

## Theoretical review: Cognitive behavioral therapy for anxiety reduction in taekwondo athletes.

### Revisión teórica: Terapia cognitivo conductual para la disminución de ansiedad en deportistas de taekwondo.

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#### **Abstract:**

The objective of this study was to make a theoretical review of some intervention programs in athletes, focused on reducing their anxiety levels. The present study is a theoretical study, and the information was carried out in metasearch engines such as Google Academic, Redalyc, Scielo and Dialnet, and taking care that the publications taken, although in various formats, the inclusion criteria of the present study was always respected. It is concluded that a high level of anxiety determines the quality of the performance of the athlete, as well as the results of the competitions they were involved in. The techniques mainly used to reduce anxiety, are those oriented at having an impact at a physiological, cognitive, and behavioral level; and the importance of including in the intervention programs, objectives such as: strengthening of coping strategies, emotional intelligence, self-confidence and resilience in the athletes, is also mentioned.

#### **Keywords:**

*Anxiety, Sports performance, Cognitive behavioral intervention, Coping strategies.*

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#### **Resumen:**

El objetivo de este estudio consistió en hacer una revisión teórica de los programas de intervención en deportistas para reducir sus niveles de ansiedad. Es un estudio teórico. La búsqueda de información se llevó a cabo en Google Académico, Redalyc, Scielo y Dilanet donde fueron tomados en cuenta publicaciones en diversos formatos que respetaran los criterios de inclusión. Se concluye que un alto nivel de ansiedad determina la calidad del rendimiento deportivo, así como de los resultados competitivos. Las técnicas empleadas mayormente para reducir la ansiedad son aquellas que tienen impacto a nivel fisiológico, cognitivo y conductual; también se menciona la importancia de incluir en los programas de intervención objetivos como el fortalecimiento de las estrategias de afrontamiento, inteligencia emocional, autoconfianza y resiliencia en los deportistas.

#### **Palabras Clave:**

*Ansiedad, rendimiento deportivo, intervención cognitivo conductual, estrategias de afrontamiento.*

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Within clinical psychology, various approaches have been developed, one of which is Cognitive Behavioral Psychology, which has enjoyed growing popularity due to the protocols and techniques successfully developed for issues such as depression, anger, frustration, fear, stress, and anxiety. These are topics where sports psychology and clinical psychology converge, and where both fields of psychology show interest in studying in order to provide emotional regulation and coping tools to athletes or consultants.

Therefore, the idea of incorporating or adapting techniques and procedures from the Cognitive Behavioral approach of clinical psychology to the sports context is not incompatible, whether in a group or individual setting, with the goal of helping athletes regulate the levels of anxiety that may arise during training, pre-competition, during competition, and after.

Some of the moments in which athletes commonly experience anxiety at a higher intensity are during sports competitions, where the individual must perform to the best of their potential to achieve a satisfactory result. In those minutes of their performance, all of the athlete's own expectations, those of

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coaches, family members, and judges regarding their physical performance, self-control skills, problem-solving, etc., are activated. Negative thoughts about the perception of threat and the evaluation of others increase the athlete's anxiety levels, to the point of greatly influencing their performance, causing the individual to perform below their potential, generating unfavorable results for the athlete (Hren, 2020).

This is why psychological preparation is so important. This is understood as the set of activities or steps aimed at developing the qualities, abilities, and states required by sports activities and that help achieve high goals or performance. Its main objective is to strengthen the athlete's optimal mental state to face training and competitions (Landivar, 2019).

According to Garfield (as cited in Santoyo, 2022), psychological preparation for competitions is not only a psychological process, but also a pedagogical one, which is added to the multidisciplinary preparation made up of three other areas: "technical", "medical-prophylactic", and "personological-behavioral". As Castro et al. (2020) mention, the purpose of psychological intervention is the training of mental skills to control and enhance psychological and physical performance. That is, in any sports psychological intervention program, it will be particularly important to promote motivation, leadership, or coping strategies in stressful situations.

