

One-to-one volunteer befriending to reduce symptoms of depression in people with intellectual disability: a feasibility RCT

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Plain English summary

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People with intellectual disability (also known as learning disability) often have few friends and limited access to social support, which can lead to loneliness. This can have a negative effect on their self-esteem and lead to depression. Befriending could help individuals with intellectual disability to access more community activities and emotional support, which could lead to improved well-being, but there have been no trials evaluating befriending in this population.

Methods

We carried out a pilot trial of one-to-one befriending by volunteers in people with intellectual disability who had symptoms of depression. Participants were randomised to the intervention group or control group. Both groups received usual care and a booklet of local activities. We recruited participants from one NHS trust and two befriending schemes that managed the befriending intervention (i.e. recruitment, training, matching and supervision of volunteers). Pairs were asked to meet for at least 1 hour per week, over 6 months. We were aiming to recruit at least 35 participants, to match 70% of those in the intervention group to a volunteer, for less than 30% of participants and volunteers to drop out of the study, for befriending to be considered acceptable (based on feedback from interviews) and for the intervention be delivered as intended (at least 10 meetings between pairs).

Results

We recruited only 16 participants and 10 volunteers because of delays in setting up the study and challenges with our recruitment approach. Six of the eight participants in the intervention group were matched to a volunteer. Only two volunteers dropped out of the study. Matched pairs met 12 times and the most frequent activities involved going to cafes and restaurants, and on walks. Experiences of befriending were largely positive.

Conclusion

It will not be possible to carry out a large randomised trial using the same recruitment approach.

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