

## Summary of study

**Study title: Continuity therapy for couples living with brain injury: A tier 3 study focused on development of an intervention. IRAS ID: 320276**

Duration of study: April 2023 to March 2025

You can see a video summarising the study at: <https://continuity-therapy.squarespace.com/>

### Background and aims of the study

Brain injuries can put a strain on marriages and partnerships. NHS brain injury services often struggle to address this issue. This is largely due to the lack of therapies that have been shown to help with the problems that brain injuries can create for the relationship. The aim of this study was to develop a therapy called *Continuity Therapy* that tries to help couples deal with these problems and to maintain a strong relationship. We also wanted to collect information about how helpful the therapy was and whether it showed sufficient promise to deserve further research.

### What is Continuity Therapy?

The therapy is based on research about ways in which brain injury can undermine relationships. In the therapy, we look at these different areas, and the couple reflect on how their relationship was before the injury, and how it is now. So, we look at things like how the couple communicate, how they spend their time together, and so on. Where changes have happened, we think about what improvements the couple would like to make – using how it was before the injury as a guide. The couple then work on making these improvements in their daily life together.

The therapy is also about helping couples see the bigger picture. When a brain injury happens, it can sometimes feel like there is a big divide between life before the injury (which was good) and life after the injury (which is bad). The brain injury can take over, and dominate how people think about themselves, their life, and their relationship. The therapy tries to redress this balance, encouraging people to think about the good things about themselves, their life, and their relationship that have survived from before the injury; to think about their strengths as individuals and as a couple that help them meet the challenges thrown at them by the injury; to think about ways in which they have grown as individuals and as a couple in response to these challenges; and to reflect on reasons for feeling positive about their future together.

## What did we do?

Sixteen couples living with brain injury took part, although one couple had to withdraw for personal reasons. Couples received the therapy in 10 or so one-hour sessions, spread over about three months.

Couples completed questionnaires about their relationship and their psychological wellbeing before and after receiving the therapy. They also rated the therapy in terms of how useful they had found it.

The couples and therapists were also asked for feedback about their experience of the therapy, and this feedback was used to make improvements to the therapy. Suggestions included the need for more information about what the therapy was trying to achieve, and avoiding repetition. Some participants found the 'tree of life' (a way of organizing the discussion) was unhelpful. Changes were made to the therapy in response to this feedback.

## What did we find?

The results were promising:

- On average, both the participants with a brain injury and their partners showed a large improvement on questionnaires about their relationship, and they showed large or moderate improvements on questionnaires about their wellbeing.
- Participants gave an average rating of 5.9 in terms of how useful the therapy was (on a scale from 1 ('not at all helpful') to 7 ('very helpful')).
- Many participants also gave very positive feedback in the interviews, for example:  
*"Really glad that we took part. I think that over time we got more and more from it... I'd go through it again and I'd highly recommend it... What it has achieved is fantastic... I read that people who are the partner of a brain injury survivor, had, I think it said a 60% chance of being divorced, and that really worried me. But I'm not worried by it now - the therapy has helped. Probably stopped me from getting a divorce."* (used with permission)

However, not everyone benefited. Eight of the 32 participants did not show substantial improvement on any of the questionnaire measures. The therapy requires couples to change how they interact in everyday life. Some couples struggled to make these changes and seemed to benefit less from the therapy. Timing of the therapy was also an issue, with some feeling that the therapy had come too soon or too late for them.

## What's next?

The results of the project were promising enough to suggest that the therapy should now be properly evaluated in what's called a *randomised controlled trial*. These trials are a way of helping us be sure that improvements following the therapy are due to the therapy and not

other things. If the results of this trial are positive, the therapy would then be recommended for use in brain injury services.

So, the next step is that we will apply for a research grant to fund a randomised controlled trial of the therapy.

You will be able to follow what is happening on our website:

<https://continuity-therapy.squarespace.com/>

We are also doing a 3-month follow-up to see if any benefits that couples got from the therapy in this study are maintained over time. Once all the results are in, these will be posted on the website.

### **Any questions or comments?**

If you have any comments or questions about this study, please contact the study lead, Gerry Riley, by emailing [g.a.riley@bham.ac.uk](mailto:g.a.riley@bham.ac.uk)

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