Title: A school-based feasibility study of Method of Levels: a novel form of client-led counselling

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to test the feasibility and acceptability of a novel psychological therapy (Method of Levels) amongst adolescents experiencing psychological distress. An initial estimated effect size and a clinical significance analysis were undertaken which will help inform future studies.

A case-series of 16 participants utilised the YP-CORE as a primary outcome measure. Data was collected at baseline, on completion of therapy (six months) and two and four months after completion of the therapy. Young people used a self-booking system to access sessions. Additionally, young people had full control over the content and length of the sessions.

A total of 14 participants reported that the therapy was acceptable to them and 12 participants were retained for the entire course of the study. The self-booking system was successfully used with young people attending on average 6-8 sessions. Analysis of clinically significant change for the YP-CORE at therapy completion indicated that five students recovered and seven experienced no change; this was largely maintained at follow-up. Effect size estimations were medium-to-large.

Initial findings suggest that Method of Levels is a feasible and acceptable form of counselling for young people within the school setting. Moreover, positive preliminary effectiveness outcomes suggest that a randomised control study should be considered.

Introduction

Evidence suggests that approximately 10-20% of young people worldwide are affected by mental health difficulties (Kieling et al., 2011).

Schools are commonly the first place where adolescents seek help (L. A. Barker & Adelman, 1994), and more importantly, where most individuals receive mental health support (Rones & Hoagwood, 2000) School-based counselling services vary in their approach and focus across countries (Cooper, 2013) and it has been argued that their effectiveness is poorly documented and reported (Kline, 2012; Wancata, Krautgartner, Alexandrowicz, & Meise, 2001).

A quantitative synthesis of 190 published and unpublished studies concluded that one size does not fit all and interventions should be based on young people's needs (Fedewa et al., 2016). Issues previously raised by young people accessing therapy have been related to choice, control, contributions, involvement in decision-making, and relationship differences (Everall & Paulson, 2002; Gibson & Cartwright, 2013). When working with young people in a therapeutic context, practitioners are advised to "consider using client-centred approaches that pro-actively solicit feedback from individuals to help direct the work and keep it targeted towards the needs and wants of the client" (Hanley, Frzina, et al., 2017, p. 178).

An approach developed to specifically encompass the recommendations outlined above is a cognitive therapy called Method of Levels (MOL).

MOL is the direct clinical application of Perceptual Control Theory (PCT) (W. T. Powers, Clark, Mcfarland, et al., 1960) PCT is an empirical theory of everyday human functioning based on three principles: **control, conflict and reorganisation**.

PCT argues that normal functioning is achieved when individuals **control** important goals or 'preferred states' in their life (Mansell et al., 2012). Any individual has numerous goals that they are controlling simultaneously. Control might not always be possible because of goal **conflict (**when one is pursuing two or more incompatible goals).

Conflict can be resolved through **reorganisation;** a mechanism through which random change is continuously generated until control is restored (Tai, 2016).

MOL helps individuals become aware of conflicting goals, which in turn facilitates restoration of control through reorganisation. There are two goals during MOL- to encourage the client to talk about things that are bothering them and to notice any background thoughts the client might be experiencing. The latter may indicate a client is becoming aware of other goals that they haven't considered before. Greater awareness facilitates reorganisation by allowing individuals to explore their higher-level goals, which might be causing them conflict (Tai, 2016).

MOL is ‘adiagnostic’; it does not require formal identification of a particular mental health problem and can be applied across a wide range of mental health problems. This addresses criticisms that current psychosocial interventions are disorder-specific (Hoagwood et al., 2001). Moreover, MOL is ‘client-directed’ and incorporates client’s wishes and preferences in its practice. This makes it amenable in a school setting.

A number of studies have explored MOL’s feasibility with adults and reported positive results (Carey et al., 2009, 2013; Carey & Mullan, 2008). These studies were conducted in various settings with differing numbers of participants as follows: a GP practice that offered MOL to 101 participants (Carey & Mullan, 2008); primary and secondary care settings where 120 participants accessed MOL; a clinical psychology clinic where 92 participants accessed MOL (Carey et al., 2013) and a primary care psychology service where 29 participants were offered MOL (Bird et al., 2019). In these studies, MOL was deemed acceptable and patients showed large effect sizes in their changes in distress over the course of the intervention.

