

National positive thinking trial aims to prevent childhood depression

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More than 7,000 school pupils from across the UK will be taking part in the trial of a new positive thinking programme led by the University of Bath designed to prevent children developing problems with depression.

Around one in ten children have symptoms which place them at high risk of becoming seriously depressed. If left unmanaged, these symptoms could have a significant impact upon the child's everyday life and increase the possibility of mental health problems in young adulthood.

The £1.25 million programme, funded by the NHS Health Technology Assessment Programme (HTA), will involve 13-16 year olds from schools in Bath, Bristol, Nottingham, Swindon and Wiltshire.

The programme uses a technique known as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) which has been shown to prevent young people from developing mental health problems by giving them skills which help promote positive thinking, coping and problem solving.

As part of their lessons in Personal Social & Health Education (PSHE), the pupils will be taught how to acknowledge their personal strengths, identify negative thought processes and develop problem solving skills.

This kind of positive health intervention could help make a significant reduction to the risk of developing mental health problems. The whole class approach will benefit all children by helping them develop a robust approach to the challenges of life.

"Depression is a serious problem amongst adolescents that can lead to mental health problems in later life," said Professor Paul Stallard from the Mental Health Research & Development Unit at the University of Bath, who is leading the project.

"Studies have shown that if we give young people the tools that can help them build resilience, they can avoid these issues becoming a problem in later life.

"If this trial is successful, we hope to be able to roll-out this programme to schools throughout the country."

The programme involves academics from the universities of Bath, Bristol and Nottingham and the Peninsular Medical School, and is linked to local clinical services in the areas the trial will be taking place.

Following an initial screening, the CBT programme will be delivered in 10 weekly classroom sessions. The researchers will compare the effects of the programme being delivered by teachers and by specially trained facilitators from outside the school with current PSHE lessons.

Further assessments will be carried out immediately after the CBT programme and at six months and one year after the trial.

These assessments will look at whether the programme is successful in reducing the rates of depressive symptoms amongst children and particularly those who were initially identified with severe symptoms.

A pilot programme will take place in January 2009 with the main study taking place between September 2009 and July 2010.

"We hope that the CBT programme will result in a significant reduction in the number of children at risk of becoming seriously depressed," said

Professor Stallard, who is also a chartered clinical psychologist with the Avon & Wiltshire Mental Health Care Partnership Trust.

"Cognitive Behavioural Therapy works by improving the individual's ability to deal with negative situations and to acknowledge and focus on more positive skills and outcomes."

Professor Stallard's book on CBT, Think Good, Feel Good, was highly commended by the British Medical Association and has been translated into 13 languages.

He has won five national awards for a school-based CBT programme (FRIENDS) to prevent children from developing mental health problems.

Professor Stallard will be presenting his latest findings at the School for Health's Research Matters conference on Friday 19 September.

Source: University of Bath

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