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Study title: Evaluation of a rumination intervention for individuals with PTSD

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Coping with Dwelling Study - Summary of Findings

Why did we do this study?

After a traumatic event, it is common for people to dwell on what happened and ask themselves questions such as 'why did this happen to me?' Dwelling is a type of over-thinking and can become problematic. Some people develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which is a very distressing psychological stress reaction. Researchers have found out that dwelling can keep PTSD symptoms going. For example, dwelling can trigger unwanted memories to pop into our mind, it can stop us from changing unhelpful beliefs such as 'the world is unsafe' and keep us feeling low. No previous study has evaluated whether we can teach individuals with PTSD symptoms how to cope with dwelling, as a stand-alone online intervention.

The current research study developed and tried out a particular way to decrease dwelling on trauma, for individuals with symptoms of PTSD. We wanted to find out whether participants found it feasible (was it possible to do) and acceptable (did it feel like a reasonable and useful thing to do). We also wanted to explore whether the intervention could actually reduce dwelling, symptoms of PTSD and depression.

How this research was conducted

Individuals with lived experience of PTSD and dwelling, as well as psychology experts in dwelling and PTSD helped develop the study materials and online module. The intervention was completely online, so more people would have access to it from the comfort of their home.

Because this was the first time this intervention was tested, we only looked at a small group of people. The online module taught participants about what dwelling is, why people dwell after trauma, and ways to cope with it. All coping skills were based on the currently highest research standards and knowledge of cognitive behaviour therapy, which has shown to be very effective in other treatments. Participants also received a telephone call from the researcher to review the coping skills and think together how to adapt them to their specific context.

What we found

Participants told us that they found the intervention, and especially the review call, very helpful and relevant, and the coping skills easy to use. From our data, we concluded that the intervention appeared feasible and acceptable. It seemed that the intervention was most helpful for people who had never had PTSD treatment before and more difficult for individuals who were also struggling with other stressors, mental health or learning difficulties. Overall, results showed that there was a decrease in trauma-specific dwelling (in response to unwanted memories) and in PTSD symptoms, but not in general dwelling and depression symptoms. Since we only had a small group of participants, we can only draw preliminary conclusions from these results.

What this means & next steps

This study helped us better understand how we can support people to cope with dwelling after a traumatic event. It seems that this online format of teaching coping skills plus a follow-up review call is feasible and was acceptable to participants. Our initial results support the idea that dwelling can be closely linked to PTSD symptoms. The next step will be to refine and improve the intervention, based on the feedback we received. It may be that the intervention will be used by an NHS service in the future, for example, by incorporating it into existing PTSD support. Anonymised results will also be written up for a scientific journal publication, so others can also learn from the study and build on it.

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