Behavioural couples therapy improved psychosocial functioning of children whose fathers have alcoholism or other drug abuse


QUESTION: In heterosexual couples in which men are entering outpatient treatment for alcoholism (AL) or other drug abuse (ODA), is behavioural couples therapy (BCT) more effective than individual based therapy (IBT) for improving the psychosocial functioning of their children?

**Patients**

135 heterosexual couples (mean age 37 y) in which men were entering outpatient treatment for AL (71 couples) or ODA (64 couples). Inclusion criteria for men included DSM-III-R criteria for psychoactive substance abuse or dependence. Exclusion criteria included either partner being in a methadone maintenance programme or having a major mental disorder, or couples in which women had a recent psychoactive substance use disorder. Follow up was 82%.

**Intervention**

Couples were allocated to 32 sessions of treatment over 20 weeks which included BCT (n=25 for AL and n=22 for ODA), IBT (n=22 for AL and n=21 for ODA), or psychoeducational attention control treatment (PACT) (n=24 for AL and n=21 for ODA). The 32 sessions consisted of 20 sessions of cognitive behaviour therapy for substance abuse, which was the same for all men, and 12 sessions that varied among the groups. The variations involved couples therapy aimed at improving abstinence and relationships (BCT group), individual coping skills for the men only (IBT group), and lectures about substance abuse attended by both partners (PACT group).

**Main outcome measures**

Children’s psychosocial adjustment (Pediatric Symptom Checklist), relationship adjustment (The Dyadic Adjustment Scale), and substance abuse (Timeline Followback Interview) assessed immediately after treatment, and at 6 and 12 months during follow up.

**Main results**

Analysis was by intention to treat. Improvement in psychosocial functioning of children whose fathers received treatment for either AL or ODA was greater in the BCT than in either of IBT and PACT groups throughout follow up (table). Improvements in the couples’ relationship and the men’s substance use were also greater in the BCT than in either of the IBT or PACT groups.

**Conclusion**

In heterosexual couples in which men are entering out-patient treatment for alcoholism or other drug abuse, behavioural couples therapy was more effective than individual based therapy for improving the psychosocial functioning of their children.

*CSee glossary.*

**Group** | **Condition** | **PSC mean score (SD) at baseline** | **PSC mean score (SD) immediately after treatment** | **PSC mean score (SD) 12 months after treatment**
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BCT | Alcoholism | 16.9 (12.6) | 7.2 (16.2)‡ | 9.0 (11.6)‡ |
IBT | | 17.6 (14.4) | 10.2 (11.4) | 13.9 (15.1) |
PACT | | 18.7 (12.6) | 11.4 (8.6) | 13.9 (13.2) |
BCT | ODA | 24.2 (16.9) | 10.4 (12.2)‡ | 14.0 (13.6)‡ |
IBT | | 25.4 (18.4) | 17.1 (13.6) | 20.4 (15.1) |
PACT | | 23.6 (17.8) | 16.9 (14.8) | 18.0 (13.2) |

1PSC = Pediatric Symptom Checklist (lower PSC scores indicate better functioning); SD = standard deviation. CI defined in glossary. Mean score for BCT is significantly lower than the mean score for either IBT or PACT in each group (analysis of simple effects).