Vocationally oriented cognitive behavioural training for the very long-term unemployed

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Background The very long-term unemployed (i.e. those unemployed for more than 2 years) face serious mental health problems and social difficulties in regaining employment.

Aims To assess the effectiveness of a pilot vocationally oriented cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) programme on mental health and vocational outcomes among a group of very long-term unemployed.

Methods A pre-test–post-test design with follow-up assessment at 12 weeks was used to assess the effects of CBT group training on mental health, self-esteem, optimism and attitudes to work. Participants were recruited through employment agencies in Sydney, Australia.

Results Twelve weeks following CBT training, the 21 participants reported increased optimism and attitudes to work, and more than half of them had participated in some kind of paid employment.

Conclusions While this study is small and non-generalizable, the findings suggest the value of vocationally oriented CBT approaches in assisting the very long-term unemployed to get back into the workforce.

Key words Occupational rehabilitation; psychological health; public health.

Introduction

People who are long-term unemployed are at risk of serious mental health problems, including psychiatric diagnoses of depression and anxiety [1]. ‘Structural worklessness’ in the form of permanent disability among the very long-term unemployed (i.e. unemployed for 2 years or more) has increased significantly over the past 25 years [2]. As workforce participation rates decline in many western nations and the welfare burden increases, there are new imperatives to assist people who are very long-term unemployed to get back into the workforce.

Vocationally oriented cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) has demonstrated efficacy in improving the mental health and employment outcomes of people who are unemployed [3], and a few studies suggest that its utility is high for people receiving sickness benefits [4] and those with a psychiatric disability [5]. There was, however, a need to assess the benefits of this approach on the very long-term unemployed population, and therefore, the aim of this pilot study was to examine the effects of a vocationally oriented CBT group training programme on psychological health and vocational outcomes among a group of very long-term unemployed in Sydney, Australia.

Methods

A pre-test–post-test design was used with follow-up assessment at 12 weeks. Participants were recruited through employment network agencies across five metropolitan sites. Participants had to be registered as unemployed for more than 2 years and looking for work, aged between 18 and 45 years, proficient in English, and possess basic reading and writing skills. Self-report questionnaires were administered immediately prior to training (pre-test), immediately after training (post-test) and 12 weeks following training (follow-up). The questionnaires assessed mental health using the SF-12 Mental Component Summary [6], self-esteem using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale [7], optimism using the Life Orientation Test–Revised [8], and attitudes to work using the Work Involvement Scale [9].

The vocationally oriented CBT programme involved practical activities, peer learning and facilitated in-depth
discussion of job-seeking experiences to provide participants with strategies to manage their thoughts, feelings and behaviours related to unemployment, and develop new perspectives and skills associated with successful re-employment. The programme was delivered by registered psychologists over a 2-week period in four sessions of 4 h each.

Paired t-tests were used to test the outcomes of the programme, immediately following training and 12 weeks later. Alpha was set at 0.05 for significance testing. Simple counts of participant’s self-reported paid work were collected at pre-test and follow-up.

Ethical approval was received from the University of Western Sydney and Sydney South West Area Health Service Human Research Ethics Committees.

Results

Twenty-seven people participated in this CBT intervention. As shown in Table 1, most participants were men, aged 35 years and older, had been registered as unemployed for more than 5 years, had completed secondary education or equivalent and had not undertaken any paid work in the 3 months prior to the intervention.

Twenty-three participants completed the post-test questionnaire and 21 completed the 12-week follow-up questionnaire. Those who failed to return the follow-up survey (n = 6) were all men. Table 2 presents the mean scores (M), standard deviations (SD) and t-values for each measure at pre-test, post-test and follow-up. The level of optimism (t = 3.995, df = 22, P < 0.01) before training (M = 12.26, SD = 3.12) significantly improved post-training (M = 14.48, SD = 3.19). Twelve weeks following training, the group maintained significant improvement from pre-test levels (t = 3.03, df = 20, P < 0.01) and showed a remarkable improvement in their attitude to work (t = 2.75, df = 20, P < 0.05).

More participants reported involvement in paid work at follow-up (12/19 or 63%) than at pre-test (8/23 or 35%). Most of the positions at follow-up were casual (8/12 or 67%); one position was full-time, two were part-time and one was temporary.

Discussion

Twelve weeks following the vocationally oriented CBT intervention for the very long-term unemployed,
participants reported an improvement in optimism and attitude to work. Furthermore, more participants reported undertaking any form of paid work at follow-up. These results are similar to the findings from other vocationally oriented CBT studies undertaken with general unemployed populations, people receiving sickness benefits, and those with psychiatric disability. While its findings are promising, the study is limited by the lack of a non-therapeutic control, small sample size and inability to control for possible confounders. A randomized control trial with a wait-list control would be suitable to rigorously test the efficacy of the programme.

The very long-term unemployed face significant psychological barriers to work. Repeated failure in job search and the inability to maintain employment can reduce one’s self-esteem, motivation and expectations for future employment [10]. In this study, optimism improved immediately following training and remained high 12 weeks later. This is an important finding given that high levels of optimism, or changed expectations for success, may stimulate improvement in other areas of health and work functioning. Improvements in attitude to work at 12 weeks following training, for example, may have resulted from the initial growth in optimism. Alternatively, it may be that participants’ increased involvement in paid work at follow-up had a direct impact on their attitudes to work. These speculative interpretations of the outcomes of vocationally oriented CBT require further investigation.

Of particular note is that 8 of 23 participants had undertaken some paid work in the 12 weeks prior to training, suggesting that for some people who are very long-term unemployed, the issue may not be about attaining work but in accessing secure employment and maintaining a position in the workforce. Even those who reported they had undertaken some form of paid work at follow-up were likely to have engaged in casual work. Changes to the structure of the workforce, including a reduction in the availability of low-skill jobs, and the increase in casual, part-time and contract work, present a challenge for the very long-term unemployed in gaining a secure and independent economic future. Programmes to promote the capacity of the very long-term unemployed to gain employment, such as vocationally oriented CBT, must be complemented with broader labour market policy if we are to see a population shift from welfare to work.

Key points
- There are new policy imperatives to assist the very long-term unemployed get back into the workforce.
- Vocationally oriented cognitive behaviour therapy may be a useful adjunct to labour market initiatives in promoting employment among the very long-term unemployed.

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Conflicts of interest
None declared.

References