

On-line Self-help Programs for Psychological Distress

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Why on-line self-help?

- Large numbers of students are distressed or have psychological problems.
(~ 15-50%, depending on how you define and measure it.)
- Many of them, about half, do not seek help and don't want to, or can't, come for therapy.
- Many of these would prefer some type of on-line service

Why on-line self-help?

- On-line Self-help Programs have been shown to be effective.

There have been over 70+ Controlled Clinical Trials, mostly on CBT-based programs. The evidence exceeds the requirements for APA's criteria for "empirically supported therapy".

Why on-line self-help?

- This research has shown effectiveness for the most common psychological problems:
 - Anxiety problems (social anxiety, phobias, generalized anxiety, health anxiety, panic disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder)
 - Depression, mild to severe.
 - Habit problems (e.g. problem drinking, smoking, hair-pulling, skin-picking, etc.)

Why Not?

Still, very few universities and colleges offer this type of help. Some possible reasons:

- It's most effective with people who want this type of help, and not with people who want direct personal help.

Therefore it doesn't replace counselling, and won't reduce the demand for counselling.

It's an *additional outreach* program for the students who currently aren't being served.

Why Not?

- The effective programs are much more than just putting information, "tips", etc. on a website. They are structured multi-module interactive programs which engage people and usually involve individualized tailoring. These programs are complex and time-consuming to initially develop. (They can be very time & cost-efficient in the longer run.)

Why Not?

- The most effective on-line programs involve some degree of on-line “coaching” or intermittent contact with a professional.
“Pure” self-help programs which leave people entirely on their own have extremely high non-completion rates. So it’s not a matter of just putting up a link to some self-help program elsewhere. Some staff time is required.
(But it can be very much less than traditional therapy services.)

Example: SHIFT

- **Self-Help for Improving Feelings and Thoughts.**
- On-line coach-assisted self-help program for university students with mild to moderate anxiety, depression and stress.
- Based on cognitive-behavioural principles
- 5 “core” modules focused on changing thinking and behaviour (low activity level, avoidance, and/or reducing stress in problematic ways).

Example: SHIFT

- The on-line modules involve:
 - self-assessment questionnaires
 - educational information
 - video examples
 - exercises to do on-line and as “homework”
 - and various options (in terms of order; focusing on anxiety or depression or both; male and female versions; additional modules on social interactions, sleep, etc.)

Example: SHIFT

- Initial screening by telephone and then weekly e-mail or brief (~ 15 minute) phone contact with a student coach.

Coaches are *not* therapists; they answer questions about the program, help with tech issues, and mostly encourage students to keep working on the program.

Example: SHIFT

- Evaluated in a controlled clinical trial, which found that students using the program had significantly greater reductions in anxiety, depression and stress, than students in a waiting control group, and mostly down to a “normal” range level.

(Day, McGrath & Wojtowicz, 2013, Behaviour Research and Therapy, **51**, 344-351)

Example: SHIFT

- This Fall term, SHIFT is in use by more than 100 students at Dal, King’s and NSCAD.
2 student coaches (a grad student senior coach, 10 hr./week; and a second coach 8 hr/week)
The senior coach trains and supervises the junior coach.
The senior coach meets with me for 1 hr/wk.

Contact information

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