It's important to consider that each sport's unique characteristics determine the specific goals of each intervention. For example, taekwondo has certain characteristics associated with increased anxiety levels, such as the fact that it's an individual sport (responsibility for the outcome lies entirely with the individual), where you never have control over the situation. Despite the quality and quantity of prior training, your opponent can surprise you and surpass your level. Another relevant fact is that, within competitions, there is the presence of a referee, judges, coaches, family, and friends who are associated with a certain evaluative role in the athlete's performance, which in many cases increases the fear of negative evaluations. Last but not least, there is the fear of injury, since, as a contact sport, the probability of suffering severe blows or fractures is high.

Therefore, some of the specific objectives of psychological preparation in taekwondo are: anxiety control and concentration, elimination of negative thoughts and enhancement of positive ones, regulation of motivation, goal setting and use of imagination to improve the athlete's activity (Fiametta et al. 2021).

There is research that, in addition to analyzing the objectives of psychological preparation in taekwondo, has focused on the influence that this sport has on the personality of those who practice it (reduction of aggressiveness, increase in patterns of optimism and self-confidence, willpower, concentration and self-regulation (Chang & Hwang, 2017); However, little emphasis has been given to psychological preparation prior to a competition or to reduce the symptoms of anxiety prior to a fight or an exam for a belt change. Therefore, this work aims to

emphasize and describe the interventions from the cognitive-behavioral approach mostly applied to the sports field that have proven effective in reducing levels of pre-competitive and competitive anxiety; taking into account the characteristics of this sport, mentioned above.

## **METHOD**

The search for studies was conducted using Google Scholar, Redalyc, Scielo, and Dialnet. The keywords used were cognitive-behavioral techniques, cognitive behavioral therapy in athletes, techniques to reduce anxiety in athletes, and anxiety in athletes.

The inclusion criteria for reviewing theses, e-books, and articles were a time interval of no more than 10 years, a sample of athletes, and an implicit basis for the program described in the cognitive-behavioral approach. The exclusion criteria for research included studies conducted with children or group sports.

The design of this research was a theoretical study. The data analysis procedure consisted primarily of a comparison of studies conducted with athletes, classifying them by population characteristics and the techniques applied. Finally, articles that did not contain an intervention program but provided explanations for the origin of anxiety and the relationship between athlete anxiety and performance were considered.

## **RESULTS**

Clark and Beck (2012) define anxiety as a behavioral, physiological, affective, and cognitive response triggered by anticipating events or circumstances that are judged as threatening and difficult for the individual to cope with. Events are perceived as unpredictable, uncontrollable, and potentially threatening to the individual's interests; in turn, the individual perceives themselves as incapable of successfully coping with the situation.

Anxiety has two components: the first is known as somatic anxiety, related to the physiological activation of the body that includes symptoms such as increased heart rate, blood pressure, and respiratory rate, sweating, pupillary dilation, gastric motility, tremors, and a feeling of weakness or fainting (Trujillo-Torrealva & Reyes-Bossio, 2019; Weinberg & Gould, 1995, as cited in Ramis et al., 2010). The second component is cognitive anxiety, which consists of negative and irrational thoughts, self-talk about fear of failure, recurring doubts about self-efficacy, and catastrophic conclusions about the situation (González, 2022).

The overall description of anxiety is punctuated by this anticipated negative and catastrophic appraisal of a stimulus perceived as dangerous or threatening, triggering intense emotional distress. Physiologically, it acts on the body, generating a series of reactions in preparation for attack or flight.

Due to the crucial role that perception, thoughts, and beliefs play in generating high levels of anxiety, cognitive behavioral

therapy, through the contributions of its two leading exponents, Albert Ellis and Aaron Beck, has demonstrated the effectiveness of its protocols and techniques in the intervention of all types of psychological problems, including anxiety disorders, depressive disorders, eating disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorders, phobias, among others (Nieto, 2018).

Aaron Beck developed an explanatory model of anxiety. This model emphasizes that the origin of anxiety problems lies in the individual's underlying beliefs and interpretation of the stimuli they fear, including their own physiological reactions, which he called cognitive appraisal (Ruiz et al. 2012).

