



Synopsis

Brief psychodynamic-interpersonal therapy for adults with a history of self-harm: the SafePIT RCT

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Plain language summary

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We set up this research trial to find out whether a brief type of therapy, psychodynamic-interpersonal therapy, helps people who attend an emergency department after an episode of self-harm, over and above National Health Service standard care.

People who self-harm are emotionally distressed and have a high risk of ending their lives. Most people who attend hospital following self-harm are not offered any psychological therapy. Self-harm, Assessment, Formulation, Engagement Trial of Psychodynamic-Interpersonal Therapy involves 4 weekly sessions of one-to-one therapy and is intended for people who have three or fewer prior episodes of self-harm.

We planned to involve 12 different emergency departments around England in the full trial and recruit 770 people.

We started the trial in February 2022 just after the height of the Omicron wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. We found it extremely difficult to recruit people to the study due to a variety of factors, but the most important one was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on clinical services and also research support services. It took us a long time to set up hospital sites. At the hospital sites, the mental health teams suffered from high rates of staff turnover and sickness absence. There was low morale, and staff at times did not have the capacity to recruit people to the study.

Despite our best efforts to overcome these problems, it became clear that we would not be able to complete the study, and we agreed with the funders to close the trial after 12 months. In total, we recruited 22 participants. It is not possible from the small number of people we recruited to make any judgements about the helpfulness of psychodynamic-interpersonal therapy for people who self-harm. We hope that future research in this area will be able to learn from the difficulties that we encountered.