Due to its transdiagnostic nature, MOL has been successfully used with individuals experiencing a wide range of presenting problems and diagnoses. Additionally, owing to its client-led approach (self-booking appointments), therapy was found to be as effective and more efficient than usual practice and the average number of cancelled or unattended sessions was low - between 0-1.1 (Carey et al., 2013). A recent qualitative study with individuals experiencing first-episode psychosis reported that having control over the therapeutic process facilitated the opportunity to explore difficulties and helped them generate new solutions (R. Griffiths, Mansell, Edge, et al., 2019). Despite MOL’s promising results with adults, no studies have yet been conducted with young people. The current paper reports on the feasibility and acceptability of MOL amongst adolescents as well as providing an estimate effect size.

Aims

MOL’s feasibility and acceptability among adolescents will be determined by:

- retaining at least 60% of participants in the study
- having at least 50% of adolescents successfully use the self-booking system
- obtaining a mean score of at least 36 on the Child/Session Rating Scale (C/SRS) (Duncan et al., 2003). This scale assesses the extent to which participants found the client-therapist relationship and the sessions satisfactory. It focuses on four areas: relationship (the extent to which participants felt heard understood and respected), goals/topic (the extent to which participants felt able to work on/talk about chosen topics during sessions), approach/method (the therapist’s approach) and overall (the extent to which participants felt satisfied with the session).

The study seeks to obtain an initial estimated effect size and perform a clinical significance analysis to help inform future studies.

Methods

The study received ethical approval from Manchester University UREC 2 (Ref: 2016-0163-442). Informed consent/assent was obtained from students and their parents prior to the study commencing.

Study design

The study took the form of a case-series. Abu-Zidan et al. (2012) recommend that a case-series research study includes more than four participants but no more than ten (Abu-zidan et al., 2012). The current study aimed to obtain data from 8-10 young people. In line with published levels of attrition of around 40%, 16 participants were recruited.

Participants

Participants were recruited from a secondary school in North West, Manchester. The identification of eligible students followed the same procedure being used to refer students for additional support. Currently, any students experiencing difficulties that cannot be supported by the pastoral team are referred to see a professional within or outside the school. Subsequently, the recruitment procedure involved close liaison with the pastoral team. To be able to take part in the study, adolescents needed to be aged 11-16, attend school, be willing to talk about something that bothers them and be able to speak, understand and read English.

Measures

The Young Person's Clinical Outcomes in Routine Evaluation (YP-CORE) (Twigg et al., 2016) was used as the primary indicator of psychological change. The measure is a 10-item self-report questionnaire for use with adolescents (11-16 years old) across a variety of settings. YP-CORE is psychometrically valid and sensitive to change (Twigg et al., 2016). Furthermore, the overall alpha score for this measure is .80 (Twigg et al., 2016). It has been selected due to its wide use in schools with young people as well as its ability to monitor session by session change (Twigg et al., 2016).

The Goal-Based Outcome Measure (GBO) (Law, 2013) is a tool for assessing a young person's progress towards a self-selected goal in counselling. The measure is suitable for this study because it allows young people to choose the goals set in therapy and therefore, follows MOL's client-centered/led approach. In this report the GBO scores have been excluded because a number of students have changed or added new goals throughout the study. This made it difficult to assess the mean and standard deviation.

The General Health Questionnaire-12 (GHQ-12) is a 12-item questionnaire assessing current mental health, recommended for both adults and adolescents (Goldberg et al., 1997; Robinson et al., 2010). The questionnaire was completed by young people. The current study used the GHQ- scoring (0-less than usual, 0-no more than usual, 1-rather more than usual, 1-much more than usual) which is the method recommended by the test author (Goldberg et al., 1997). The suggested default threshold has been set as 1/2 (max score 12) for the GHQ- scoring system (Goldberg et al., 1997). The 12-item version was selected for the current study because is short, reliable and recommended for research studies (Goldberg et al., 1997). Additionally, it has been used in the 'Longitudinal study of young people in England cohort 2: health and wellbeing at wave 2' (Lessof et al., 2016) which allows for comparison with other studies in the field.

