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Brief CBT-based Psychological Interventions to Improve Mental Health Outcomes in Refugee Populations: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis

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ABSTRACT

"Background: Refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced people experience a high burden of mental health problems owing to their experiencing traumas and stressful events. Objective: To summarise the available evidence and analyse the efficacy of brief psychological interventions (< 3 months) on improving mental health outcomes, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)-related symptoms in refugees. Method: We searched Medline, EMBASE, PsycINFO, CINAHL, and Global Index Medicus from inception to 19 December 2023. We included controlled studies using any cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) or CBT-based therapies delivered over a short time (< 3 months), which reported mental health outcomes pre-and post-intervention. We conducted meta-analyses using random effects to derive pooled summary statistics. The quality of the evidence was assessed with the Cochrane Risk of Bias (RoB2) and ROBINS-I tools. This study is registered on the Open Science Framework, DOI 10.17605/OSF.IO/9CXU4. Results: 34 eligible studies across 37 publications were retrieved for analysis, and 33 studies with 4479 participants were included in the meta-analysis. There was an overall improvement in immediate mental health outcomes for all three domains, with analysis of 13 studies on anxiety outcomes (SMD -1.12 , 95% CI -1.72 to -0.52), 20 studies on depression (SMD -1.04 , 95% CI -1.97 to -0.11), and 24 studies on PTSD (SMD -0.82 , 95% CI -1.20 to -0.45). At 3 to 6-month follow-up, however, analysis of mental health outcomes shows no significant change from baseline, with a SMD of 0.24 (95% CI -0.94 to 1.42) across 4 studies, -0.73 (95% CI -2.14 to 0.68) across 9 studies, and 0.29 (95% CI -0.94 to 1.53) across 12 studies for anxiety, depression, and PTSD respectively. Conclusion: Low-quality evidence shows brief psychological interventions have a positive immediate effect on refugees and internally displaced people's mental well-being. However, these effects do not persist in the short-term follow up. Heterogeneity was high, even among subgroups, impacting our findings' generalisability."

Keywords: refugees, psychological interventions, CBT, anxiety, depression, PTSD