When faced with a potentially stressful situation, athletes make judgments about the situation's significance, classifying it as threatening, stressful, positive, controllable, changeable, or simply irrelevant. If the situation is considered stressful (a threat, a challenge, harm, or loss), the athlete will experience anxiety. Therefore, it is assumed that situations do not directly cause the anxiety response, but rather that certain situations of pressure or potential conflict become stressful when they are evaluated as threatening (Pons, 2018).

Another of the main concepts that Beck identified was called the cognitive triad, Ruiz et al. (2012), which refers to three cognitive patterns or schemes that induce the individual to perceive themselves, the world and the future from a hopeless and negative point of view (in depression). In anxiety, the cognitive triad operates as follows: the vision of oneself makes the individual perceive himself as vulnerable, fragile, helpless, incompetent; the perception of the world as threatening, dangerous and hostile, which leads to the vision of a future full of uncertainty and with little capacity to be controlled, generally, with more and more dangerous stimuli versus a deterioration of the person's coping skills and insecurity.

For his part, Albert Ellis formulated an explanatory model of personality summarized in the well-known ABC framework (Ellis & Dryden, 1994, as cited in Rodríguez, 2019):

(a) Activating events. Situations to which the individual must respond. These can be external events or internal experiences (emotions, thoughts).

(b) Beliefs. These are activated to interpret the activating event. They can be rational or irrational.

(c) Consequences. These are the result of the worldview (beliefs) that are activated by the specific situation. They can be of three types: emotions, behaviors, or beliefs.

When beliefs are rational, adaptive behaviors and appropriate emotions (whether positive (happiness) or negative (frustration, grief, disappointment) will be activated, allowing us to adequately cope with the situation. If beliefs are irrational, the behaviors deployed to cope with the situation will be inappropriate (defeatist, inconsistent), and the emotions aroused will be inappropriate or extreme (sadness, anxiety, or mania).

Ellis developed an initial list of irrational beliefs that underlie different psychological disorders. According to Salgado (2010, as cited in Medina, 2017), the main irrational beliefs that are directly related to high levels of anxiety in athletes are:

a. It is an extreme need for adult human beings to be loved and approved by virtually every significant person in society.

b. To consider oneself valuable, one must be highly competent, sufficient, and capable of achieving everything in every possible way.

c. It is terrible and catastrophic when things don't work out the way one would like them to.

d. If something is or could be dangerous, I must feel terribly uneasy about it and must constantly think about the possibility of this happening.

e. It is easier to avoid life's responsibilities and difficulties than to face them.

f. One must depend on others and needs someone stronger to trust, and one cannot lead one's life alone.

The final irrational belief is perfectionism: There is invariably a precise, correct, and perfect solution to every human problem, and if this perfect solution is not found, catastrophe ensues.

In taekwondo specifically, the more strongly an athlete embraces these beliefs, the more anxiety they may experience. That is, the greater their belief that they need to be loved and approved by those significant to them, the greater their belief that they consider successes and victories as a measure of their personal worth, and the greater their perception that things not going as expected is terribly catastrophic, the more the athlete will experience such intense anxiety that it will make it difficult to perform as expected (Pérez & León, 1998).

In relation to this, Dunn (1999), as well as Dunn and Syrotuik (2003 as cited in Moran & Toner 2018) carried out an analysis of cognitive anxiety, where they identified four potentially anxiety-generating themes: fear of failing in their performance, apprehension regarding negative evaluation by others, concerns about physical injury or danger, and a non-specific fear of the unknown; in addition to these themes, they also consider the perception of the rival, adverse public, competition with a certain partner, climatic factors, certain scenarios of the competition, being specially evaluated to access some accreditation (such as obtaining a belt change in Taekwondo) etc. to be stressful. In general, the greater the importance attributed to the competition, the greater the probability of experiencing more anxiety in it.

In addition to the present competitive context, a previous sporting experience in which the individual has not achieved the expected performance or result is highly likely to be valued as a failure, a factor that increases the probability of generating higher levels of anxiety in this new competition, viewing failure as something threatening and from which one intends to flee at all costs by not experiencing it again (Arias, 2021; Estrada & Pérez, 2011).

