

New psychological treatment for depression in early MS

28th January, 2016



Mental health issues are common in people with MS, and in particular can have a significant impact in the period immediately following diagnosis. As many as 36% of people with MS have high levels of depression and anxiety in these first few years. Dr Litza Kiropoulos and her colleagues, from the University of Melbourne and Royal Melbourne Hospital, have developed a new psychological intervention to help reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety in people in the early stages of MS.

MS Research Australia and the MS state society MS-ACT/NSW/VIC recently co-hosted a MS Research Update webinar in which Dr Litza Kiropoulos spoke about the results of her preliminary clinical trial to test this intervention.

The researchers ran a randomised controlled clinical trial through the outpatient services at Royal Melbourne Hospital.

This is one of the first good quality trials looking at a psychological intervention for depression tailored to people in the early stages of MS; most research to date has focused on treating depression in people later in illness. However, if left untreated, depression can have a range of significant negative effects on both general functioning and MS severity, which provides a strong argument for early intervention to prevent future decline in mental health.

In this trial, participants received one hour of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) per week for 8 weeks, and the results were followed up over a 20 week period. CBT is a solution-focused therapy, which aims to challenge unhelpful thoughts and behaviours and reinforce practical solutions. The researchers tailored the therapy to deal with issues specific to people with MS, including education about MS symptoms, course, prognosis and relapse prevention; strategies to increase adjustment to a new MS diagnosis; fatigue and pain management; breathing and relaxation exercises; problem solving skills; and sleep hygiene.

The researchers found that over the 20 week period, the CBT intervention had significant benefits for reducing levels of depression and anxiety. The study also showed additional benefits for reducing fatigue and improving overall quality of life. Dr Kiropoulos also found that participants showed a high level of satisfaction with the treatment and value in participating in the trial. However, this was a small preliminary study and further research is crucial before this intervention can be made more widely available.

MS Australia has announced this month that Dr Kiropoulos will receive a [three-year MS Research Australia Project Grant](#) beginning in 2016, to support a larger-scale trial to continue developing this valuable intervention and understanding more about how it may be able to benefit people in the time soon after their MS diagnosis.

You can watch a recording of the [webinar here](#)