

Online CBT effective for social anxiety disorder in young people

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Jens Hogstrom, Eva Serlachius and Martina Nordh.
Credit: Stefan Zimmerman

Social anxiety disorder can cause considerable suffering in children and adolescents and, for many with the disorder, access to effective treatment is limited. Researchers at Center for Psychiatry Research at Karolinska Institutet and Region Stockholm in Sweden have now shown that internet-delivered cognitive behavioral therapy is an efficacious and cost-effective treatment option. The study is published in the journal *JAMA Psychiatry*.

Social anxiety disorder (SAD, previously known as [social phobia](#)) has a typical onset during childhood and is characterized by an intense and persistent fear of being scrutinized and negatively evaluated in social or performance situations. The fear typically leads to avoidance of such anxiety triggering situations or are endured under great distress, resulting in an impaired ability to function in everyday life. The disability can lead to underperformance in school, social isolation from peers and, inability to partake in leisure activities.

As one of the most common anxiety disorders

among youth, the disorder affects 5 to 10% of the youth population and without effective treatment it has been linked to long-term psychosocial adversity and persistence into adulthood. Despite known evidence-based treatments for SAD, such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), the access to [effective treatment](#) is very limited.

As a means to increase access, researchers at Center for Psychiatry Research at Karolinska Institutet and the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services in Region Stockholm have now developed and evaluated a 10-week internet-delivered CBT (ICBT) program for young people with SAD.

The study was conducted between 2017 and 2020, and included 103 youths aged 10 to 17 along with their parents. Participants were randomly assigned to either internet-delivered CBT or an active control group, internet-delivered supportive therapy.

Both interventions included ten online treatment modules with weekly therapist support and, three video sessions with the therapist. Parents parallelly received five online modules with therapist support.

The results showed that ICBT was significantly more effective than supportive therapy in reducing social anxiety and comorbid psychiatric symptoms, as well as in increasing the level of global functioning.

The superiority of ICBT was shown in assessments of participants' symptoms made by masked assessors as well as in ratings by participants themselves and their parents.

According to the researchers, the [digital format](#) can also increase access to evidence-based treatment for children and adolescents with SAD.

"Offering treatment digitally means that children and parents don't have to take time off school and

work to travel to a health care facility," says the study's first author Martina Nordh, psychologist and researcher at the Center for Psychiatry Research, part of Karolinska Institutet's Department of Clinical Neuroscience, and Region Stockholm. "We also believe it may lower the threshold to seeking treatment, as young people with SAD can find it too challenging to meet with unfamiliar people and to be in a new setting."

The total time spent by the therapists in ICBT was about a quarter of the time normally required by face-to-face CBT for SAD.

"Shorter therapist time enables each therapist to treat more patients and may lead to reduction of waiting times," says principal investigator Eva Serlachius, child and adolescent psychiatrist and adjunct professor at the Center for Psychiatry Research, part of Karolinska Institutet's Department of Clinical Neuroscience, and Region Stockholm. "This also makes digital CBT less costly for the healthcare services and resources can be redistributed to those with greater need of more intensive treatment."

More information: Therapist-guided internet-delivered CBT versus internet-delivered supportive therapy for children and adolescents with social anxiety disorder: a randomized controlled trial.

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