A high level of anxiety in athletes is linked to multiple adverse effects (Martín et al. 202), including those directly related to poor performance during a competition. These include: difficulty making decisions, inability to concentrate on the performance, inadequate and excessive attention paid to internal physiological experiences, forgetting details or even

previously rehearsed strategies, and an increased tendency to rush into a performance.

According to Estrada and Pérez (2011), anxiety generates an excessive focus of attention on irrelevant stimuli related to one's own physiological activation or on the approving reactions of others, which reduces the level of attention one needs to pay to the relevant aspects of one's competition, one's movements, and analysis of one's opponent.

In response to the significant negative impact anxiety has on athletes, several authors have proposed considering certain psychological factors directly related to self-control skills in anxiety-provoking situations in intervention programs to reduce anxiety. These factors include:

*A) Coping strategies:* These arise from the cognitive model of stress developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1986, as cited in Izquierdo, 2020). In this model, coping is defined as the constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts developed to manage specific external or internal demands that are assessed as surplus or overwhelming the individual's resources. Pinto and Vásquez (2013, as cited in Tobar, 2014) propose that coping strategies can be divided into interventions aimed at three general objectives: a) Control of environmental stimuli: These aim to adequately manage perceptions of sports situations, either by reducing uncertainty or behaviors motivated solely by results. Techniques used for these purposes are visualization, simulation, and stimulus control. b) Arousal control: These work on the somatic basis of anxiety, generating a state of relaxation. These techniques include Schultz's autogenic training, Jacobson's progressive relaxation, and breathing. c) Negative thought control: These are techniques designed to avoid or reduce the effect of cognitions that could potentially lead to inefficient performance. These techniques include thought stopping, cognitive restructuring, and self-talk. Pons (2018) states that the coping strategies used by athletes to control and/or neutralize stressful situations that arise in the competitive environment are closely related to their performance results.

In this sense, Pinto and Vásquez (2013, as cited in Tobar, 2014) propose that athletes who develop coping skills on their own, or through training, will achieve optimal performance, and this will be an indicator and promoter of the athlete's psychological well-being.

*B) Self-confidence:* In 1997, Bandura studied the concept of self-efficacy, describing it as the cognitions and perceptions that people have about their own abilities to successfully carry out a given action. For his part, Contreras (2020) mentions that self-confidence is the degree of success a person has, proportional to the strength with which they believe in themselves and their abilities.

Both concepts, self-efficacy and self-confidence, are often used synonymously to describe the confidence with which a person performs an activity, knowing they are capable of performing it to the best of their ability.

The perception of self-efficacy directly influences the level of competitive anxiety. People with higher perceived physical self-efficacy tend to experience lower levels of cognitive anxiety before and during the competition, favoring greater athletic performance (González & Garcés de los Fayos, 2018). Self-confidence is repeatedly tested in highly competitive fields, so after failures or setbacks in sports, self-doubt can arise. This concept is closely related to resilience, which is the ability to cope with adverse situations. Athletes who lack resilience generally have low levels of self-confidence, which increases their psychological vulnerability, potentially making them victims of high levels of anxiety (González et al., 2017).

*C) Emotional Intelligence:* Velásquez-Pérez et al. (2023) state that emotional intelligence is the capacity that enables the integration of cognitive and emotional aspects in an effective way; they describe emotional processing effectively based on the perception, assimilation, understanding, and regulation of emotions. Also, emotional intelligence includes the skills to perceive the emotions of others, as well as respond with appropriate behaviors in various circumstances. Castro Sánchez et al. (2020) conducted a study in which they concluded that the development of emotional intelligence is directly related to the athlete's anxiety levels and that, the higher the emotional intelligence, the lower the symptoms of pre-competition anxiety, and the lower the emotional intelligence skill, the higher levels of anxious activation are present in athletes.

Therefore, the techniques most commonly applied in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy to reduce anxiety in athletes, which in turn promote the development of the aforementioned psychological factors, can be grouped into three categories: techniques aimed at reducing physiological symptoms (somatic anxiety); effective techniques for reducing negative thoughts (cognitive anxiety); and, finally, behavioral techniques aimed at facilitating the athlete's expected performance.

