BRIEFGUIDED INTERNET-BASED COGNITIVE BEHAVIOURAL THERAPY FOR PEOPLE WITH EMOTIONAL DISTRESS

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Abstract - Objectives: The aim of this study was to investigate the acceptability and effectiveness of a briefguided internet-based cognitive behavioural therapy (iCBT) for people with emotional distress. Methods: Using a quasi-experimental research design with a 3-arm study, eligible participants were assigned to a group with student counsellors (n = 24), a group with counsellors (n = 23) or a non-active control group (n = 21). Participants received eight online modules and regular support via telephone counselling or video conferencing app (Zoom) from a counsellor or student counsellor during a 5-week intervention period, while the control group did not receive any intervention during the intervention period. The eight online modules of were adapted from the traditional CBT approach, and included the following topics: psychoeducation and normalising the experiences of emotional distress and abdominal breathing (module 1); introduction to the ABCDE model, identifying cognitive distortions and learning more relaxation skills, including breathing techniques and imagery relaxation (modules 2 and 3), learning cognitive restructuring skills (modules 4, 5 and 6), developing a healthy lifestyle (module 7) and preventing relapse (module 8).Results:The student and counsellor intervention groups together reported an attrition rate of 14.89% and overall adherence rate of 85.10%. The results of the 3 (group) × time (pre vs post) repeated-measures analysis of covariance showed that the student counsellor and counsellor groups demonstrated significantly greater reductions in total emotional distress (partial $\eta^2 = 0.10$) and stress (partial $\eta^2 = 0.14$) than the control group. In addition, student counsellors and counsellors produced comparable intervention effects, and telephone counselling and Zoom support produced comparable intervention effects. Conclusion. This study supports the acceptability and effectiveness of brief-guided iCBT for people with emotional problems during the COVID-19 pandemic in Hong Kong.

Keywords - Brief-guided internet-based cognitive behavioural therapy, Chinese, COVID-19 pandemic, Emotional distress, Student counsellors

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