

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

A SYSTEMATIC (COCHRANE) REVIEW OF PSYCHOTHERAPY FOR DENTAL ANXIETY

Researchers

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Aim

To assess the effectiveness of psychological interventions compared to a placebo control or other psychological intervention in the treatment of dental anxiety.

Project Outline/Methodology

Literature searches for randomised controlled trials conducted with patients being treated in primary and secondary care settings for dental anxiety were carried out. Studies were included where there was comparison of a psychological intervention with another or with a placebo/control. A range of psychological interventions were identified prior to the review. Studies were identified using a standard search strategy. Two reviewers independently assessed the methodological quality of all eligible trials.

Key Results

A total of 496 studies were identified through initial database searches. Of these 99 were considered for further reading. In total, 77 studies did not meet the pre-specified inclusion criteria. Eleven studies were suitable for inclusion but had insufficient data to be analysed. Thus eleven studies representing data from 512 participants were included. Most studies addressed dental anxiety outcomes (n=7) with six studies measuring attendance at future dental appointments. The participants were adults and no studies included children.

The results show that although inconclusive, the psychological interventions known as behavioural and cognitive-behavioural therapy resulted in more attendances at future dental appointments than controls. There was some indication from one study that applied relaxation training resulted in a greater reduction in anxiety than cognitive therapy but the results were also inconclusive. On the other hand, the psychological interventions of one session of cognitive therapy and cognitive-behavioural therapy (consisting of a combination of systematic desensitisation, relaxation and biofeedback) were more effective in reducing dental anxiety than

controls. No differences between the various psychological interventions were identified.

Conclusions

Despite considerable study of psychological interventions for managing dental anxiety, there are few good quality studies. No firm conclusions can thus be drawn from these. Due to the heterogeneity of studies, it was not possible to present combined data. The full range of psychological interventions have not been tested in randomised controlled trials. This review confirms that the majority of studies examining psychological interventions for dental anxiety were broadly behavioural therapy with some having a cognitive element (cognitive-behavioural therapy).

What does this study add to the field?

There is little consensus within dentistry as to the most effective interventions to use for the effective treatment of anxiety in dental patients although some psychological interventions show promise. This review highlights the need for better quality research to be undertaken in this field by accurately identifying the limitations of previous studies.

Implications for Practice or Policy

This review provides some support to have psychological interventions available to anxious patients attending dental practice. More certain is the fact that any future intervention studies in this area need to focus on larger sample sizes, multi-centre research and better quality RCTs following agreed published guidelines.

Where to next?

Better quality randomised controlled trials are needed to provide more substantial support for psychological interventions as effective treatments for dental anxiety.

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