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**THE ROLE OF CBT-BASED JOURNALING IN PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING AND  
SELF-ESTEEM: A NARRATIVE REVIEW**

**Abstract**

Therapeutic writing practices have gained increasing attention as supportive tools within psychological interventions. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) techniques aim to identify individuals' negative automatic thoughts and distorted cognitive patterns and replace them with more adaptive and balanced thought patterns. For this purpose, journaling is one of the effective techniques that facilitates the identification and processing of thoughts, emotions, and experiences. By externalizing internal cognitive and emotional states, individuals can gain deeper self-awareness and challenge maladaptive patterns of thinking. Within therapeutic contexts, particularly in CBT-based approaches, journaling serves as a practical tool for cognitive restructuring and the improvement of psychological well-being. The aim of this narrative review is to investigate the role of journaling (structured daily writing), based on CBT techniques, in psychological well-being and self-esteem of the individuals. Empirical and theoretical studies on the topic were identified through academic databases, and synthesized to examine common findings and theoretical perspectives. The findings of this review show that CBT-based journaling supports cognitive restructuring by enhancing emotional self-awareness and thought monitoring in individuals. This process may contribute to modifying negative thinking patterns, improving emotional regulation, strengthening coping strategies, and ultimately increasing psychological well-being and self-esteem.

**Keywords:** CBT, self-esteem, well-being, journaling, cognitive-behavioral therapy.

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**Introduction**

The main components of mental health and life satisfaction are psychological well-being and self-esteem. Low levels of psychological well-being and self-esteem are connected with a range of psychological difficulties, including stress, anxiety, depression, and maladaptive coping strategies [1,2]. Accordingly, identifying attainable and powerful interventions that can support individuals' emotional and cognitive functioning has become a crucial focus in psychological research. For that reason, there

is an effective, the most known evidence-based behavioral perspective – Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). CBT helps individuals to control their emotional troubles and dysfunctional thinking patterns. Based on CBT, most of the thoughts, emotions, and behaviors of individuals are associated. Therefore, common use of CBT makes important growth in emotional well-being and behavioral patterns.

In recent years, expressive and structured writing interventions have received increasing attention as complementary tools in

psychological treatment. When journaling is organized according to CBT principles, individuals are encouraged to track their thoughts, identify cognitive distortions, and replace maladaptive beliefs with more balanced interpretations. Research indicates that regular gratitude journaling may contribute not only to short-term positive emotional experiences but also to long-term improvements in overall mental health [3,6]. As well as enriching emotional well-being, gratitude journaling strengthens interpersonal relationships by promoting a deeper sense of appreciation and connection toward the people who provide us with support and care [4,5]. While gratitude journaling has been widely studied within positive psychology, it can be conceptualized as one component of CBT-based journaling, which encompasses a broader and more structured framework grounded in cognitive restructuring techniques. CBT-based journaling represents a structured form of expressive writing that integrates cognitive restructuring techniques, distinguishing it from broader forms of gratitude or expressive writing. A recent randomized feasibility study by Krentzman [6] examined a journaling intervention grounded in CBT and positive psychology principles among individuals in recovery. The results showed that structured journaling, i.e. incorporating techniques such as cognitive reframing and behavioral activation, was experienced as more useful and engaging compared to control conditions, particularly in the early stages of recovery [6]. These findings indicate that CBT-informed journaling can support emotional well-being and encourage more adaptive behavioral patterns by helping individuals focus on positive experiences and meaningful actions.

Although both CBT and journaling interventions have been widely studied independently, their combined application, particularly in the form of CBT-based journaling, has not yet been comprehensively synthesized in relation to psychological well-being and self-esteem. Existing research tends to examine these constructs separately, leaving a conceptual gap in understanding how

structured, CBT-informed writing practices specifically contribute to improvements in these domains. Accordingly, the main aim of this study is, to show theoretical and practical importance of CBT-based journaling for improving self-esteem and psychological well-being [7].

**Conceptual foundations of CBT and CBT-based journaling.** CBT originated from the 1950s work of Albert Ellis, with Dr. Aaron T. Beck later refining the framework in the 1960s. Since then, it has become one of the most widely used and important treatment approaches [8]. One of the evidence-based and commonly used behavioral approach for most emotional disorders is CBT. Because of most of thoughts, behaviors and feeling of people are related, it creates psychological stress, as explained by CBT.

