

Cost and Outcome of Behavioural Activation (COBRA): a randomised controlled trial of behavioural activation versus cognitive-behavioural therapy for depression

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Disclaimer: This report contains transcripts of interviews conducted in the course of the research and contains language that may offend some readers.

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Plain English summary

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Plain English summary

Depression is a major health problem that causes severe hardship, distress and disability to many people. Cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), which works by helping people change the way they think, is an effective treatment for depression but its delivery requires a highly trained and professionally qualified workforce. Behavioural activation (BA), which works by helping people change the way they behave, may be an effective alternative to CBT and, because it is simpler, might be delivered more cheaply by less specialised health workers.

In this study, we directly compared CBT with BA, allocating people by chance, so that half of our 440 research participants received BA and half received CBT, to see if people receiving BA were no worse off than those treated with CBT. We also analysed cost-effectiveness – the differences in the costs of both treatments related to their effectiveness – and interviewed participants and therapists for their views on treatment.

We found that the people in both groups improved. We also found that at 6, 12 and 18 months after people were allocated to either treatment, those receiving BA were not worse off in terms of symptoms of depression than those receiving CBT, as measured by any questionnaires we used. We also found that the total costs of health and social care were lower for people treated with BA and that it was more likely that BA was cost-effective compared with CBT. Patients and therapists identified some challenges receiving and delivering treatment, but found BA and CBT to be acceptable overall.

In conclusion, our trial has shown that BA is a clinically effective and cost-effective alternative psychological therapy to CBT for the treatment of patients with depression.

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