

Implementing a brief CBT-informed intervention to address mental health issues among individuals in custody.



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Mental Health in the Prison Population

Research has shown that the prevalence of mental illness in prison populations is significantly higher than in the general population (Fazel et al., 2016). In the Irish prison population, the prevalence of mental illness is 24% in male prisoners and 60% in female prisoners (Kennedy et al., 2005). Depression and anxiety are common mental health problems for individuals in custody in Ireland with 37.6% of male prisoners in medium security prisons reporting moderate to severe levels of depression and 29.7% reporting moderate to severe levels of anxiety (O'Sullivan et al., 2018). The presence of mental illness in individuals in custody is linked with higher levels of self-harm, suicide, violence perpetration and victimisation (Fazel et al., 2016).

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) focuses on the relationship between thoughts, emotions and behaviour (Fenn & Byrne, 2013). The efficacy of CBT as an intervention for mental illness has been well established in community settings, particularly as interventions for affective and anxiety disorders (Hofmann et al., 2012). In the prison population, CBT based approaches have been found to be effective in the treatment of depression and anxiety (Yoon, Slade & Fazel, 2017). CBT intervention programs have also been found to reduce recidivism (Friendship et al., 2002).



Within the IPS Psychology Service, assistant psychologists (APs) implement a brief mental health intervention for individuals in custody that is informed by the principles of CBT. Clients complete up to 12 sessions of cognitive behavioural mental health work with APs. The brevity of the intervention has significant benefits in the prison environment, such as providing intervention for those on shorter sentences and those waiting for long-term interventions with psychologists. It also allows people in custody to become familiar with the Psychology Service.

Aim

The aim of this research is to assess the effectiveness of the current CBT-informed intervention, implemented by APs in the IPS Psychology Service, in reducing the symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Method

Participants were clients of the Psychology Service from different sites across the prison estate. To assess the effectiveness of the intervention, psychometric measures were used to measure the severity of depression and anxiety in participants before and after the intervention. The following measures were administered;

- The Burns Depression Checklist (BDC; Burns, 1984).
- The Burns Anxiety Inventory (BAI; Burns, 1989).

Discussion

Over the past two years, 84 clients completed the BDC pre- and post-intervention and 80 clients completed the BAI pre- and post-intervention. The audited data suggests that the current CBT-informed intervention implemented by the IPS Psychology Service can be effective in reducing the symptoms of depression and anxiety among individuals in custody. Participants experienced a decrease in depression and anxiety following the intervention. Limitations of this pilot include the absence of a control group, as well as the potential variability in implementation between different APs on different sites, across the prison estate.

Future Directions

This programme will continue to be implemented by APs in the IPS Psychology Service. Future directions include the collection of data to allow for the analysis of descriptive statistics. These findings may inform the future development of this brief, CBT-informed intervention. Dissemination of such findings is also envisaged.

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