According to Beck's cognitive theory of depression [34], individuals experiencing depression often interpret situations in a negative or distorted way, which can reinforce feelings of hopelessness or low self-esteem. CBT aims to help individuals identify these maladaptive thinking patterns and gradually replace them with more balanced and realistic interpretations. At the same time, CBT also focuses on behavioral changes that encourage individuals to engage in more adaptive activities and coping strategies. Traditional CBT is usually delivered through structured sessions with a trained therapist. During therapy, individuals learn to recognize automatic negative thoughts, evaluate their accuracy, and develop alternative ways of thinking. Techniques such as cognitive restructuring, behavioral activation, and problem-solving are commonly used to address both cognitive and behavioral aspects of distress [9]. Over time, these strategies help individuals develop more flexible thinking patterns and reduce the emotional impact of stressful experiences.

CBT journaling represents a broader and more structured framework within which gratitude journaling may be incorporated, although the two approaches differ in emphasis and theoretical grounding. In recent years, CBT-based journaling has gained increasing

attention as a self-guided or supplementary approach derived from the principles of CBT. CBT journaling involves structured writing exercises in which individuals regularly record their thoughts, emotions, and reactions to daily experiences [6,7]. Positive psychology has increasingly focused on gratitude not just as a passing feeling, but as a deeper mindset of appreciating life's positives and others' support, which ultimately helps people build resilience, improve their relationships, and foster long-term personal growth [4]. Research suggests that practicing gratitude doesn't just reduce depressive symptoms; it triggers a range of other psychological shifts that help explain why it's so effective for boosting overall mood [15]. Through repeated journaling, individuals may begin to recognize recurring negative beliefs and gradually develop more adaptive ways of interpreting situations.

Both CBT journaling and traditional CBT have similar conceptual framework, but there are also some dissimilarities between them. The main dissimilarity is the degree of counselor's recommendations. In traditional CBT, the therapist plays an active role in guiding the client through cognitive restructuring and helping them challenge distorted thinking patterns. The therapist can also provide feedback, clarification, and support when individuals struggle to apply cognitive techniques. CBT journaling may offer several practical advantages. It is relatively low-cost, accessible, and can be practiced independently without requiring continuous professional supervision. This makes it a useful intervention for individuals who may not have easy access to psychological services [4].

**Neurobiological and clinical mechanisms of CBT.** Recent studies indicate that CBT is effective not only at the psychological level but also at the neurological level, as it has been shown to induce both functional and structural changes in brain regions associated with emotional regulation and cognitive control [10-13]. Brain imaging research has begun to map out a specific "gratitude network," with fMRI studies

consistently highlighting several key regions when people reflect on being helped or feeling thankful. These regions include medial and ventromedial prefrontal cortex (involved in processing moral values and our own self-narrative), anterior cingulate cortex (involved in emotional appraisal and social reward), ventral striatum / nucleus accumbens (area confirming that feeling grateful is inherently satisfying, driven by dopamine release), and *temporo-parietal junction* (involved in perspective-taking, our ability to understand the effort and intent behind someone's generosity) [5]. CBT appears to enhance the prefrontal cortex's capacity to exert top-down control over subcortical regions, thereby improving the brain's ability to regulate emotional responses [14].

Several studies have examined both antidepressant medication and CBT and have found that their effectiveness in treating depression is generally comparable [9]. However, the benefits of CBT tend to last longer over time. Despite their differences, both approaches appear to influence similar underlying processes in reducing acute depressive symptoms. At the same time, treatment outcomes may vary depending on individual factors, such as whether a person has experienced early life trauma, highlighting the importance of considering personal history in treatment planning. Overall, most findings suggest that the most effective approach to treating depression is a combination of both CBT and antidepressant medication rather than relying on only one method [9].

