

# Digital cognitive behavioral therapy effective for severe COVID-19 worry

November 20 2020

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Worry about COVID-19 dominates some people's lives in a way that has an impact on their health. A group of researchers at Karolinska Institutet in Sweden has developed a digital CBT program that significantly reduced the participants' unhelpful worry about the pandemic. The study is published in *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics* and the program is

available through 1177 Vårdguiden.

A great many people in Sweden and around the world have been infected with COVID-19 in a short space of time. Meanwhile, much has been done in society to limit transmission. It is completely normal to worry at times like this, and for the vast majority of people the anxiety requires no intervention.

However, in some people, worry turns into unhelpful worry, which is to say that it takes over their lives in a detrimental way, leading to a heightened state of anxiety, insomnia, concentration difficulties, low mood or excessive use of alcohol and drugs.

## **Managing COVID-19 anxiety**

Last spring, researchers at Karolinska Institutet with experience of dealing with anxiety-related problems developed a digital, CBT-based self-help program designed to reduce unhelpful worry associated with COVID-19.

"The digital self-help intervention 'Hantera oro vid covid-19' (Managing COVID-19 worry) is completed in three weeks without any contact with a therapist," says the paper's first author Tove Wahlund, psychologist and researcher at the Department of Clinical Neuroscience, Karolinska Institutet. "The main reason for developing an entirely self-guided online intervention was to create a scalable and easily accessible solution that didn't put additional pressure on the already burdened [healthcare services](#)."

The researchers evaluated "Hantera oro vid covid-19" during the spring and summer by randomly assigning 670 participants to two groups, one that started the CBT program immediately and one that was required to wait for three weeks. The groups were then compared.

The results showed that the therapy reduced the participants' unhelpful worry by about 40 percent according to a self-rated questionnaire completed at the end of the three-week program. During this time, the [control group](#)'s self-rated worry decreased by 17 percent, a statistically significant difference.

"The participants who underwent the therapy also showed a significant improvement in their ability to function at work and at home, and had fewer sleep problems and a lower degree of depressive symptoms," says the paper's last author Erik Andersson, associate professor and psychologist at the Department of Clinical Neuroscience, Karolinska Institutet.

The self-help program is currently available to all citizens in Region Stockholm through the 1177 Vårdguiden website and app. The program is also on its way to being adopted by other health authorities around the country.

**More information:** Tove Wahlund et al. Brief Online Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Dysfunctional Worry Related to the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Randomized Controlled Trial, *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics* (2020). [DOI: 10.1159/000512843](https://doi.org/10.1159/000512843)

Provided by Karolinska Institutet

Citation: Digital cognitive behavioral therapy effective for severe COVID-19 worry (2020, November 20) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-11-digital-cognitive-behavioral-therapy-effective.html>

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