

Cognitive bias modification: A new approach to treating emotional disorders

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(Medical Xpress) -- A new approach to preventing and treating anxiety and depression may be used to improve the emotional health of fly-in fly-out workers and people living in bushfire-prone areas.

The new approach, known as cognitive bias modification (CBM), has been developed by researchers involved in a world-leading study at The University of Western Australia.

Led by Winthrop Professor Colin MacLeod, from UWA's Elizabeth Rutherford Memorial Centre for the Advancement of Research on Emotion (CARE), the team has already published studies that show how CBM works for anxiety and addictions.

The treatment works by altering automatic and unconscious biases in the way people selectively process emotional information, using simple computer programs and smart [phone applications](#). It can be effective after only a few 15-minute sessions and does not use drug or counselling therapy. All it requires is to sit in front of a computer or use a smartphone app and access a program that subtly alters harmful thought patterns.

CARE researchers are now working with the Australian Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre to evaluate whether CBM can be used to improve the emotional and behavioural preparedness of people exposed to the threat of bushfire.

Professor MacLeod also plans to investigate CBM's potential contribution to the prevention and remediation of depression in rural and remote areas of Western Australia, with a particular focus on how computer-delivered and smartphone-based CBM techniques can enhance the [emotional health](#) of fly-in fly-out workers. FIFO staff often work in isolated regions with limited access to traditional [mental health services](#).

In addition, the Romanian Complex Exploratory Research Project program has awarded Professor MacLeod almost \$2 million funding to lead three teams of Transylvanian researchers in a longitudinal study of [anxiety and depression](#) in adolescents. The study will combine CBM techniques with genetic and developmental approaches.

CARE has succeeded in attracting funding for several international collaborations. They include postdoctoral research fellow Dr Patrick Clarke and PhD student Ben Grafton, who will carry out collaborative work on CBM with colleagues at Oxford University and postdoctoral research fellow Lies Notebaert, funded by the Australian Bushfire CRC, whose work on CBM will involve collaboration with partners at Ghent University in Belgium.

Professor MacLeod has also won funding to support collaborative CBM research with colleagues at Harvard University where UWA PhD student Dan Rudaizky is currently working with Professor Rich McNally to evaluate a new iPhone app developed by CARE to produce beneficial cognitive change.

"We are delighted our researchers are committed to ensuring their internationally influential work also delivers practical benefits to the Western Australian community," Professor MacLeod said.

Provided by University of Western Australia

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