Review: group psychotherapy is effective for depression


**QUESTION:** Is group psychotherapy effective for patients with depression?

**Data sources**
Studies were identified by searching PsycLIT and Medline with the terms group therapy, and depression. Reference lists were scanned and recent issues of relevant psychology and psychiatry journals were handsearched.

**Study selection**
English language studies published from 1970–98 were selected if they tested the efficacy of group psychotherapy for depressive spectrum disorders in adults, used well-known self-report or interviewer-based measures of depression, and reported pre-treatment and post-treatment scores on depression measures for participants assigned to group therapy. Case studies were excluded.

**Data extraction**
Data were extracted on diagnostic criteria, inclusion and exclusion criteria, depression measures, and results. Effect sizes were calculated for each study.

**Main results**
48 studies met the selection criteria. The patients’ mean age was 44 years, and 70% of patients were women. 18 studies included an untreated control group. All but 1 study included a cognitive and/or behavioural treatment group. 8 of 12 studies that compared cognitive behavioural therapy with a non-cognitive behavioural intervention included psychodynamic or interpersonally oriented group therapy. 45 of the 48 studies reported that group psychotherapy was effective for reducing depressive symptoms. 43 studies showed statistically significant decreases in depressive symptoms for group psychotherapy, and 2 studies did not report statistical analyses. The pooled results showed that group psychotherapy was more effective than no treatment after the treatment period (15 studies) and at a mean 19.1 weeks after treatment ended (10 studies) (table). 9 studies showed that group psychotherapy and individual psychotherapy did not differ in effectiveness (table). 8 studies showed that cognitive behavioural therapy was more effective than psychodynamic group therapy (table).

**Conclusion**
In patients with depression, group psychotherapy is effective for relieving symptoms.

**Group psychotherapy for relieving depressive symptoms in patients with depression**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comparison</th>
<th>Number of studies</th>
<th>Mean effect size (95% CI)</th>
<th>Number of control patients with worse outcome†</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group psychotherapy v no treatment at post-treatment</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1.03 (0.6 to 1.5)</td>
<td>85% (72 to 93)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group psychotherapy v no treatment at mean 19.1 weeks after treatment</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1.2 (0.6 to 1.8)</td>
<td>88% (72 to 96)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group v individual psychotherapy</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>−0.2 (not significant)</td>
<td>Not significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBT v psychodynamic group therapy</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.3 (0.0 to 0.6)</td>
<td>62% (50 to 72)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*CBT=cognitive behavioural therapy.
†Proportion of patients in the control group with a worse outcome than the average patient in the treatment group; see glossary.