The Youth Empowerment Scale (YES) (Grealish, 2013) consists of 21 items assessing how empowered a young person feels. The scale has been reported as reliable and valid with an overall alpha score of .89 (Grealish, 2013). MOL is designed to grant clients control over booking appointments and topics discussed in sessions. Furthermore, its ultimate aim is to help clients regain control over important aspects of their life. Therefore, as control of this kind is a key feature of empowerment, and the YES has been validated with this age group, this measure was selected.

The Reorganisation of Conflict measure (ROC, 11 items) (Bird, 2013) is the goal conflict reorganisation subscale which has been developed from the original 22 item self-report measure (Higginson & Mansell, 2008). The measure has been adapted for the current age group after consultation with young people. The adapted young persons' version was validated as part of a Masters degree (N'Danga-Koroma, 2018). The scale demonstrated acceptable internal reliability with an overall alpha score of .75. The measure is designed to evaluate an individual's ability to effectively resolve problems that might cause distress (e.g. 'Talking through my problems helps me to feel different about them'). As mentioned in the Introduction, according to PCT, longstanding problems are the result of *conflict* between important life goals. Therefore, the measure was used to understand how MOL affected goal conflict.

The Child/Session Rating Scale (C/SRS) (Duncan et al., 2003) is a simple visual analogue scale consisting of four items measuring the effectiveness of client-therapist relationship. The CSRS is recommended for children aged 6-12 while the SRC is suitable for individuals aged 13+. The total possible score is 40 with each scale being 10 centimetres long. It is advised that any score lower than 36 should be interpreted as a concern and the client should be given the opportunity to discuss their concerns (Duncan et al., 2003). Considering that MOL has not been used with this age group before it was considered essential to assess the client-therapist relationship and address any concerns.

Intervention

Students were offered a treatment window of six months during which they could book their own appointments and decide how long they wanted to stay and choose what they wanted to talk about.

Young people were offered a variety of ways to book appointments. The booking system aimed to mirror a patient-led scheduling system successfully used in adult facilities (Carey et al., 2013). Moreover, the booking system followed the founding principle of PCT which states that individuals function best when they have control over important things in their lives.

Therapy was available between 08.00 – 16.45 for four days a week and was delivered by the first author (AC). The intervention was delivered in accordance with the two principles of MOL therapy.

The therapist received weekly training, supervision and evaluation/assessment from the other authors (ST and WM), using the MOL Evaluation Form (Carey & Tai, 2012).

After each therapy session students were asked to complete the C/SRS (Duncan et al., 2003) assessing the therapeutic relationship. Risk and safeguarding concerns were managed in line with policies and procedures for the school and the University of Manchester. There were no significant or unexpected concerns during the study.

Analysis

All statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS version 23. There was no missing data at baseline. Means and standard deviation are reported for all 16 participants. For the time points at the end of therapy, two, and four months follow-up, only data from 12 participants was recorded and, therefore, reported.

In order to understand whether MOL helped reduce psychological distress in young people, a clinical significance analysis (Jacobson, Follette, & Revenstorf, 1984) was performed. This involved reporting the number of participants that have recovered, improved, made no change or deteriorated (Twigg et al., 2016).

For participants to be classed as recovered they would need to move a certain amount of points (in the direction of decreased distress) and also cross the cut-off value set for their age and gender. Any participants that moved the relevant number of points for their age and gender but did not cross the cut-off value were classed as improved. Any participants who failed to move enough points in the direction of improvement (regardless whether they crossed the cut-off value) were

classed as making no change. Lastly, any students that moved the required number of points but in the direction of increased distress were categorised as deteriorated. The number of points young people needed to move in order to ensure the change was reliable was: by more than 8.3 points (male, 11-13 years), 8.0 points (male, 14-16 years and female, 11-13 years), and 7.4 points (female, 14-16 years). The cut-off value set for each group was the following: 10.3 (male, 11-13 years), 14.1 (male, 14-16 years), 14.4 (female, 11-13 years), and 15.9 (female, 14-16 years) (Twigg et al., 2016).