#### **Psychological well-being conception.**

As being comprehensive concept, psychological well-being based on people's appraise of their daily life situations with behaviorally and emotionally [16]. This conception covers individual's specific functioning through social, personal, behavioral, and emotional. People with high level of psychological well-being, can make helpful, caring, and healthy relationships in social circumstances and they function effectively in their daily life [17]. Some aspects of life, like social and environmental, also affects well-being differently [1]. For

maintaining strong well-being, healthy relationships, with supporting and positive influence, are very effective in this period.

In addition, factors such as socioeconomic conditions, cultural context, and life experiences can influence how individuals perceive and evaluate their lives. This suggests that well-being is shaped not only by internal processes but also by external circumstances.

Cognitive processes play an important role, as the way individuals interpret their experiences can influence their emotional responses. For example, individuals who tend to interpret events in a more balanced or optimistic way are more likely to experience higher levels of well-being [35]. Behavioral factors, including engagement in meaningful activities, social interaction, and goal-directed behavior, are also essential for well-being. These elements are closely related to concepts used in cognitive behavioral approaches, where changes in thinking and behavior can lead to improvements in emotional well-being.

**Self-esteem concept.** Self-esteem is a fundamental psychological construct that refers to how individuals evaluate their own worth and value [18]. It can be understood as an individual's evaluation of their abilities and personal qualities across different areas such as intellectual functioning, work performance, social competence, physical appearance, and athletic ability, and it primarily reflects subjective perceptions and feelings about these attributes rather than an objective assessment of one's actual capabilities [2]. One of the early and widely accepted definitions of self-esteem was created by Morris Rosenberg, who described it as a global evaluation of the self, ranging from positive to negative attitudes toward oneself [18]. From this perspective, individuals with high self-esteem tend to view themselves as competent and worthy, while those with low self-esteem are more likely to experience self-doubt and negative self-perceptions. Importantly, self-esteem is not only about feeling good about oneself, but also about maintaining a safe and realistic sense of self-worth. When self-esteem is high, individuals tend to view themselves as valued

and respected by others, which encourages behaviors that help maintain and strengthen social relationships; in contrast, low self-esteem is often associated with a sense of threatened social standing, triggering emotional reactions that motivate efforts to regain acceptance and connection [19,20]. From the sociometer perspective, self-esteem can therefore be understood as an affective system that continuously monitors and responds to cues of social inclusion or rejection [21]. Higher levels of self-esteem are generally linked to better emotional regulation, greater resilience to stress, and more adaptive coping strategies [22]. Individuals with higher self-esteem are also more likely to engage in positive social interactions and pursue personal goals with confidence. In contrast, low self-esteem has been associated with increased vulnerability to mental health difficulties, including depression and anxiety.

**The association between psychological well-being and self-esteem.** Psychological well-being and self-esteem are closely related concepts that both contribute to an individual's overall mental health and functioning. While psychological well-being refers to broader aspects of positive functioning, such as purpose in life, personal growth, and quality of relationships, self-esteem reflects a person's evaluation of their own worth. Although these concepts are ideally distinct, research consistently shows that they are strongly interconnected and tend to influence one another over time [23,24,25]. The results of the study by Çiçek İ. et al. (2021) that was conducted among university students showed that self-esteem appears to be a primary driver of both psychological and subjective well-being among university students, serving as a foundational internal resource that enhances their overall mental health across multiple life domains. The authors suggest that higher self-esteem serves as a protective factor against psychological difficulties while also supporting positive personal development and resilience [1]. The mechanism behind it may be due to positive evaluation of the self-supporting more adaptive cognitive and emotional processes in general. For example,

individuals with higher self-esteem are generally more resilient to stress and are able to better regulate negative emotions [26]. As a result, they are more likely to maintain stable psychological well-being even when facing challenges. Both self-esteem and psychological well-being are important for individuals, because they contribute to adaptive functioning in everyday life. Individuals with higher levels of both are more likely to form healthy relationships, cope effectively with stress, and pursue meaningful goals.

