

**Efficacy of Internet-based cognitive behavioral therapy (ICBT) as a treatment
for anxiety and depression: A randomised controlled trial.**

Abstract

Mental health services provided by the Hospital Authority in Hong Kong are already overcrowded (Hospital Authority, 2020), however the percentage of affected individuals consulting mental health services was rather low (Lam et al., 2015). The Internet-based psychological interventions with proven effectiveness in treating different psychological disorders, e.g. depression (Spek, et al., 2007) and anxiety disorder (Spek, et al., 2007), was recommended by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) under a stepped care model (NICE, 2009; NICE 2011). It could be an alternative to alleviate the critical situation in Hong Kong.

Since the co-occurrence of depression and anxiety disorders is common (González-Robles, Díaz-García, Miguel, García-Palacios, & Botella, 2018; Titov, Andrews, Johnston, Robinson, & Spence, 2010), and there was no empirical study on the efficacy of Internet-based cognitive behavioral therapy (ICBT) for depression and anxiety disorders in the local population, the present study attempted to investigate the efficacy of a 6-session Internet-based transdiagnostic cognitive behavioral therapy for people with clinical diagnosis of depression and/or anxiety.

This study is a randomised controlled trial investigating the efficacy of ICBT for Hong Kong adults with diagnosable depression and/or anxiety disorders comparing with an Internet-based education control (IEC). Participants who met the inclusion criteria for both online and face-to-face screening were randomised into either ICBT or IEC group. Each intervention consisted of six sessions. Participants proceeded with the sessions sequentially within a ten-week period. Measures of depression, anxiety, repetitive negative thinking (RNT), and frequency of actions and thoughts scale (FATS) were conducted at pre-intervention, post-intervention and 6-month follow-up.

A total of 210 participants completed pre-intervention assessment, with 160 and 137 of them completed post-intervention and 6-month follow-up assessment, respectively. ICBT (N= 104) showed greater reduction in depression than IEC (N=106). Such effect was mediated by rewarding behaviors of FATS. Limitations, clinical implications, and future directions were also discussed.