

ABSTRACT

Introduction. Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) is common in general population. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is proven to be efficacious as treatment of GAD, with large effects on worrying as well as on anxiety and depression. However, traditional CBT for GAD usually incurs substantial resources and long waiting time. Low-intensity CBT (LiCBT) in the form of self-help program accessed through the internet can be a less costly option. This study aims at evaluating the efficacy of a LiCBT program, delivered in a self-help format with non-therapist minimal support, in reducing anxiety and depressive symptoms as well as functional impairment.

Methods. In this randomized controlled trial, a total of 109 participants (mean age: 39.9 years (SD:10.56); 84.4% female) fulfilling the diagnostic criteria of GAD were recruited between May 2020 and February 2021 and subsequently randomized into either treatment group (n=54) or waitlist control group (n=55). The treatment program consisted of six 1-hour sessions of internet-based cognitive behavioral therapy (iCBT) program with minimal non-therapist support, with between-session homework assigned after each session. The primary outcome measures were Generalized Anxiety Disorder 7-item Scale (GAD-7) and Penn State Worry

Questionnaire (PSWQ). The secondary outcomes were Patient Health Questionnaire 9-Item (PHQ-9) and Work and Social Adjustment Scale (WSAS). Adapted version of Credibility / Expectancy Questionnaire (CEQ) was used to examine post-treatment satisfaction.

Results. The treatment group displayed significant improvement on GAD-7 and PSWQ scores with large within-group effect size (GAD-7: $d=1.0$; PSWQ: $d=0.97$) and a medium to large between-group effect size on post-treatment scores (GAD-7: $d=0.74$; PSWQ: $d=0.78$) compared to waitlist controls. For secondary outcomes, significant reduction of depressive features with medium within-group effect size ($d=0.48$) and medium between-group effect size ($d=0.62$) compared to control group were found. No significant between-group differences were found on the rate of improvement for measure on functional impairment ($p=0.062$, CI: -6.7 to 0.16). The ratings on post-treatment satisfaction were positive.

Conclusion. Initial clinical efficacy for iCBT program with minimal non-therapist support was demonstrated in local community individuals displaying clinical anxiety features. Outcome studies with follow-up data should be carried out to examine the effects at longer intervals. Local service providers may apply this treatment program

to community patients especially those who are unready to receive routine mental health service. (368 words)

摘要

背景：廣泛性焦慮症在社區中十分常見，而研究證實認知行為治療能有效治療廣泛性焦慮症，特別是擔憂、焦慮和抑鬱的現象。不過，傳統的認知行為治療需要大量的人力和時間。另一方面，如網上自助課程的低密度認知行為治療可能是一個額外的選擇。本研究旨在評估在沒有治療師的支援下，網上自助課程作為低密度認知行為治療的功效。

方法：在這隨機對照試驗中，共從社區招募了 109 名符合廣泛性焦慮症的人士（平均年齡 39.9 歲，84.4%女性）作為研究對象，並隨機分為兩組。治療組（N=54）的內容為一個共六期的網上自助認知行為治療課程。課程中沒有治療師的支援，而參與者亦需要在每期課程後完成功課。研究的主要測量為 GAD-7 和 PSWQ。

結果：完成課程後，治療組的 GAD-7 和 PSWQ 都有顯著的改善（GAD-7: $d=1.0$; PSWQ: $d=0.97$ ）。同時，相比起對照組，治療組亦有中度至顯著的成效（GAD-7: $d=0.74$; PSWQ: $d=0.78$ ）。次要的測量方面，治療組的抑鬱症狀在完成課程後及相比對照組皆有中度的改善（分別為 $d=0.48$ 和 $d=0.62$ ）。兩組參與者在身心功能障礙的改善並沒有明顯的分別。參加者對治療課程亦有正面的滿意程度。

討論和結論：本研究顯示在沒有治療師的支援下，網上自助課程作為低密度認知行為治療的功效。未來的研究可以在課後繼續跟進參加者以研究課程的長期功效。未來，本地的心理治療服務亦可探討是否可採用本研究的成果為未能得到相關心理治療的人士提供服務。