

New mental health treatment withstands lockdown isolation

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Experts say a new treatment option for young people with depression and loneliness is showing promising benefits, especially during COVID-19 lockdowns.

Researchers from The Australian National University (ANU) say the new treatment, Groups 4 Health (G4H), focuses on social connection rather than symptoms of mental illness.

"Groups 4 Health is a new way to deal with some of the underlying causes of poor mental health," Associate Professor at ANU and Clinical Psychologist Tegan Cruwys said.

"The goal for G4H is to boost group-based belonging. The program is built on the science showing that social groups are good for health.

"When people form a group they strongly identify with, they feel a sense of belonging and community. We then see these really amazing outcomes in terms of mental health."

Associate Professor Cruwys was involved in creating the treatment in collaboration with researchers from The University of Queensland, including Professors Cath Haslam and Alex Haslam.

The third clinical trial of the program was recently completed among a group of 174 young people suffering from depression and loneliness.

G4H is a group-based manualised psychotherapy program, which consists of modules entirely focused on social relationships. This includes sessions on mapping our social worlds, re-connecting with old groups, joining new groups, and the G4H group itself provides a scaffold for the formation of groups.

"The sessions themselves don't focus on the symptoms of mental illness, but yet, we are seeing the immense benefits to participants' mental health up to a year after treatment," Associate Professor Cruwys said.

The benefits of G4H were found to be comparable to commonly used

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) - a treatment considered "gold standard" for treatment for depression in young people.

The recently completed clinical trial, published in *British Journal of Psychiatry*, randomly assigned young people to either G4H or CBT. With COVID lockdown restrictions imposed halfway through the one-year follow up for the treatment trial, researchers were also able to test G4H effectiveness in the presence and absence of a major threat to social connectedness.

"The participants who did their follow up assessments during a COVID lockdown tended to do better if they had been in the G4H condition, compared to the CBT condition," Associate Professor Cruwys said.

"We know that when social connectedness is at risk, mental health is more vulnerable.

"A crucial thing for our wellbeing is our social groups, and when we go through life changes or upheavals, often what makes those things stressful is that they compromise our connection with groups.

"G4H was specifically designed to give people the skills to be able to maintain those connections with their social groups."

Associate Professor Cruwys' recently published these COVID-related findings in the *Journal of Affective Disorders*. While both CBT and the new G4H led to symptom improvement in participants, the benefits of G4H were stronger in the face of unexpected social [isolation](#) during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

"Isolation and exclusion are risk factors for people's mental health—hence the need for a treatment method to focus exclusively on combatting these issues," Associate Professor Cruwys said.

"We need to keep innovating in mental health. The current treatment approaches we have do help, but they are much too focused on just alleviating symptoms. We also need to treat the cause.

"We don't know if life is going to give us lemons next year, but there are things we can do right now to make us more resilient in the future for if and when things do go wrong."

More information: Tegan Cruwys et al, Groups 4 Health protects against unanticipated threats to mental health: Evaluating two interventions during COVID-19 lockdown among young people with a history of depression and loneliness, *Journal of Affective Disorders* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jad.2021.08.029](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2021.08.029)

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