

**Stony Brook University
The Graduate School**

Doctoral Defense Announcement

Abstract

Development of a Brief Couples Therapy for Depression: Targeting Illness-Related Behaviors and Attitudes, Empathy and Support

By

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Interpersonal and social support models of depression emphasize the role of conflictual and unsupportive relationships in maintaining a person's depression. Factors such as high negativity and low empathy and support have been shown to predict relapse and prolong recovery. Research has also documented the negative impact of depression on marital satisfaction, as well as the distress and burden experienced by the spouses of depressed individuals. The current study aimed to develop a brief couples therapy for depressed women and their husbands. Treatment was designed to increase partners' knowledge and understanding of depression, reduce negative attitudes and behaviors towards depression, foster more empathy and support toward the depressed partner, and alleviate the psychological distress and burden experienced by non-depressed husbands. To participate, women had to meet diagnostic criteria for major depression or dysthymia, and their husbands did not meet criteria for clinical depression. Thirty-five community couples participated in a randomized clinical trial investigating the effects of our brief couples therapy (BCT) on two primary outcomes—depression and relationship satisfaction. Couples were randomly assigned to either the five-week treatment group or a waitlist control group, and were compared at three time points (pre, post, and three-month follow-up). Compared to waitlist controls, women who received the treatment showed significant reductions in depressive symptomatology and half of the women had recovered from their depressive episode by follow-up. Both husbands and wives experienced significant improvements in marital satisfaction following treatment, and husbands in the treatment group experienced significantly reduced levels of depression-specific burden compared to waitlist controls. Mediation analyses revealed that reductions in women's depression and increases in both partners' marital satisfaction were significantly mediated by positive changes in partners' illness-related attitudes and behaviors, increased mutual support, and reduced negativity toward depression.

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