Digital Intervention Improves Depression in People With HIV

In many nations, people living with HIV have limited access to mental health services.

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A digital mental health intervention improved symptoms of depression among a group of people living with HIV in China in a recent study.

Of the estimated 36 million people living with HIV worldwide, perhaps one in three have symptoms of depression. But globally most people with HIV live in developing nations, where because of stigma against the virus and a shortage of mental health professionals, they have limited access to mental health services.

Seeking a practical and scalable solution to this widespread problem, Alicia Hong, PhD, a professor at George Mason University's College of Health and Human Services, and colleagues in China designed a study of a digital mental health intervention called Run4Love. The intervention operated through the social media app WeChat, which is popular in China.

As described in the Journal of Medical Internet Research, the study authors recruited 300 people from an HIV clinic in South China. The participants were screened with the Center for Epidemiologic Studies-Depression (CES-D) scale, and all scored the required 16 or higher, which indicated they had significant depressive symptoms.

The participants were randomized into two even groups to receive the intervention or serve in the control group. Run4Love involved stress reduction exercises, cognitive behavioral therapy and exercise guidance, provided via WeChat. The study authors monitored the participants and provided them with tailored feedback.

About 91% of the participants returned for the three-month follow-up visit to the study, 88% returned for the six-month visit and 87% attended the nine-month visit.

At the three-month follow-up point, the CES-D score had declined from the study's baseline point from 23.9 to 17.7 among those in the intervention group and from 24.3 to 23.8 in the control group. The improvement among those in the intervention group compared with those in the control group was sustained at the six- and nine-month follow-up points.

“This is one of the first large [randomized controlled trials] with long-term follow-up to evaluate digital interventions in global health settings,” Hong said in a press release, “The success of Run4Love suggests an app-based digital intervention is feasible for many [people with HIV] in resource-limited settings.”

To read a press release about the study, click here.

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