In the first group of techniques to reduce somatic anxiety levels, the techniques most commonly applied are those aimed at relaxing the body, allowing the athlete to identify and control their muscle tension levels, and stemming the flow of negative thoughts about their performance (Mejía, 2018). Among the physiological benefits of applying these techniques are relaxation of the digestive, muscular, urological, and circulatory systems, reducing discomforts such as cramps, diarrhea, constipation, or lack of oxygen in the body. Relaxation makes physical and mental effort easier and more effective, helping to reduce anxiety, aggression, frustration, or discouragement, generating greater emotional control (Oladejo, 2021).

Some of these techniques are: progressive relaxation, diaphragmatic breathing, tension-relaxation (Tobar, 2014; Medina, 2017); imagery (Paredes et al., 2014), and visualization (Clark & Beck, 2018; Pérez & León, 1998; Zamora et al., 2017).

On the other hand, for cognitive anxiety, techniques are used to help athletes identify, analyze, and modify thoughts that generate discomfort, promoting the restructuring of the athlete's perception of threat regarding the competitive activity, their own self, and the results obtained. These techniques reduce negative thoughts, mistrust, doubts about self-efficacy, and difficulty concentrating, transforming them into more objective, rational, and/or functional thoughts that allow them to direct their concentration toward competitive performance with greater control (Sunjang et al., 2021).

Among the main cognitive techniques applied to sports are: self-talk (Tobar, 2014); thought stopping (Zamora et al., 2017); and the discussion of irrational beliefs (Mesagno et al., 2020). The third group of techniques are called behavioral techniques, which provide the individual with strategies for effectively coping with the situation. Among the techniques most frequently applied to sports are: stimulus control (Tobar, 2014); goal setting (Zamora et al., 2017); and problem-solving training (Paredes et al., 2014).

Paredes et al. (2014) concluded in their study that the selection and combination of these cognitive-behavioral techniques not only have positive effects on reducing competitive anxiety, but also that athletes report benefiting from them in their daily lives.

## DISCUSSION

Currently, martial arts are practiced for a variety of reasons, including sports, health, personal protection, personal development, mental discipline, and self-confidence (Medina, 2013; Weiss & Miller, 2019). Taekwondo is a contact sport within the martial arts that has gained greater impact and popularity in Mexico in recent years. However, based on the findings of this research, it can be concluded that no studies have been conducted in this country aimed at innovating psychological intervention proposals for the difficulties that athletes may experience, including anxiety. The information is generally adapted from programs developed in other countries and, for the most part, are interventions for athletes from other disciplines. This indicates a lack of current and specific information on clinical psychological interventions in taekwondo. Therefore, future research would be advisable to design programs specific to the characteristics of the Mexican population of taekwondo athletes. The objective of this work, in addition to aiming to be a watershed for sports psychology research in Mexico, was to present the cognitive-behavioral interventions that have been most commonly incorporated into studies aimed at reducing anxiety in taekwondo athletes. The techniques mentioned in this project have been part of combinations of some of them. Some programs have evaluated only relaxation techniques, others only cognitive techniques, others have also evaluated distraction or coping techniques, and others have combined at least one technique from each sector, verifying their effectiveness in all of them, both in group and individual sports.

These techniques, as mentioned above, have been used in the treatment of pre-competitive and competitive anxiety. They are distinguished by their origin in cognitive behavioral therapy, known as second-generation therapy. These include the acquisition and development of coping skills, thought control or internal dialogue, behavioral and emotional control strategies, thought avoidance or blocking techniques, and relaxation techniques. However, the growing effectiveness of therapies known as "third-generation," including Mindfulness, has focused on techniques such as body scanning, Mindful Yoga, and Mindfulness of Breathing, with the main objective of generating this abandonment by stopping or modifying internal experience (sensations and thoughts) and acquiring an observant stance toward them. These interventions, despite their relatively recent emergence, have been evaluated and proven effective against pre-competitive anxiety (Trujillo & Reyes, 2019).

Because of this, it is of great interest that future studies validate the use of a program of techniques that include techniques from this new wave of therapies in their combination, in order to generate a new treatment path in sports psychology that may even be useful in the athlete's daily life.

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