First web-based Dual Disorder Treatment Trial among Problematic Alcohol Users with moderate Depression Symptoms

Summary

Background
Web-based self-help programs that reduce problematic substance use are able to reach "hidden" consumer groups in the general population who often fear stigmatization. These programs are characterized by their low treatment threshold, non-restrictive setting for intervention and remarkably positive cost-benefit relation, which is of interest for both low-income and high-income industrialized countries suffering from exorbitant health costs. There is substantial co-occurrence of mental disorders and substance use disorders. Prevalence of dual disorders, the condition of suffering from a mental illness and a co-morbid substance abuse problem, is probably highest in the general population for individuals with depression disorders and problematic alcohol use. Co-morbidity of alcohol misuse and abuse is two to three times higher for those who suffer from depression disorders compared to the general population. Internet-based self-help programs to reduce subclinical alcohol use disorders or ameliorate moderate to mild depression symptoms have been reported to be effective in meta-analyses. A cost-effective intervention that is able to reach at-risk individuals in early stages of potentially more pronounced alcohol use and depression disorders is of great importance from a public health point of view. Therefore we aim to develop the first web-based dual disorder self-help intervention for harmful or hazardous alcohol users with mild to moderate co-occurring depression symptoms and to test this intervention's effectiveness in a randomized controlled trial.

Methods/Design
This research proposal presents the protocol for a three-arm multi-country randomized controlled trial that intends to test the effectiveness of a combined intervention aiming to reduce alcohol consumption and depression symptoms, a web-based self-help intervention focusing on problematic alcohol use only, and a waiting list control condition in hazardous and harmful alcohol users with co-morbid mild to moderate depression symptoms. Data collection waves will take place at baseline, 3 months and 6 months post-randomization. The two primary outcomes will be the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test and the Center of Epidemiologic Studies of Depression Scale. Secondary outcome measures will include the number of alcohol free days per week, the use of tobacco and illicit drugs, changes in mental health symptoms, quality of life, treatment retention, and client intervention satisfaction. The self-help intervention will consist of modules designed to reduce alcohol use based on the principles of motivational interviewing, self-control practices, and methods of cognitive behavioral therapy as well as additional modules for the reduction of depression symptoms based on cognitive-behavioral therapy in the combined treatment study arm.

Expected Value of the Proposed Project
The expected findings will extend the knowledge of designing effective Internet based treatment on dual diagnoses in general and more specifically for co-morbid alcohol and depression disorders. Especially otherwise well integrated individuals who suffer from depression symptoms and fear stigmatization for their harmful or hazardous alcohol consumption and thus do not show up in addiction counseling and treatment centers may profit from this easy to access and anonymous intervention. In case of effectiveness confirmation, the intervention will be implemented in the Swiss addiction portal Safe Zone. Help seeking individuals on Safe Zone will be offered to be screened and receive access to the corresponding self-help intervention (one for problematic alcohol use and comorbid depression symptoms or one for those with problematic alcohol use but without depression symptoms). Thus, the planned interventions possess a high potential to help many problematic alcohol users in the general population with and without depression symptoms in a very cost-effective way. To our best knowledge, this is the first "dual diagnosis" Internet-based self-help research conducted. It is likely that proven intervention effectiveness will stimulate other research groups to conduct similar research on further comorbid substance use and mental health disorders of public health relevance.