

Virtual reality supported therapy for the negative symptoms of schizophrenia: the V-NeST feasibility RCT

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Plain language summary

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Background

Schizophrenia is one of the most severe and debilitating mental health conditions. Full recovery rates are low, and the illness burden is huge for those affected. Research suggests that negative symptoms reduce people's recovery prospect. Negative symptoms include poor motivation, social withdrawal, difficulty in enjoying daily activities and reduced communication. These symptoms influence patients' day-to-day functioning, and reports of patient groups have highlighted this as a key area for new treatment development.

Aims

To: (1) develop a novel virtual reality supported therapy (called Virtual Reality Supported Therapy for the Negative Symptoms of Psychosis) targeting the negative symptoms of schizophrenia with the overall aim of improving recovery; (2) evaluate Virtual Reality Supported Therapy for the Negative Symptoms of Psychosis for ease of use, acceptability and safety and estimate its potential benefits.

Development work

The Virtual Reality Supported Therapy for the Negative Symptoms of Psychosis software and procedures were initially developed by the research team. This process included several feedback phases from different stakeholders including service users, clinicians and technology experts. The resulting therapy is a 12-session virtual reality supported intervention delivered by a psychologist.

Evaluation work

We used a controlled study design where half of the participants were offered Virtual Reality Supported Therapy for the Negative Symptoms of Psychosis in addition to their usual treatment and the other half received usual treatment alone. The study recruited to target (30 participants) but took longer than anticipated to complete because of COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Prior to random assignment, participants were assessed with measures of goal attainment, negative symptoms and functioning.

Four participants did not complete the study (two in Virtual Reality Supported Therapy for the Negative Symptoms of Psychosis and two in usual treatment alone). More than 80% of the participants in the therapy group received an appropriate number of therapy sessions. Interviews suggested that the therapy was considered acceptable and useful. Preliminary analysis suggested that the intervention had a positive effect on therapy recovery goals and negative symptoms. The research procedures were considered feasible.

Implications and next steps

The results of this study are encouraging and support further evaluation of this therapy through a randomised controlled trial to formally assess its efficacy.

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