

Researching counselling effectiveness

A recent systematic scoping review of research in the university and college counselling sector calls for government supported funding to deliver a coordinated UK national study to evaluate routine student counselling and evaluate its effectiveness. This overview of the review's findings reveals the challenge to the sector to start participating in and producing more robust research evidence

The *Systematic scoping review of research on counselling in higher and further education* published in May 2006 was commissioned by BACP with the aim of mapping out the primary areas and domains of research activity in the sector and assembling the best quality research evidence in those areas.

The review included studies of students of any age or status attending a student counselling service for individual therapy provided within an institution of higher or further education, as well as highest quality studies where the students were not recruited from a student counselling service. The interventions included were those evaluated within a student counselling or psycho-therapeutic context, however that counselling or psychotherapy was defined, or when the study took place outside a student mental health service the BACP definition

of counselling/psychotherapy was applied as an inclusion/exclusion criteria.

A wide range of research designs was evaluated (including experimental and non-experimental quantitative research, and qualitative research) and a hierarchy of evidence approach was taken. Randomised controlled trials (RCTs), non-randomised controlled trials (CTs), controlled clinical trials (CCTs), controlled before and after studies, and interrupted time series were prioritised.

The review identified and summarised the best quality research falling into one of three broad areas, agreed through consultation with BACP and AUCC:

- the effectiveness of student counselling/psychotherapy
- factors affecting the outcome of student counselling
- intake severity and assessment of students attending counselling services

Effectiveness findings

There was preliminary evidence that psychodynamic therapy was effective for student counselling populations (low-quality non-experimental research designs). There was preliminary evidence that short-term therapy was effective, with three out of four studies reporting positive results (non-equivalent control groups design, therapeutic orientation undefined). There was tentative evidence that crisis intervention was useful in preventing drop-out from university (single study, quasi experimental/non-equivalent group design). There was limited evidence that cognitive therapy was effective in reducing test anxiety (RCT, single study). There was limited evidence that cognitive therapy was effective in reducing unresolved traumatic experiences (RCT, single study).

Outcomes findings

Static client and therapist variables were found not to be associated with outcome. The research relating to complex client and therapist variables was too diverse to permit definitive conclusions to be drawn. Two promising findings are outlined as follows:

- Cognitive (eg thinking patterns, self-efficacy) and psychological (eg optimism/hope) resources in students appeared to protect against premature termination in therapy.
- Therapist responsiveness to clients' needs, (ie where therapists are responsive to clients' varying requirements, adapting their interventions so as to maximise effectiveness) seemed to be an emerging theme in terms of its salience to outcome of therapy.

Findings on intake severity and presenting problems

Most of the research pertaining to symptom severity was conducted in the US in single institutions, limiting generalisability to UK populations and across service populations. Multivariate classification schemes employed to categorise presenting problems appear to be a promising method of 'profiling' vulnerable students. Social support systems, trauma screening and alcohol use have been reported to impact on student distress levels and should

therefore be incorporated into standard assessment procedures (single studies).

Review conclusions

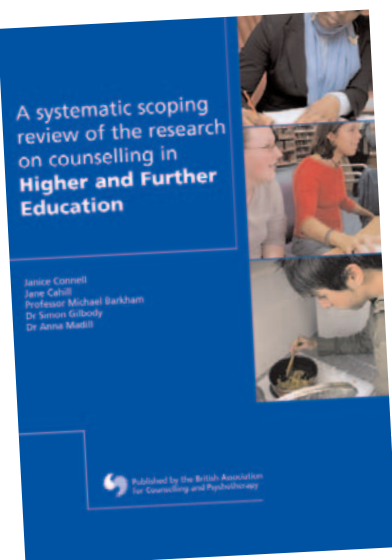
The evidence base associated with student counselling is characterised by low quality and/or research designs that are inappropriate to the research questions. Future research needs to be more coordinated, more focused in the breadth of area covered, and raised in terms of methodological quality to permit conclusions to be drawn and recommendations to be implemented at government and service level. In the context of finite resources and increasing demands for an evidence base, there is a strong argument for government supported funding to deliver a coordinated UK national study to evaluate student access to routine student counselling and establish its effectiveness. This would parallel current government initiatives looking at models of improving access to psychological treatments¹. ■

Reference

1 Layard R. Therapy for all on the NHS. Lecture delivered at the Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health. 12/9/05.

This article is a slightly adapted extract from A systematic scoping review of the research on counselling in higher and further education, which is presented as required reading for counsellors working with students and for managers of counselling services who

want an evidence-based overview of counselling services for students, providing useful information on benchmarking and service delivery as well as evidence for effectiveness. It is available from BACP publication sales on 0870 443 5252 or via www.bacp.co.uk/shop, at £12 for BACP members and £18 for non-members.



Chair of AUCC's research sub-committee, Richard Evans, comments on the scoping review findings

It is unfortunate that current thinking in the rank ordering of research evidence, replicated in this scoping review, continues to prioritise the randomised controlled trial (RCT). This is particularly so given the findings of a rigorous and authoritative analysis of trials within the field of psychotherapy research¹ which has created significant controversy in the US but gone almost un-noted here. Wampold¹ argues that specific ingredients, that is types of intervention or models of therapy, account for no more than about eight per cent of the variance in outcomes and possibly as little as one per cent. This would strongly suggest that the generally applied, manualised styles of RCTs inappropriately privilege a minor contribution to therapeutic outcome. This, in turn, supports the conclusion that what Wampold calls the contextual model² provides the underlying conceptual basis for the effects of psychotherapy, as opposed to the medical model that RCTs assume. Wampold's view is close to that which we as practitioners and heads of service intuitively think we know, but is not well received in the cost-benefit marketplace; that is, the medical model does not explain the benefits of therapy, rather it is the factors common to all therapies that are central to the effectiveness of psychotherapy. These general factors or common effects account for around 70 per cent of psychotherapeutic effects. Key variables are the personality of the therapist, their competence, and the ways in which therapist and client interrelate. The findings suggest that we need a different and more naturalistic approach to collecting research data.

I wholeheartedly agree that we need to get robust research studies underway and that these will need funding. It is important, though, that these efforts are directed appropriately – that the research questions and designs focus on what is actually done in our practice. We need to counter the likely scepticism about the validity and robustness of naturalistic data, even though it may accurately reflect what we actually do in the room(s) rather than a manualised abstraction. It will need a national effort to generate enough naturalistic data of our practice base to be convincing, but the development of practice research networks is one way to do this (see box below).

References

- 1 Wampold BE. The great psychotherapy debate: models, methods and findings. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates; 2001.
- 2 Frank JD, Frank JB. Persuasion and healing: a comparative study of psychotherapy. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press; 1991.

An opportunity to take up the research challenge...

The last AUCC journal published an invitation to college and university counselling services to join a new practice research network using the well-known CORE tools. The idea is to gather and pool high-quality data in a uniform way, so that it provides a robust evidence base and makes a substantial collective research contribution to student counselling.

For CORE sceptics, see Nic Streatfield's article opposite setting out the therapeutic benefits members of the network pilot group have found in working with the CORE outcome measures.

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