Family focused therapy is more effective than crisis management for preventing relapse after a bipolar episode

For outpatients with a recent bipolar episode, does family focused therapy reduce relapse and improve adherence to drug treatment compared with a less intensive crisis management intervention?

METHODS

**Design:** Randomised controlled trial.
**Allocation:** Concealed.
**Blinding:** Participants and practitioners not blinded; blinded observers assessed results for treatment adherence.
**Follow up period:** Up to 24 months.
**Setting:** Outpatient clinic, Colorado, USA.

**Patients:** 101 people (18–62 years; mean age 36 years; 64 women) with bipolar disorder episode (DSM III-R and DSM IV, diagnosed by Structured Clinical Interview) within past 3 months; with family support. Exclusions: neurological or developmental comorbidity; recent substance misuse. Participants recruited from inpatient and outpatient settings.

**Intervention:** Family focused therapy or crisis management. Concomitant drug therapy and other aspects of usual care were permitted in both groups as needed. Family focused therapy: 20 one hour long sessions over nine months, delivered by trained therapists, consisting of psychoeducation; communication enhancement, and problem solving skills training. Crisis management: two one hour family education sessions in the home in the first two months, followed by crisis intervention sessions as needed to resolve family conflicts and prevent relapse.

**Outcomes:** Relapse; adherence to drug therapy (rated from 1 (poor adherence) to 3 (good adherence)) based on patient, physician, and family report.

**Patient follow up:** Family focused therapy: 22/31 (71%) up to 24 months; crisis management: 43/70 (61%) to 24 months.

MAIN RESULTS

Family focused therapy resulted in fewer relapses compared with crisis management (35% vs 54%, p<0.005). Family focused therapy significantly increased time to relapse compared with crisis management (intention to treat analysis; mean time to relapse: 74 weeks with family focused therapy vs 53 weeks with crisis management; hazard ratio: 0.38; 95% CI 0.20 to 0.75). Family focused therapy improved adherence with drug therapy compared with crisis management (mean adherence score: 2.77 with family focused therapy vs 2.56 with crisis management; p = 0.04).

CONCLUSIONS

Family focused therapy reduces relapse and improves drug adherence compared with crisis management in people with a recent bipolar episode.