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Exploring outcomes of a self-guided online course for adults with posttraumatic stress symptoms

Submission date
21/07/2026

Recruitment status
No longer recruiting

Registration date
22/07/2026

Overall study status
Completed

Last Edited
22/07/2026

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
Posttraumatic stress can affect a person's thoughts, emotions, relationships, and daily life. Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT) is a well-established and well-validated psychological treatment that helps people identify and reconsider unhelpful beliefs linked to traumatic experiencs. It is usually delivered via a psychotherapist, whether individually or in groups. However, many people experience barriers to accessing this and other psychological interventions because of cost, location, waiting lists, limited availability, or concerns about stigma.

This study explored the outcomes of a fully self-led online version of a CPT workbook that was published by Guilford Press in 2023. This modality has been under studied. The main aim of this study was to examine whether adults report changes in PTSD symptoms and general psychological functioning while completing the treatment course. The study compared people who received immediate access to the treatment with people who waited before receiving it. It also examined participation in and completion of the course.

Who can participate?
Adults ages 18 years or older of any sex/gender, provided they:
1. live in the US
2. can complete the study materials in English
3. report at least one traumatic experience involving actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence
4. had elevated PTSD symptoms on a screening questionnaire

What does the study involve?
All study activities take place online. After completing screening and initial questionnaires, eligible participants are assigned by a compter program to one of two groups: the Intervention and the Waitlist. All participants complete questionnaires about their PTSD symptoms and broader psychological funcitoning before and after the course.

The Intervention group receives immediate access to the 12-week treatment via an online course platform that divided the content into modules. The materials include educational material, structured exercises, videos, and biographical examples.

The waitlist group receives delayed access. Each week for 12 weeks, they are sent a PCL-5 with which to track their symptoms. After 12 weeks, the waitlist group receive access to the treatment.

What are the possible risks and benefits of participating?
Participants may gain a better understanding of their trauma-related thoughts, emotions, and coping patterns. They might also experience improvement in their symptoms or daily functioning, but direct benefit was not guaranteed. The study could help researchers understand whether a self-guided course may offer a more accessible form of support for people struggling with PTSD symptoms.

However, thinking about traumatic experiences and completing course exercises may cause temporary emotional discomfort or distress. Repeated questionnaires could also cause tiredness or frustration. As with any online study, there is also a small risk that private information could be exposed via data breaches.

Participants receive information about crisis and support services, and the research team is prepared to intervene if a participant discloses imminent harm to vulnerable populations. Participants are informed of possible emotional distress, fatigue, privacy concerns, and these reporting responsibilities. Those who completed all required course activities and assessments are offered a $100 electronic gift card. Partial payment is not provided for incomplete participation.

Where is the study run from?
The Department of Psychology at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, United States of America.

When is the study starting and how long is it expected to run for?
February 2025 to December 2025.

Who is funding the study?
The Department of Psychology at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, United States of America.

Who is the main contact?
Melissa Goates-Jones, cpt-study@byu.edu

Contact information

Type(s)
Principal investigator, Scientific, Public

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Study information

Scientific Title
Posttraumatic stress and psychological functioning among trauma-exposed adults receiving immediate or delayed access to a self-led online cognitive processing therapy workbook

Study objectives
To evaluate whether a fully self-led online course with content of a Cognitive Processing Therapy recovery workbook is associated with reductions in posttraumatic stress symptoms and improvements in overall psychological functioning among trauma-exposed adults with clinically elevated PTSD symptoms. The study also examines course engagement and completion. Participants assigned to delayed access served as a waitlist comparison during the initial 12-week period and subsequently received access to the intervention.

Ethics approval required
Ethics approval required

Ethics approval(s)
Approved 24/01/2025, Brigham Young University Institutional Review Board; Human Research Protection Program (Room 121, South Campus Office Building (SCOB)735 N 500 E, Provo, 84602, United States of America; +1 8014221461; BYU.HRPP@byu.edu), ref: IRB2024-420

Primary study design
Interventional

Allocation
Randomized controlled trial

Masking
Open (masking not used)

Control
Uncontrolled

Assignment
Randomized delayed-access waitlist design; participants were assigned to immediate intervention or a 12-week waitlist followed by access to the same intervention.

