Reviewer's report

Title: Psychological treatment of depressive symptoms in Chinese elderly inpatients with somatic diseases: A meta-analysis

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Reviewer: Martin Pinquart

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Major Compulsory Revisions

First, the authors wrote that they selected studies that compared psychotherapy against a treatment-as-usual control group. Figure 1 reported that 23 studies were excluded because they did not exclusively focus on psychotherapy. However, Table 1 indicates that the members of the intervention group of two included studies also received rehabilitation (Liu & Wang, 2006; Liu et al., 2003). Rehabilitation would not be considered as psychotherapy. As physical illness is a risk factor for depressive symptoms, treatment effects in these studies may be based on effects of rehabilitation (e.g., physiotherapy) on physical health rather than on direct effects of psychotherapy on depressive symptoms. Thus, they may have to exclude these two studies from their analysis.

Second, the authors also analyzed effects of psychotherapy on indicators of physical health. Unfortunately, only minimal information is provided on the assessment of physical health. More concretely, did any of these health measures use patient self-reports? In this case, improvements in (reported) physical health may reflect declines in depressed patients' biased reports of physical health conditions rather than changes of objective health.

Third, the authors should provide more information regarding their third inclusion criterion (“increased level of depressive symptoms”). Is there an objective criterion, such as X standard deviation units above the norms of Chinese elderly?

Minor Essential Revisions

The authors refer to Cohen’s criteria of interpreting effect sizes and write than effect sizes of lower than 0.5 standard deviation units would be small. However, Cohen had suggested a lowest threshold of small effects (d=.20).

Computing effect sizes as standardized difference of posttest scores could cause errors if the pretest scores of the intervention group and control group differ. I would recommend controlling for this source of bias (if pretest scores are available).

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests
Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: Yes, and I have assessed the statistics in my report.

Declaration of competing interests:
I have no competing interests.