Reviewer's report

Title: Solution-focused follow-up for sick listed employees with psychological problems or muscle skeletal pain: a randomised controlled trial

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Reviewer: Willy Eriksen

Reviewer's report:

General

1. This paper describes a randomised controlled trial of a solution focused intervention in sick listed employees with psychological problems or muscle skeletal pain. The aim of the intervention was to improve the health and functional ability of the employees and reduce the length of the sick leave.

Long-term sick leave causes individual suffering as well as public expense, and there is a lack of effective measures designed to reduce this major public health problem. Hence, the study is of great importance.

The study was well conducted. Unfortunately, the number of employees included in the trial, and consequently the statistical power of the trial, turned out lower than the authors had hoped and expected. Still, the results may be of interest to researchers as well as policy makers.

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

2. The indeces of the SF-36 may not be normally distributed. Did the authors investigate this, and which statistical test was used to compare the groups regarding these indeces? I cannot see that these issues are addressed?

3. Quite a few statistical comparisons are made in this study. In the primary analyses alone, as many as 10 comparisons are made. One should also take into account the secondary analyses. When many comparisons are conducted, the nominal p-values for each variable may be misleading, because the risk of type I error cumulates with each statistical test performed. However, I cannot see that the authors mention this problem either under Methods or in the Discussion. It is important to acknowledge that implementation of multiple comparison procedures has a philosophical component, involving a researcher’s position on the balance between statistical power and control over Type I error. Hence, the use of a traditional level of statistical significance (0.05) is not necessarily wrong. Still, the issue should be addressed, and the authors should explain how they think about this matter (either in Methods or Discussion).

4. The authors mention that 15-20 responders returned the questionnaire between 7-10 months after the intervention, while they should have returned it at 6 month follow-up. Do the authors know whether these late responders were evenly distributed between the groups? If there are data on this, they should be reported. As there may be a decline in health complaints over time after a “crisis”, an uneven distribution of late responders may have influenced the results. This problem may be mentioned in the Discussion.

5. The Discussion is interesting and well written. My concern is the conclusion. The authors state
that "The observed differences in the SF-36 subscale of mental health and return to work rate at six months follow-up…indicate that the intervention is effective". In my view, this conclusion is hardly supported by the data, especially when taking into account the multiple comparison problem. The authors may want to reconsider this statement and perhaps make the conclusion more cautious.

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**Minor Essential Revisions** (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

**Discretionary Revisions** (which the author can choose to ignore)

6. The authors have published an article earlier in BMC Public Health that describes the results of a solution focused intervention, but I cannot find any reference to this article. Would it not be appropriate to mention this trial/article?

7. The authors find that some of the secondary analyses reveal significant or borderline significant associations. It would be of interest to see more figures (in parantheses), supporting these statements: e.g. mean vs. mean. So far, the authors have only given p-values and ES.

**What next?**: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

**Level of interest**: An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English**: Acceptable

**Statistical review**: No

**Declaration of competing interests**: I declare that I have no competing interests.