In order to estimate MOL's effectiveness in supporting young people experiencing psychological distress an estimated effect size was calculated. This is an indication of how effective MOL could be if a bigger sample was considered. Given the small sample used in the current study, careful consideration was given when calculating the estimated effect size. In order to account for the missing data, the principle of last observation carried forward was applied (Unnebrink & Windeler, 2001). The effects size results were interpreted according to Cohen's (1988) criteria of .1=small effect, .3=medium effect, .5=large effect (Cohen, 1988).

Results

Feasibility

Considering the limited literature available on child psychotherapy attrition, in order to establish feasibility, the current study aimed to retain at least 60% of students recruited at baseline. Kazdin (1996) suggests that around 40-60 percent of children and adolescents cease treatment prematurely (Kazdin, 1996). The study recruited 16 students within seven weeks and 12 participants (75%) were retained for the entire study. This included the follow-up assessments. Two students decided to stop taking part in the study after the first month and two stopped after four months. While exploring students' decision to stop taking part in the study, two students reported feeling victimised (by peers as well as teachers) and stigmatised. Another student reported that the therapy was not the right approach for them and decided to stop attending within the first month. Lastly, one student reported not needing the therapy anymore, so they ceased to attend the assessments after four months.

At the time of recruitment, students' age ranged from 11 to 15 (mean 13.2). Nine of these were male and seven were female. Out of the 16 participants, 14 individuals identified themselves as White British, one as mixed background and one as Black British-African.

Self-booking system

All sessions offered were booked at the initiative of young people. Various ways to do this were used: asking the therapist at the end of an assessment or counselling session, through the school email, booking in the pastoral office or using the timetable pinned outside the therapy office.

Overall, students attended 122 MOL sessions during the six months period. The six months were defined as six *school* months after the initial baseline assessment rather than *calendar* months. Out of these, 89 (73%) sessions were booked using the self-booking system and 42 (34%) sessions were booked after students attended a session or an assessment. Four sessions were delivered impromptu without any prior arrangement and four were cancelled and rebooked. A total of 13 sessions were not attended because students were ill/not in school (ten sessions) or forgot to come for the session (three sessions). On average, students attended 7.62 sessions, with some students attending only one session while others attended up to 18 sessions. Details of attendance for each participant can be found in Figure 2.