**The role of CBT in psychological well-being.** CBT has been widely studied not only as a treatment for psychological disorders, but also as an approach that can contribute to improvements in overall psychological well-being. While much of the early research about CBT focused on symptom reduction [26,27], more recent studies have increasingly examined its impact on broader aspects of functioning, including life satisfaction, emotional balance, and personal growth [28]. It has been shown that apart from symptom severity, low quality of life, and impairment in psychosocial functioning are significantly associated with relapse or recurrence in depression [33]. This shift reflects a growing recognition that effective psychological interventions aimed at remission or recovery from mental health disorders should address both the reduction of distress and the enhancement of well-being. By helping individuals identify and modify negative thought patterns, CBT interventions can reduce maladaptive interpretations of experiences and promote more balanced thinking. Additionally, behavioral components such as activity scheduling and goal setting encourage individuals to engage in meaningful and rewarding activities. As a result, individuals may experience increased positive affect, improved coping skills, and a greater sense of control over their lives. This contributes not only to improvements in symptoms of depression and anxiety, but also in measures of life satisfaction and overall well-being.

However, some findings suggest more limited effects [29]. In some cases, the effects of CBT on psychological well-being may be limited or short-term, particularly if the intervention primarily focuses on symptom reduction rather than on enhancing positive functioning. Therefore, individuals with more complex or chronic conditions may require additional or integrated approaches to achieve significant gains in well-being.

Building on these mechanisms, CBT-based journaling represents a structured application of CBT principles in written form. [34,7]. CBT-based journaling enhances psychological well-being by systematically guiding individuals to identify, evaluate, and restructure negative automatic thoughts through written reflection. This structured writing process promotes emotional regulation and cognitive clarity, thereby supporting more adaptive interpretations of daily experiences [16,35].

**The role of CBT in self-esteem.** Self-esteem is closely related to how individuals perceive and evaluate themselves, and it is often shaped by underlying cognitive patterns. From a cognitive perspective, low self-esteem is associated with persistent negative beliefs about the self, such as feelings of inadequacy, worthlessness, or failure [29]. These beliefs are typically maintained by cognitive distortions and biased information processing, which reinforce negative self-evaluations over time. CBT aims to address these maladaptive patterns by helping individuals identify, examine, and modify their negative self-beliefs. One of the core techniques used in CBT is cognitive restructuring, which encourages individuals to challenge the accuracy of their automatic thoughts and replace them with more balanced and realistic alternatives. Through this process, individuals can gradually develop a more stable and positive sense of self-worth. In addition to cognitive techniques, behavioral strategies such as behavioral activation and graded task assignment are used to create opportunities for positive experiences, which can further strengthen self-esteem.

Many studies have shown that, CBT has been shown to strengthen self-esteem and reinforce more positive self-evaluations [30, 31]. Its practical tools challenge self-critical thinking and help build a more balanced and adaptive sense of self. A recent study by Martinsen [32] examined school children experiencing anxious and depressive symptoms. The study included both a control group and an intervention group, with the latter receiving a CBT-based transdiagnostic program (EMOTION). The results showed a significant improvement in quality of life and self-esteem among children in the intervention group compared to those in the control group [27].

However, the effect of CBT on self-esteem may be more gradual or less pronounced [30, 32]. This may be because traditional CBT often prioritizes symptom reduction rather than directly targeting self-esteem as a primary outcome. Also, individual differences, such as the severity of negative self-beliefs or the presence of long-standing core schemas, may influence the extent to which self-esteem improves during therapy.

CBT-based journaling contributes to the improvement of self-esteem by helping individuals recognize self-critical thought patterns and replace them with more balanced and self-affirming cognitions [30, 34]. Regular engagement in this practice fosters greater self-awareness and supports the development of a more stable and positive self-concept [22, 7].

### **Conclusion**

This narrative review aimed to examine the role of CBT-based journaling in psychological well-being and self-esteem by integrating theoretical perspectives and empirical findings. The reviewed literature highlights that both psychological well-being and self-esteem are complex and interconnected constructs that play a crucial role in overall mental health. CBT provides an effective framework for addressing maladaptive thought patterns and behaviors that negatively influence these outcomes.

CBT-based journaling, as an extension of traditional CBT, appears to offer a practical

and accessible approach for promoting self-reflection, cognitive restructuring, and emotional processing. Through regular and structured writing, individuals may become more aware of their automatic thoughts and develop more balanced self-perceptions, which can contribute to improvements in both self-esteem and psychological well-being.

