Author's response to reviews

Title: Experiences of guided Internet-based cognitive-behavioural treatment for depression: A qualitative study

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Experiences of guided Internet-based cognitive-behavioural treatment for depression: A qualitative study
Nina Bendelin, Hugo Hesser, Johan Dahl, Per Carlbring, Karin Zetterqvist Nelson and Gerhard Andersson

Dear editor

Please find enclosed our revised manuscript that has been altered in line with the comments provided by our reviewers. We will provide you with a point by point reply to all the comments made most of which greatly improved the ms.

Reviewer's report

Title: Experiences of guided Internet-based cognitive-behavioural treatment for depression: A qualitative study
Reviewer: Nickolai Titov

Reviewer's report:
Thank you for inviting me to review this interesting paper.
The authors report the results of 12 interviews with participants of a self-help internet treatment program for depression. They identify three change processes categorizing how participants engaged with the treatment material, and report how each change process was reflected in four core themes. The three change processes addressed attitudes towards treatment, views on motivational aspects of treatment, and perceptions of consequences of treatment. The authors conclude that their results corresponded with current models of traditional
face-to-face psychotherapy, particularly with respect to identifying that motivation is a crucial aspect of guided self-help for depression and that people who take responsibility for treatment and who attribute success to themselves benefit more.

General Comments
The aim of this study, to obtain a detailed understanding of participants’ experience of treatment in order to improve the effectiveness and to reduce dropouts in Internet-based depression treatments, is important. The general methodological approach was sound, and based on acceptable models. The manuscript is generally well written, appropriate work is cited and referred to, and the title and abstract are appropriately presented. Unfortunately, as is the case with much qualitative research, only a very small sample (n=12) was used, but a relatively large amount of data was derived from the interviews including four core themes, which were then reviewed based on each of three groups, who reflected different trajectories or experiences of treatment. A significant weakness of this manuscript is that key methodological details were not presented, for example, levels of agreement between interviewers, or agreement between the interviewers and the ‘experienced researchers’ (page 8). This makes it difficult to determine the reliability or validity of the results. I suspect the author’s results and conclusions are valid, but I feel unable to independently determine this based on the presented evidence. I hope the following comments are helpful.

Major Compulsory Revisions
1. The authors should report any available data about the levels of agreement

Response:
Thank you for the positive feedback and the appropriate comment that qualitative research generally includes less participants than quantitative studies. Our reviewer asks about level of agreement. We understand this question but believe we provide a full description of how the analyses were conducted. Level of absolute agreement is not a regular part of qualitative research as analyses involved interpretation and iterative coding in an unblinded cooperative fashion. In other words consistency in coding is regarded as a research goal but agreement is more important and handled by discussions. We do understand that this has a major impact on the reliability and validity of the results when constrained with ordinary quantitative methods (which we are trained in and know well). There is a rich literature on validity in qualitative research (Elliot R, Fischer CT, Rennie DL. Evolving guidelines for publication of qualitative research studies in psychology and related fields. Br J Clin Psychol. 1999;38:215-29.)

Reviewer’s report
Title: Experiences of guided Internet-based cognitive-behavioural treatment for
depression: A qualitative study
Reviewer: Karina Lovell

Reviewer’s report:
This is an interesting paper but I am unsure if it significantly adds anything to the current literature on computerised CBT (CCBT). The overall aim of the study was to obtain a detailed understanding of participants’ experience of the treatment that could contribute to improve the effectiveness and reduce dropouts in Internet-based depression treatments.

The authors have argued that there is a paucity of literature on the user experience of internet delivered CBT. The authors failed to mention 3 key papers (Gerhards et al (2011) Improving adherence and effectiveness of computerised cognitive behavioural therapy without support for depression: A qualitative study on patient experiences. Journal of Affective Disorders, 129, 117-125; Kaltenenthaler et (2008) The acceptability to patients of computerized cognitive behaviour therapy for depression: a systematic review. Psychological Medicine ; R. Waller and S. Gilbody (2009) Barriers to the uptake of computerized cognitive behavioural therapy: a systematic review of the quantitative and qualitative evidence. Psychological Medicine. Although it is probable that the Gerhard (2011) was published after submission of this paper the other two papers should have been referenced as they have direct relevance to the aim of this study.

