Evaluating the Efficacy of Graded In Vivo Exposure for the Treatment of Fear in Patients with Chronic Back Pain: A Randomized Controlled Clinical Trial
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Background

- Psychological treatments for chronic pain, particularly those based upon cognitive behavioural (CB) principles, have generally been shown to be efficacious.
- Recently, a treatment based upon the fear-avoidance model of chronic pain, which suggests that chronic pain can be relieved by exposing the individual to movements and tasks that have been avoided due to fear of pain/(re)injury, has been developed.
- This graded in vivo exposure treatment has been found to be efficacious in case studies.
- To date, however, there has been no randomized controlled assessment of the efficacy of graded in vivo exposure for the treatment of chronic low back pain.

Objective

- To compare graded in vivo exposure to graded activity and a wait list control condition amongst 60 (20 per group) chronic low back pain patients.

Methods

- Participants were randomly assigned to one of the 3 treatment conditions.
- All participants received a physiotherapy assessment prior to beginning treatment.
- Participants in all conditions completed questionnaires at baseline, 2 weeks, 4 weeks and 8 weeks.

Results

- Preliminary analysis from 4 participants (two per treatment group) suggests that completion of graded in vivo exposure or graded activity treatment programs results in a decrease in measured fear-avoidance beliefs, pain-related anxiety, cognitions and behaviours, severity and symptoms of pain, and perceived level of disability. Pain-related self-esteem showed improvement.
- With the exception of the TSK, PASS, and HADS, the magnitude of improvement seems to be greater on all measures for individuals who were assigned to the graded in vivo exposure treatment group.
- Mean ratings on the PHODA by participants in the graded in vivo exposure treatment group showed a particularly robust decrease, suggesting that participant's anxiety for performing many daily activities was significantly reduced.

Discussion

- These findings support the validity of the fear-avoidance model of chronic pain.
- These results also support prior case-study research which suggests that graded in vivo exposure is an effective treatment for individuals with chronic back pain.
- This data is preliminary. Additional data from participants who have completed the treatments needs to be gathered and analyzed.

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