

Acceptability and feasibility of an acceptance-based guided self-help programme for weight loss maintenance in adults who have previously completed a behavioural weight loss programme: the SWiM feasibility study

Lay summary of results:

Behavioural weight management programmes are effective in reducing weight, however most people regain the weight lost within 3-5 years. Weight management programmes based on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) show promise for longer term maintenance of weight loss, but they are typically very expensive to deliver. The costs could be reduced by delivering the programmes digitally (for example, using a website) and by non-specialist staff, but we are not sure whether this is acceptable to people or whether it is practical to deliver on a larger scale.

We did a study to understand whether a programme based on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and delivered digitally by non-specialists (known as 'SWiM' – Supporting Weight Management) could help people to maintain the weight they previously lost, and whether people would find this kind of programme acceptable. SWiM was developed to support people who have already completed another weight management programme, to help them stay 'on track' and maintain the weight they lost.

We recruited 61 people who recently completed a behavioural weight management programme and randomly allocated them to SWiM or to a control group. The SWiM programme includes 14 sessions that used Acceptance and Commitment Therapy to support weight loss maintenance; the programme was delivered on a website with telephone support from trained non-specialist coaches. The control group received a leaflet about weight loss maintenance.

At the beginning and end of the programme, all participants completed questionnaires to measure their weight, eating behaviours, and mental wellbeing. Participants also completed questionnaires about their experience of the programme, such as how useful they found the content of the sessions.

We interviewed people who took part in the study and all the non-specialist coaches to understand what worked, what did not work, and why. The non-specialist coaches also completed a report form after each participant call to record their experiences of doing the calls. We also interviewed people who withdrew from the SWiM programme to further understand what did and did not work; overall, eight people withdrew from the SWiM programme. We analysed the information to look for patterns across the interviews and coach report form.

At the end of the SWiM programme, 36 out of 41 participants completed session one, and 25 participants completed all 14 sessions. On average, participants in the SWiM group lost -2.15kg in weight, whilst control participants gained 2.17kg. SWiM participants also reported improvements in their eating behaviour and mental health, whilst the control participants did not. Most participants rated the programme as easy to use, useful, and enjoyable. It is important to note that this study was a small study and, based on these results, we cannot draw any firm conclusions. We will need to do a larger study to help us decide if the SWiM programme is effective or not.

In interviews, participants who did the SWiM programme reported learning new and reinforcing existing skills and strategies which supported them to manage their weight. They found the SWiM website was easy to use, but some participants experienced problems accessing the website from mobile devices.

Overall, the findings suggest that the SWiM programme appears acceptable and may support people to maintain their weight loss. We are making changes to the programme based on our learnings, and plan to conduct a larger study to see if the programme is cost-effective to deliver at a larger scale.