Response:
Thanks for pointing this out. All three papers are now included, but we do believe that there is still no qualitative study on guided internet-delivered CBT for depression (Beattie et al. was real time chat). Gehards et al is unguided, Kaltenhalther is not a qualitative study, the Waller and Gilbody study is not really relevant either as it focus on CCBT with substantial dropout rates which we do not have in our approach. In fact in the many studies from our group dropout is much less of a problem than in many studies on unguided Internet treatment and potentially CCBT as well. Our aim is not to study dropout but rather adherence to the treatment and response. But most important we wanted to study how the treatment was perceived.

The authors have failed to provide a coherent rationale for their sample size of 12. Given that 48 agreed to participate it would have been advantageous to increase the sample size (the authors would still have been able to incorporate purposeful sampling).

Response:
There are different opions in field of qualitative inquiry with regards to how many participants are needed and indeed studies with fewer participants can be found (e.g., only five; Clarke H, Rees A, Hardy GE: The big idea: clients’ perspective of change processes in cognitive therapy. Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice 2004, 77:67–89.). However we state in the discussion
that a larger sample would have been useful. "The sample was limited, small and selected, and from a qualitative research point of view a larger number of participants would have been preferred given the way we analyzed our data as a fuller description might have emerged."

The authors state 'The 36% who declined taking part of the study did not differ systematically from the larger group, and the main reason was lack of time' – it is unclear what is meant by this – I am assuming that they are saying that they did not differ from those who did agree but the variables that this was tested on would need to be included.

Response:
We do state that the main reason was lack of time which is a systematic difference. However we now added that they were similar in terms of Beck Depression Scores as well.

It is also unclear why the total sample were not invited to interview (total sample was 88 only 74 were contacted). The authors have argued that they used purposive sampling according to the maximum variation strategy using 2 variables (treatment group and overall improvement). The authors state 'Unfortunately, only one participant whose improvement was graded as “no change” wanted to participate in the study. This latter statement implies that only one participant of 48 reported no change on CGI – this puzzles me as if this is correct then they either have a biased sample (ie the respondents did in fact differ from those who did not participate in the study or there were so few people reporting no change then this was an unsuitable variable to use for maximum variation (I did try to check this with the main trial outcome date but the paper does not report the numbers reporting change on the CGI).

Response:
Actually we do describe the reason why only 74 were contacted: "This was done in association with a follow-up and only persons participating in the follow-up were asked for participation in this study.". For obvious reasons we did not contact persons who declined to participate in our follow-up.

Regarding CGI it is correct that we did not report that (or were advised not to do so in the review process). When we now checked the unpublished data there were only 3 who were rated as showing no change! We have now added this information in the text as it suggests that having one out of 12 (8.3%) is more rather than less than the 3 out of 51 (immediate treatment results without the control group) 5.9%.

No rationale is provided for the analysis used (i.e. thematic and a grounded theory approach). It is particularly important that a rationale for analysis is provided as most readers would want to know why this approach was used in favour of other approaches such as framework analysis. Given the small numbers in each of the 3 categories (Readers, strivers and doers) and the failure
to note whether theoretical saturation was achieved it is difficult to have confidence in these categories.

Response:
Again there are very different views on how to conduct and report qualitative studies. We added a few sentences on why we decided to combine two approaches and that we cannot claim to have reached saturation in the GT sense. " While these two approaches are related thematic analysis seek to summarise/encapsulate the data, but not necessarily with the aim of developing a theory to explain it in the same sense [26]. We wanted to expand a bit from a pure thematic analysis but did not expect to reach saturation and reach a new theory which are goals in grounded theory [27]."

Thank you again for the comments

Sincerely
Gerhard Andersson