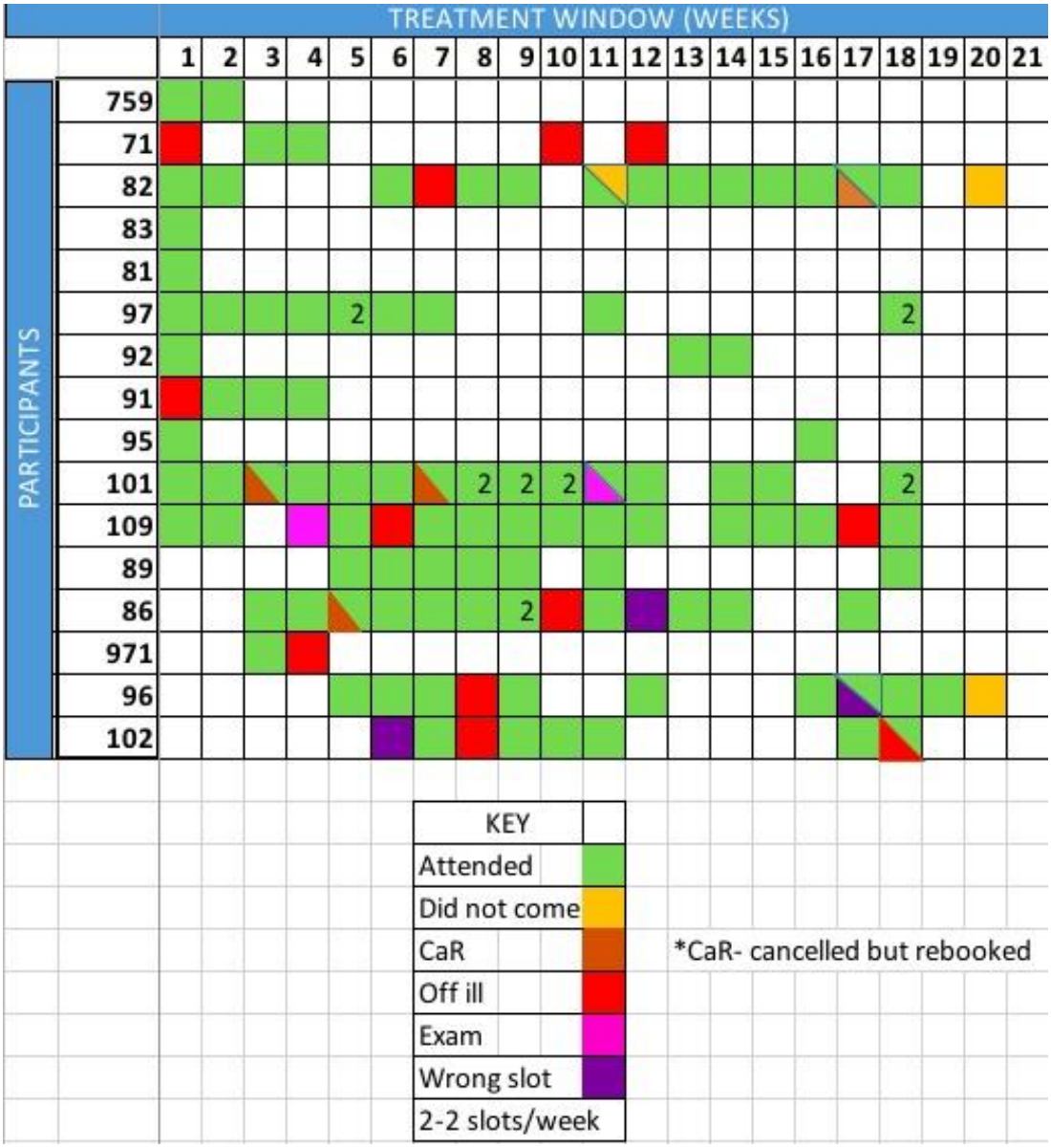

Figure 1: Each participant's attendance pattern across the treatment window in weeks

Therapeutic alliance

The therapeutic alliance was analysed by considering the scores obtained from the C/SRS (Duncan et al., 2003). The form was filled in after 107 therapy sessions and a mean of 36.37 (SD 3.80) was obtained. When exploring some of the reasons why young people might have scored lower than the maximum score, the following reasons were offered.

For the section relating to feeling listened to (CRSS), heard, understood and respected (SRS), one student reported that when you have a problem you might feel shy and might not want to talk about it too much. The participant suggested that a break in between questions would have helped as some questions were hard and caused them to feel stuck. For the second section relating to 'How important' (CSRS) and 'Goals and Topics' (SRS), a number of students reported that occasionally they did not have anything more important to talk about. When asked about 'what we did' (CRS) and about the 'approach and method' (SRS) a number of students reported that although it was good to talk, it was also upsetting. Students suggested that the use of additional materials while talking such as colouring books, play dough or something to fidget with would have helped. A variety of these materials were incorporated, and students were able to use these during therapy.

Outcomes

Table 1 provides a summary of means and SD for primary (YP-CORE), as well as the secondary measures (GHQ-12, YES, ROC) used in the study.

