

2018 Talent Development Competition Awardees

Title: Assessing the feasibility and efficacy of an online expressive writing intervention: randomized controlled trials in depressed patients with delayed access to psychotherapy

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Abstract: Most Canadians who could benefit from psychotherapy are not able to access it, making it necessary to develop psychotherapeutic interventions delivered online at a low cost. Expressive writing (EW) asks people to write their deepest thoughts and feelings about a troubling experience or problem. Previous studies have shown that EW is possible to implement online and that it can be helpful for depression. We propose to evaluate online EW in patients with mild to moderate major depression who have been evaluated at CAMH and are waiting to receive psychotherapy. In a first pilot randomized controlled trial (RCT), we will recruit 30 patients and assign half of them to complete four 20-minute sessions of EW over 7-10 days; half will be randomized as control participants. We will contact the EW participants by text or over the phone to encourage them to complete the intervention, with a goal of 60-80% of participants completing at least 3 sessions. We will measure and compare depressive symptoms in the EW and control participants; we expect EW participants to experience a larger decrease in depressive symptoms than control participants. We will interview EW participants to ask them about their engagement and experience with the intervention; we expect them to find online EW convenient and helpful. Based on the results of the pilot RCT, we will design and complete an RCT using similar methods in a larger sample (i.e., n = 60-80), potentially adjusting some aspects of EW (e.g., its length, frequency, or instructions). If both RCTs suggest that online EW is practical and helpful, future studies may focus on how and why it works as an intervention for depression. This line of research is relevant to the first Discovery Fund theme: technology-based behavior interventions. Our findings may provide a basis for increasing access to a low-cost psychotherapeutic intervention to a large number of people with or at-risk for depression.