

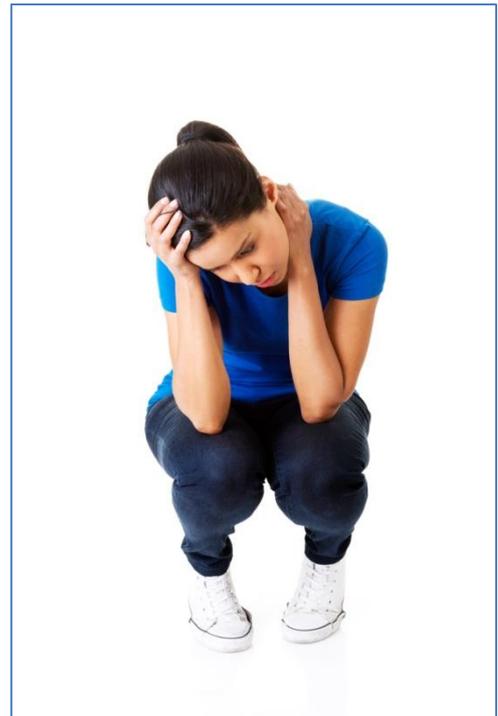
## Research Briefing N° 46

# Inequalities and the mental health of young people: a systematic review of secondary school-based cognitive behavioural interventions

The aim of this research is to increase what is known about: a) promoting good mental health; and b) mental health inequalities.

**Key words:** mental health; health; inequalities

The review was carried out by the **Institute of Education's Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre (EPPI Centre)**, in 2009 with funding from the Department of Health.



## Key findings

Findings are of interest to young people and other members of the public, researchers, research commissioners and funders, policy-makers and practitioners working with young people in schools or in child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS).

- It was found that cognitive behavioural theory (CBT) delivered to young people in secondary schools can reduce the symptoms of depression and anxiety. No evidence was found to assess the impact of CBT on suicidal thinking or behaviour.
- Few studies provided any useful data that might be used to examine the impact of CBT-based interventions on inequalities in mental health. Although conclusions about impact of CBT on inequalities are therefore tentative, there are suggestions that it might be less effective for people who are more socio-economically disadvantaged.

## What we did

Health inequalities are recognised as an important problem both nationally and internationally. The research literature which demonstrates the complex interactions between the key axes of social differences in populations including class, education, occupation, income/assets, gender, ethnicity; in relation to health outcomes is yet to be matched by a strong body of evidence of what works to reduce health inequalities. Systematic reviewers wanting to examine how interventions impact upon gaps and gradients have been hampered by a lack of tested tools and methods.

The aim of this report is to increase what is known about: a) promoting good mental health

and b) mental health inequalities. It focuses on the role of interventions based on the techniques of CBT for preventing and reducing suicidality, depression and anxiety in young people. A further aim of the study is to use the systematic review as a case study in applying an 'equity lens' to a review topic, by building on work completed in an earlier systematic map and methodological review.

## How we did it

The results of 13 randomised controlled trials (RCTs) were synthesised to yield the best evidence about the role of school-based CBT-type interventions for promoting young people's mental health and preventing depression and anxiety.

## Implications

This review has implications for a range of stakeholders:

- Providers of preventive mental health services to young people should consider providing CBT-based interventions to young people using adequately trained and supported school staff. They may wish to consider providing universal, rather than indicated interventions of at least 10 weeks duration, and to monitor any potential adverse effects.
- Commissioners of research should consider commissioning well-conducted RCTs of CBT-based interventions with young people in UK secondary schools.
- Intervention developers should: involve young people in the design of the intervention to increase its acceptability and appropriateness to young people; consider using existing school staff to provide the intervention, with appropriate training and support; include suicidal ideation and behaviours as outcome measures; and, examine differential effects of the intervention according to gender, ethnicity, and lower- and higher-socio economic status (SES) populations. Process evaluations or qualitative components to identify possible reasons which might generate such differences should be incorporated into evaluations.
- Research commissioners, journal editors and other relevant research stakeholders should encourage authors to report their data and methods of analysis for investigations of differential impact of interventions on the health status of different socio-demographic groups.

## Further information

For the full report see ['Inequalities and the mental health of young people: a systematic review of secondary school-based cognitive behavioural interventions'](#)

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