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Q: What is behavioral therapy/behavioral activation?

A: Behavioral therapy (BT) refers to a class of psychological interventions which improves symptoms and functioning through behavior change by leveraging principles of reinforcement (Lewinsohn et al., 2001). Behavioral activation (BA) is a specific technique of BT which teaches the patient to be aware of the link between avoidant behaviors and depression and seeks to increase a patient's engagement in pleasant daily activities. During treatment, patients learn to identify and track their participation in rewarding activities and relate the engagement in each activity to their resulting mood. Its delivery is typically manualized (Martell et al., 2010). BA structures the selection of activities by value domains (i.e., relationships, work, recreation, spirituality) to leverage the reinforcing factors that will increase the likelihood of engaging in the desired behavior. Patients receiving BA identify important value domains and then select an activity which fits within each preselected domain. Some versions of BA also include social skills training, assertiveness, and problem-solving (Jacobson et al., 1996).

Q: What is the treatment model underlying BT/BA major depressive disorder (MDD)?

A: Behavior therapy (BT) was founded on operant conditioning learning principles identified by B. F. Skinner and applies reinforcement theory to the treatment of MDD (Lewinsohn, 1974). This theory postulates that the quantity and quality of an individual's reinforcement-related interactions are linked to feelings of depression. Specifically, when a patient is depressed they typically stop engaging in pleasant or routine activities and avoid interpersonal contact. The lack of positive reinforcement that might be obtained through such activities and through relationships can increase symptoms of depression and contribute to patients further limiting those things. Similarly, when an individual is depressed, they may stop engaging in routine or necessary activities such as going to work or school which leads to negative consequences. This exacerbates feelings of guilt and failure that are often a component of depression. BT seeks to disrupt this cycle by using principles of reinforcement to increase desired and effective behaviors and to decrease ineffective or problematic behaviors.

Q: Is BT/BA recommended as a treatment for MDD in the Military Health System (MHS)?

A: Yes. The 2022 VA/DoD Clinical Practice Guideline of Major Depressive Disorder gives a "weak for" strength of recommendation for BT/BA for patients with uncomplicated mild to moderate MDD.

The MHS relies on the VA/DoD clinical practice guidelines (CPGs) to inform best clinical practices. The CPGs are developed under the purview of clinical experts and are derived through a transparent and systematic approach that includes, but is not limited to, systematic reviews of the literature on a given topic and development of recommendations using a graded system that takes into account the overall quality of the evidence and the magnitude of the net benefit of the recommendation. A further description of this process and CPGs on specific topics can be found on the VA clinical practice guidelines website.

Q: Do other authoritative reviews recommend BT/BA as a treatment for MDD?

A: No. Other authoritative reviews have not substantiated the use of BT/BA as a treatment for MDD.

Other recognized organizations conduct systematic reviews and evidence syntheses on psychological health topics using similar grading systems as the VA/DoD CPGs. Notable among these is Cochrane, an international network that conducts high-quality reviews of healthcare interventions.

- Cochrane: A 2020 systematic review suggested that BA may be more effective in treating depression and/or symptoms of depression than humanistic therapy, medication, or treatment as usual, though the evidence was of low quality. This review also suggested that BA is comparable to other common treatments (i.e., CBT, psychodynamic therapy, waitlist; Uphoff et al., 2020).

Q: What conclusions can be drawn about the use of BT/BA as a treatment for MDD in the MHS?

A: The 2022 VA/DoD Clinical Practice Guideline for the Management of Major Depressive Disorder recommends offering BT/BA as one option among multiple evidence-based psychotherapies and pharmacotherapies. Selection of a treatment approach should incorporate clinical judgment and expertise, patient characteristics and treatment history, and patient preferences that might influence treatment engagement and retention.

References

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