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Affect-focused group therapy for complex and long-lasting psychiatric conditions - a pilot study

Submission date
10/02/2026

Recruitment status
No longer recruiting

Registration date
10/02/2026

Overall study status
Completed

Last Edited
10/02/2026

Condition category
Mental and Behavioural Disorders

[ ] Prospectively registered
[ ] Protocol
[ ] Statistical analysis plan
[ ] Results
[ ] Individual participant data
[X] Record updated in last year

Plain English summary of protocol

Background and study aims
Many adults in psychiatric care have long-lasting and complex mental health problems, such as severe anxiety, trauma-related difficulties, and personality problems. These individuals often do not benefit sufficiently from standard treatments and may have limited access to structured psychological therapy. This pilot study aims to evaluate whether a structured, affect-focused group psychotherapy (ISTDP-G) is feasible, acceptable, and safe for adults with complex and treatment-resistant psychiatric conditions in public psychiatric care.

Who can participate?
Adults aged 18 years or older who are currently receiving care within specialist adult psychiatric services and who have long-term, complex, and/or treatment-resistant psychiatric problems may be invited to participate. All participants must be assessed as suitable and motivated for group-based psychotherapy.

What does the study involve?
Participants will take part in a structured group psychotherapy programme consisting of 25 weekly sessions, each lasting 90 minutes. The treatment focuses on understanding emotions and anxiety and developing healthier ways of managing emotional distress. Participants will complete questionnaires before, during, and after treatment, as well as at a 6-month follow-up.

What are the possible benefits and risks of participating?
Participants may experience improvements in emotional regulation, psychological symptoms, and quality of life. As with any psychotherapy, discussing emotions may cause temporary discomfort. Therapists actively monitor safety throughout the treatment.

Where is the study run from?
The study is run from Stockholm University in collaboration with specialist psychiatric clinics in Stockholm, Sweden.

When is the study starting and how long is it expected to run for?
May 2022 to December 2024

Who is funding the study?
1. Region Stockholm (Sweden)
2. Stockholms Universitet (Sweden)

Who is the main contact?
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Contact information

Type(s)
Principal investigator, Public, Scientific

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Study information

Scientific Title
Intensive short term dynamic group therapy for complex or therapy-resistant psychiatric disorders - a pilot study

Study objectives
The primary objective of this pilot study is to evaluate the feasibility, acceptability, and safety of an affect-focused group psychotherapy (ISTDP-G) for adults with complex and/or treatment-resistant psychiatric conditions within public adult psychiatric care.

Specific objectives are to assess treatment completion rates, session attendance, patient-perceived helpfulness, data completeness, and the occurrence of serious adverse events. Secondary, exploratory objectives are to examine changes in emotion regulation, anxiety, depression, quality of life, dissociative symptoms, personality functioning, and self-harm, from pre- to post-treatment and follow-up.

Ethics approval required
Ethics approval required

Ethics approval(s)

Approved 20/04/2022, Swedish Ethics Review Authority (Box 2110, Uppsala, 75002, Sweden; +46 (0)10 4750800; registrator@etikprovning.se), ref: 2022-01875-01

Primary study design
Interventional

Allocation
N/A: single arm study

Masking
Open (masking not used)

Control
Uncontrolled

Assignment
Single

Purpose
Treatment

Study type(s)

Health condition(s) or problem(s) studied
Complex and/or therapy-resistant psychiatric disorders

Interventions
The intervention is a structured affect-focused group psychotherapy based on Intensive Short-Term Dynamic Psychotherapy (ISTDP), referred to as ISTDP-G. The treatment focuses on the relationship between emotions, anxiety, and maladaptive emotion-regulation strategies, with the aim of increasing patients' capacity to regulate anxiety and reduce dysfunctional patterns that maintain psychological distress. The intervention is designed for adults with chronic, severe, and complex psychiatric problems, often characterised by high comorbidity, treatment resistance, impulsivity, and/or self-harm behaviours.

ISTDP-G is delivered in a highly structured group format and consists of three sequential phases: (1) psychoeducation about anxiety and emotion regulation, including practical exercises; (2) therapist-guided individual work within the group, focusing on anxiety regulation and barriers to emotional processing; and (3) continued individual work in the group, with emphasis on the links between emotions, anxiety, and learned automatic coping strategies. Therapists take an active role throughout to minimise negative group processes and ensure safety.

The treatment comprises 25 weekly sessions of 90 minutes. Each group includes up to six participants and is led by trained psychotherapists.

Intervention Type
Behavioural

Primary outcome(s)
1. Emotion regulation measured using the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale–16 at weekly during treatment and at follow-up

Key secondary outcome(s)
1. Anxiety measured using the Generalized Anxiety Disorder 7-item scale at pre-treatment, post-treatment, and 6-month follow-up

2. Depression measured using Patient Health Questionnaire-9 at pre-treatment, post-treatment, and 6-month follow-up

3. Quality of life measured using the Brunnsviken Brief Quality of Life Scale at pre-treatment, post-treatment, and 6-month follow-up

4. Dissociation measured using the Brief Dissociative Experiences Scale Modified at pre-treatment, post-treatment, and 6-month follow-up

5. Personality functioning measured using the Levels of Personality Functioning Scale – Brief Form 2.0 at pre-treatment, post-treatment, and 6-month follow-up

6. Self-harm measured using the Deliberate Self-Harm Inventory: Nine-Item Version at pre-treatment, post-treatment, and 6-month follow-up

Completion date
15/12/2024

Eligibility

Key inclusion criteria
Meet at least one of the following criteria whilst also expressing motivation for group treatment:
1. Having two or more personality disorder diagnoses
2. Having a personality disorder together with another psychiatric diagnosis
3. Having a psychiatric diagnosis and at least one year of contact with adult psychiatric services without being able to conclude treatment because of persistent functional impairment
4. Having autism in combination with another psychiatric diagnosis
5. Having undergone two or more treatment attempts without satisfactory effect
6. Having a psychiatric diagnosis together with active self-harm behavior

Healthy volunteers allowed
No

Age group
Mixed

Lower age limit
18 Years

Upper age limit
100 Years

Sex
All

Total final enrolment

Key exclusion criteria
1. A primary diagnosis of substance dependency (note that a diagnosis of substance dependency that was considered secondary to another psychiatric diagnosis did not lead to exclusion)
2. Psychiatric problems that were not considered as complex (i.e., a single anxiety/mood disorder, having been treated with positive outcome, etc)
3. Therapy-disrupting antisocial behavior
4. PTSD with acute symptoms such as easily triggered flashbacks (note that PTSD without acute flashbacks and trauma in general was not reason for exclusion)
5. Ongoing psychotic illness
6. Intellectual disability with a documented IQ of 70 or below
7. The need for an interpreter in order to communicate in Swedish

Date of first enrolment
01/05/2022

Date of final enrolment
15/11/2023

Locations

Countries of recruitment
Sweden

Sponsor information

Organisation
Region Stockholm

Funder(s)

Funder type

Funder Name
Region Stockholm

Funder Name
Stockholms Universitet

Alternative Name(s)
Stockholm University, SU

Funding Body Type
Government organisation

Funding Body Subtype
Universities (academic only)

Location
Sweden

Results and Publications

Individual participant data (IPD) sharing plan

IPD sharing plan summary
Not expected to be made available