Reviewers report

Title: Feasibility of a randomised controlled trial of remotely delivered problem-solving cognitive behaviour therapy versus usual care for young people with depression and repeat self-harm: lessons learnt (e-DASH)

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Reviewer: Beth Brodsky

Reviewers report:

This study investigates the feasibility and acceptability of conducting a RCT comparing remotely conducted Problem Solving Cognitive Behavior Therapy with treatment as usual in decreasing depression in young people aged 16-30 with depression who present for treatment for self-harm behaviors. The authors developed criteria for assessing feasibility and acceptability. Despite many efforts to recruit and maintain participants, the researchers were not able to achieve the criteria for feasibility and acceptability in terms of level of recruitment and retention. The authors also conducted qualitative research among the clinicians who were treating the participants, and among a subsample of young people who did not agree to participate in the intervention, and found that high levels of depression, low levels of motivation, barriers to technology such as cell phones and internet service, were obstacles to recruitment and retention. They conclude that their approach to conducting this type of RCT is not feasible or acceptable among this particular population of moderately to severely depressed young people, particularly adolescents. They recommend modifying the approach to conducting such a RCT in the future, particularly by standardizing the methods with which the referring clinicians assess level of depression, and by not limiting the inclusion criteria to such high levels of depression or recency of self harm behaviors.

The strengths of this study are the mixed method methodology, and the clear definition of feasibility and acceptability. The strongest findings are from the qualitative results that identify the obstacles of reaching at risk adolescents and young adults with potentially effective evidence based treatment for depression and self-harm behaviors. The study design is also problematic in that the authors attempted to do too much - conduct a RCT while testing the acceptability and feasibility of doing so. It is not clear why they proceeded with the study when the pilot study resulted in low feasibility and acceptability. Perhaps taking a first step of testing the feasibility and acceptability of just trying to offer the PSCBT intervention would be more productive. Also, there is no mention of offering any type of incentive or compensation for participation, which could increase recruitment and retention and allow for a RCT to determine efficacy of the treatment. These limitations need to be acknowledged and discussed.
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Yes

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