

Panic disorder and depression can be treated over the Internet

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) via the internet is just as effective in treating panic disorder (recurring panic attacks) as traditional group-based CBT. It is also efficacious in the treatment of mild and moderate depression. This according to a new doctoral thesis soon to be presented at Karolinska Institutet, Sweden.

"Internet-based CBT is also more cost-effective than group therapy," says Jan Bergström, psychologist and doctoral student at the Center for Psychiatry Research. "The results therefore support the introduction of Internet treatment into regular psychiatry, which is also what the National Board of Health and Welfare recommends in its new guidelines for the treatment of depression and anxiety."

It is estimated that depression affects some 15 per cent and [panic disorder](#) 4 per cent of all people during their lifetime. Depression can include a number of symptoms, such as low mood, lack of joy, guilt, lethargy, concentration difficulties, insomnia and a low zest for life. Panic disorder involves debilitating panic attacks that deter a person from entering places or situations previously associated with panic. Common symptoms include palpitations, shaking, nausea and a sense that something dangerous is about to happen (e.g. a [heart attack](#) or that one is going mad).

It is known from previous studies that CBT is an effective treatment for both panic disorder and depression. However, there is a lack of psychologists and psychotherapists that use CBT methods, and access to

them varies greatly in Sweden as well as in many other countries. Internet-based CBT has therefore been developed, in which the patient undergoes an Internet-based self-help programme and has contact with a therapist by email.

The present doctoral thesis includes a randomised clinical trial of 104 patients with panic disorder and compares the effectiveness of Internet-based CBT and group CBT within a regular healthcare service. The study shows that both treatments worked very well and that there was no significant difference between them, either immediately after treatment or at a six-month follow-up. Analyses of the results for the treatment of depression show that Internet-based CBT is most effective if it is administered as early as possible. Patients with a higher severity of [depression](#) and/or a history of more frequent depressive episodes benefited less well from the Internet treatment.

Jan Bergström works as a clinical psychologist at the Anxiety Disorders Unit of the Psychiatry Northwest division of the Stockholm County Council. This research was also financed by the Stockholm County Council.

"Thanks to our research, Internet treatment is now implemented within regular healthcare in Stockholm, at the unit Internetpsykiatri.se of Psychiatry Southwest, which probably makes the Stockholm County Council the first in the world to offer such treatment in its regular psychiatric services," says Jan Bergström.

Provided by Karolinska Institutet

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