Although the evidence generally supports the positive impact of CBT and journaling-based interventions, findings also suggest that the effectiveness of these approaches may vary depending on individual factors and the structure of the intervention. Overall, CBT-based journaling can be considered a promising tool that complements traditional therapeutic methods, particularly in enhancing self-awareness and supporting long-term psychological functioning.

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## **KDT ƏSASLI GÜNDƏLİK TUTMA VƏRDIŞİNİN PSIXOLOJİ RİFAH VƏ ÖZÜNƏHÖRMƏTDƏ ROLU: NARRATİV İCMAL**

### **Xülasə**

Bu məqalənin məqsədi, Koqnitiv Davranış Terapiyasına (KDT) əsaslanan gündəlik tutma vərdişinin (strukturlaşdırılmış gündəlik yazısı) psixoloji rifah və özünəhərmət üzərindəki rolunu araşdırmaqdır. KDT üsulları fərdlərin neqativ avtomatik düşüncələrini və təhrif olunmuş koqnitiv qəliblərini müəyyən etməyi, onları daha adaptiv və balanslı düşüncə tərzləri ilə əvəz etməyi hədəfləyir. Son illərdə terapevtik yazı təcrübələri psixoloji müdaxilələr daxilində dəstəkləyici vasitələr kimi getdikcə daha çox diqqət qazanmaqdadır. Bu tədqiqat təsviri ədəbiyyat icmal metodundan istifadə edilməklə həyata keçirilmişdir. Mövzu ilə bağlı empirik və nəzəri tədqiqatlar akademik məlumat bazalarından seçilmiş, təhlil edilmiş və ümumi tapıntıları, eləcə də nəzəri perspektivləri müəyyən etmək üçün mövcud elmi ədəbiyyat sistemləşdirilərək ümumiləşdirilmişdir. Ədəbiyyat icmal göstərir ki, KDT əsaslı gündəlik tutma fərdlərdə emosional özünüdərk və düşüncə monitorinqini gücləndirməklə koqnitiv yenidənqurma dəstəkləyir. Bu proses neqativ düşüncə qəliblərinin dəyişdirilməsinə, emosional tənzimləmənin təkmilləşdirilməsinə, öhdəsindən gəlmə strategiyalarının gücləndirilməsinə və nəticədə psixoloji rifahın və özünəhərmətin artmasına töhfə verə bilər.

**Açar sözlər:** KDT əsaslı gündəlik tutma, psixoloji rifah, özünəhərmət, koqnitiv yenidənqurma, reflektiv yazı.

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## **РОЛЬ ВЕДЕНИЯ ДНЕВНИКА НА ОСНОВЕ КПТ В ПСИХОЛОГИЧЕСКОМ БЛАГОПОЛУЧИИ И САМООЦЕНКЕ: НАРРАТИВНЫЙ ОБЗОР**

### **Резюме**

Целью данной статьи является изучение роли ведения дневника (структурированных ежедневных записей) на основе принципов когнитивно-поведенческой терапии (КПТ) в укреплении психологического благополучия и повышении самооценки. Методы КПТ направлены на выявление у индивидов негативных автоматических мыслей и искаженных когнитивных паттернов с последующей их заменой на более адаптивные и сбалансированные модели мышления. В последние годы практики терапевтического письма привлекают все большее внимание как вспомогательный инструмент в рамках психологических интервенций. Данное исследование было проведено с использованием метода нарративного обзора.

Эмпирические и теоретические исследования по данной теме были отобраны из академических баз данных, проанализированы, а существующая научная литература была систематизирована и обобщена для выявления общих выводов и теоретических перспектив. Обзор литературы показывает, что ведение дневника на основе КПТ способствует когнитивной реструктуризации за счет повышения эмоциональной саморефлексии и мониторинга мыслей у индивидов. Этот процесс может способствовать изменению негативных паттернов мышления, улучшению эмоциональной регуляции, укреплению стратегий совладания и, в конечном итоге, повышению психологического благополучия и самооценки.

**Ключевые слова:** ведение дневника на основе КПТ, психологическое благополучие, самооценка, когнитивная реструктуризация, рефлексивное письмо.

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