Purpose
Treatment

Study type(s)

Health condition(s) or problem(s) studied
Posttraumatic stress symptoms following exposure to a DSM-5 Criterion A traumatic event

Interventions
Eligible participants are allocated to either immediate access to a 12-week self-led online course or a 12-week delayed-access waitlist condition. The online course uses exact content from the Guilford Press workbook: "Getting Unstuck from PTSD: Using Cognitive Processing Therapy to Guide Your Recovery." Participants are asked to complete one module per week, with each module taking approximately 60 minutes. They were also asked to take weekly PCL-5 measures (per "Getting Unstuck" protocol).

Getting Unstuck from PTSD Chapter Titles
Chapter Title
Part 1: Introduction: How People Get Stuck In PTSD and How to Get Unstuck
1 Overview of CPT
2 How PTSD Keeps You Stuck
3 Making a Plan to Get Unstuck from PTSD
Part 2: Identifying Where You Are Stuck
4 Introduction to PTSD and Trauma Recovery
5 Processing the Meaning of Your Trauma and Building a Stuck Point Log
6 Identifying Thoughts and Feelings
Part 3: Getting Unstuck from Beliefs about the Trauma
7 Beginning to Examine Your Worst Traumatic Event
8 The Exploring Questions Worksheet
9 Introducing Thinking Patterns
Part 4: Getting Unstuck from Trauma-Related Beliefs about the Present and Future
10 Using the Alternative Thoughts Worksheet to Balance Your Thinking
11 Safety
12 Trust
13 Power and Control
14 Esteem
15 Intimacy
Part 5: Moving Forward
16 Finishing Cognitive Processing Therapy
17 Conclusion

Participants in the immediate-access group begin the course after baseline assessment via the Outcome Questionnaire-45 (OQ-45) and Post-traumatic Stress Disorder Checklist for DSM-5 (PCL-5). Participants in the delayed-access group complete weekly PCL-5 assessments during a 12-week no-intervention waiting period and then received access to the same course. Participants in the Intervention group also complete weekly PCL-5 assessments. Overall psychological functioning is assessed using the Outcome Questionnaire-45 at baseline and at the end of the intervention or waitlist period. Course engagement and completion are also recorded.

Intervention Type
Behavioural

Primary outcome(s)

1. PTSD symptom severity measured using PTSD Checklist for DSM-5 total score at baseline, weekly during the 12-week intervention or waitlist period, and post-treatment. The primary comparison is change from baseline to the end of the 12-week intervention or waitlist period.

Key secondary outcome(s)
1. Overall psychological functioning measured using Outcome Questionnaire-45 total score at baseline and pre-treatment, post-treatment

Completion date
05/12/2025

Eligibility

Key inclusion criteria
1. Ages 18+years
2. Residing in the United States
3. Able to read and complete study procedures in English
4. Exposure to at least one DSM-5-TR Criterion A traumatic event, assessed using the Life Events Checklist for DSM-5 (LEC-5)
5. Clinically Elevated PTSD symptoms, defined as a PTSD Checklist for DSM-5 score of 31 or higher
6. Able to access and complete the study procedures and intervention online
7. Not currently receiving psychotherapy or other psychological treatment

Healthy volunteers allowed
No

Age group
Mixed

Lower age limit
18 Years

Upper age limit
120 Years

Sex
All

Total final enrolment
1027

Key exclusion criteria
1. Younger than 18 years old
2. Not residing in the United States
3. Self-reported low proficiency in English reading and/or writing
4. No qualifying DSM-5 Criterion A traumatic event
5. PTSD Checklist for DSM-5 score below 31
6. Currently receiving psychotherapy or psychological treatment for PTSD
7. Recent active suicidality (self-reported)

8. Change in psychotropic medication during the preceding 6 weeks, or change in medication during the study
9. Imminent risk of harm to self or others (self-reported)
10. Unable to complete the online study procedures as outline in the informed consent (e.g., completion of the intervention)

Date of first enrolment
20/02/2025

Date of final enrolment
30/05/2025

Locations

Countries of recruitment
United States of America

Sponsor information

Organisation
Brigham Young University

ROR
https://ror.org/047rhhm47

Funder(s)

Funder type

Funder Name
Brigham Young University

Alternative Name(s)
The Brigham Young University, Brigham Young Academy, BYU

Funding Body Type
Private sector organisation

Funding Body Subtype
Universities (academic only)

Location
United States of America

Results and Publications

Individual participant data (IPD) sharing plan

IPD sharing plan summary
Not expected to be made available

Study outputs

Output type	Details	Date created	Date added	Peer reviewed?	Patient-facing?
Participant information sheet			22/07/2026	No	Yes