Table 1: Changes to mean scores

Measure	Baseline (N=16) M (SD)	End of therapy (N=12) M (SD)	2 months follow-up (N=12) M (SD)	4 months follow-up (N=12) M (SD)
YP-CORE	20.62 (6.88)	11.16 (9.76)	11.70 (10.33)	13.75 (9.23)
GHQ-12	7.25 (4.37)	1.75 (3.13)	2.50 (3.45)	2.16 (3.09)
YES	50.31 (6.49	72.34 (13.39)	73.19 (12.81)	65.82 (19.20)
ROC	55.07 (15.16)	58.66 (11.24)	62.00 (13.84)	53.33 (17.34)

The YP-CORE mean scores display a steady decrease (thus indicating an increase in well-being) during the period in therapy. This was sustained two months after the completion of therapy as well as four months with a slight increase.

Clinical significance

At baseline, of the 12 students that completed the study, only 11 displayed scores that indicated abnormal levels of psychological distress (above the cut-off value recommended for normal levels of

distress in young people). One student although expressed difficulties in therapy, this was not reflected in the YP-CORE scores. When considering whether young people improved, recovered, made no change or deteriorated post therapy this student was included in the 'no change' group. Results showed that at the end of the therapy, five individuals were classed as recovered and seven made no change. Full details can be found in Table 2.

Estimated effect size

The results considering MOL's estimation of effectiveness found that on completion of the therapy a large effect size (r=0.56) was recorded. At the first follow-up, two months after the end of the study a medium-large effect (r=0.48) was logged. Four months after completion of the study, the medium-large effect (r=0.47)was maintained.

Table 2: Clinical Significant Change results

N=12	Recovered	Improved	No change	Deteriorated
Completion of therapy	5	0	7	0
2 months follow-up	6	1	4	1
4 months follow-up	4	0	7	1

Discussion

Recruitment and retention

The most challenging factors researchers encounter when examining interventions are the ability to engage and retain clients for the course of treatment (Douglas Coatsworth et al., 2001). The recruitment process adopted for the current study proved feasible and acceptable. Within seven weeks of advertising the study, 16 participants were successfully recruited.

Additionally, considering published levels of attrition of around 40% (Kazdin, 1996), the study aimed to gather data from 8-10 young people; this target was exceeded as 12 participants were retained for the entire study.

No ethical or procedural difficulties were encountered throughout the study. A total of 14 participants provided qualitative feedback and reported that the therapy was acceptable for them. One student declined to be interviewed and provided no further details. Another indicated that the therapy was not the right fit for them without any other details. This indicates that a larger trial could be conducted using similar recruitment procedures.

Self-booking system

The self-booking system was well used by young people. This was despite their limitations on when within the school day they could attend sessions. Young people reported enjoying being able to decide when to attend therapy. The concept of allowing young people to decide when and how often to come to therapy is new and has not been used in schools before. Traditionally, it has been argued that young people "are less able to make appropriate decisions or comment authoritatively on their experiences of counselling" (Gibson & Cartwright, 2013, p. 341). However, the current study demonstrated that young people are capable of making sensible decisions regarding attending therapy as well as ending treatment. The attendance graph also shows how on a number of occasions young people rebooked their therapy sessions because they had to attend exams or assessments. Additionally, the majority of participants confirmed that they preferred booking their own appointments as opposed to being told when to go.

Research suggests that having a choice whether to attend counselling, can play an important role in therapy engagement (Wilson & Deane, 2001). The booking system followed current recommendations that advocate for increased client choice and control (Hanley, Frzina, et al., 2017). Additionally, because MOL is grounded in PCT, which proposes that change is non-linear, it was expected that clients would require different amounts of sessions (R. Griffiths et al., 2018). The self-booking system allowed young people to come when they needed therapeutic intervention as well as stop when they no longer required support. Previous studies exploring the self-scheduling approach with the adult population demonstrated that while this approach has the potential to increase clients' control in therapy, its impact is much wider. Increased service efficiency and reduced waiting lists have also been reported as a benefit of using the self-booking system in (Carey & Mullan, 2007; Carey et al., 2013). The average number of missed and cancelled appointments was between 0 and 1.1.

