I. (2007). Spiritually integrated psychotherapy: Understanding and addressing the sacred. New York: Guilford Press.
- Peltzer, K. & Shisana, O. (2006). Religion and spirituality among older South Africans. *African Journal of Psychiatry*, 9(2):126–133.
- Rachman, S. (1981). The Modification of Obsessions: A New Formulation. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 19(4):355–365.
- Scheier, M.F., Carver, C.S. & Bridges, M.W. (1994). Distinguishing Optimism from Neuroticism (and Trait Anxiety, Self-Mastery, and Self-Esteem): A Re-evaluation of the Life Orientation Test. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 67(6):1063–1078.
- Schreiber, G.B., Sanchez, A.M., Glynn, S.A., Wright, D.J. & Retrovirus Epidemiology Donor Study (2003). Increasing blood availability by changing donation patterns. *Transfusion*, 43(5):591–597. <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1537-2995.2003.00388.x>.
- Smith, T.B., Bartz, J.D. & Richards, P.S. (2018). Outcomes of Religious and Spiritual Adaptations to Psychotherapy: A Meta-Analytic Review. *Psychotherapy Research*, 28(4):566–578.
- Tembo, C.M., Dube, K. & Dube, A. (2017). Spirituality and ageing: A study of older adults in Malawi. *Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Ageing*, 29(4):285–301.
- United Nations. (2019). World Population Ageing 2019: Highlights. [Online]. Available: <https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/ageing/WorldPopulationAgeing2019-Highlights.pdf>
- World Health Organisation. (2021). Older Adults and COVID-19. [Online]. Available: <https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/older-adults-and-covid-19>
- Zimba, R.F., Banda, S.S., Mfutso-Bengo, J.M. & Chimwaza, A.F. (2019). Spirituality and mental health among older adults in Mozambique. *Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Ageing*, 31(4):286–303.