All participants attended at least one therapy session and on average students attended seven sessions. Most students attended one to three sessions (8) while a small number (3) attended thirteen or more. Previous studies have reported similar findings (Cooper, 2013). Similar trends have been observed in adult studies with MOL where participants attended between one and six sessions (Carey & Mullan, 2008). This further exemplifies how offering pre-set numbers of sessions might not benefit all individuals. However, by offering a more flexible and varied approach that individuals have control over could contribute to increased effectiveness. Detailed feedback on young people's experiences of having control over the booking system as well as topics discussed in therapy has been reported elsewhere (Churchman, Mansell, & Tai, 2019a).

Therapeutic alliance

The acceptability of the therapy among adolescents was further explored by considering the C/SRS scores (Duncan et al., 2003). The four items on the C/SRC scales allow the client to report on the effectiveness of the therapeutic relationships (Duncan et al., 2003). During the current study, young people were given the opportunity to provide feedback after each therapy session. It was anticipated that a score of 36 would be obtained which indicates acceptable therapeutic alliance (Duncan et al., 2003). The mean score of 36.37 was obtained for all the sessions rated by young people. This indicates that young people found the client-therapist relationship satisfactory.

In order to increase attendance in therapy and help individuals work on their difficulties, practitioners need to allow clients the opportunity to express what is important to them and decide what would be helpful during the therapy sessions (Schauman & Mansell, 2012). The C/SRS measures allowed young people to provide feedback on ways to improve sessions as well as identify any aspects that needed altering. Timimi et al. (2013) argue that therapy should be patient-directed and outcome-informed (Timimi, Tetley, Burgoine, & Walker, 2013). The C/SRS is the perfect tool to facilitate this.

Outcomes

Initial results exploring the change in the mean scores obtained on the primary outcome measure (YP-CORE) show promising results. Young people accessing MOL therapy had a mean score of 20.62 (6.88) at baseline which is similar to previous findings reported by McArthur et al. (McArthur et al., 2013) and Pybis et al. (Pybis et al., 2014) whose mean scores at baseline were 19.44 (6.24) and 21.94 (7.74) respectively. These studies, however, used a humanistic, person-centred approach and had a control group (waiting list) in their studies. On completion of MOL therapy, as well as two months after this, young people showed a significantly lower level of distress. The scores from baseline to end of therapy, and from baseline to first follow-up, showed similar improvements in wellbeing as previous studies (Cooper et al., 2010; Hanley, Sefi, & Lennie, 2011; Pybis et al., 2014). An exception was McArthur's study (McArthur et al., 2013), which showed a slightly larger improvement. However, previous studies only offered therapy for six weeks or 12 weeks with an average of 5.3 sessions.

Effect size estimations were in the medium to large range for this study. Taken together, these findings support the feasibility and acceptability of this approach with young people in schools. These results emulate previous studies where MOL's effectiveness in reducing psychological distress in adults was reported as relatively large (Carey & Mullan, 2008).

Recommendations

This feasibility study demonstrates that a bigger study could be run in schools using MOL. In future, additional measures such as the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires (SDQ) should be used. This questionnaire is often used in mainstream mental health services outside schools and would allow for direct comparison with richer data available on interventions for young people. Additionally, the treatment window could be reduced to 12 weeks or a school term as previously offered in similar studies in schools. This would allow time for follow-up assessments to fall within school term time and also allow direct comparison to other studies conducted in the field. Nevertheless, this suggestion is valid for research purposes only. As previously demonstrated, recovery takes different times for different people. Previous studies reported that on average, young people attend between three to six sessions while the majority of students only attend one or two sessions with a small number exceeding ten sessions (Cooper, 2013).

Conclusions

Young people found MOL acceptable and the methods employed for recruitment proved feasible in this case-series. Additionally, the results provided a positive early indicator for the therapy's effectiveness. Given the limitations of the current approaches used in schools and their mixed findings regarding effectiveness, this study provides a promising stepping stone towards assessing whether MOL therapy could be effective in reducing psychological distress in young people.

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Declaration of interest statement

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Availability of Data

The datasets used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request

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