Adapting the Unified Protocol for transdiagnostic treatment for emotional disorders to a low intensity group intervention for individuals with mild to moderate emotional disturbances

Herman HM Lo, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Jonathan WH Mak, Hong Kong Family Welfare Society, Matthew WH Pun, Hong Kong Family Welfare Society, Sara KH Chan, Hong Kong Family Welfare Society, Michael CW Chiu, Mind HK, Candice LYM Powell, Mind HK

Introduction

The Hong Kong Family Welfare Society (HKFWS), a long-standing NGO supporting emotional well-being since the 1980s, has expanded its mental health services to address the increasing prevalence of mild to moderate emotional difficulties in the community.

To enhance the impact and accessibility of cognitive-behavioural group interventions, HKFWS adopted the Unified Protocol (UP)—a transdiagnostic cognitive-behavioural approach proven effective in treating a range of emotional disorders. UP was selected for its flexibility, efficiency, and focus on core emotion regulation skills, making it well-suited to the evolving needs of individuals facing diverse life stressors.

Through a co-creation process involving a CBT expert, a certified UP trainer (clinical psychologist), and experienced social workers from HKFWS, a low intensity, 8-session group protocol was developed based on UP. Launched in mid-2023, the initiative offers a feasible and sustainable model for community-based emotional support. A cohort of 40 trained social workers now delivers this innovative intervention across Hong Kong.

Methods

This study is based on a quasi-experimental design. Self-reported measures on depression, anxiety, stress, and experiential avoidance using DASS-21 and BEAQ. A paired-sample t-test was administered to test the effect of the UP protocol. During the project period from mid-2023 to mid-2025, 118 participants completed the questionnaire before and after the group intervention.

Session Outline

- **S1:Understanding of Emotion**
- **S2: Mindful emotion**
- **S3: Understanding and confronting physical sensation**
- **S3: Cognitive flexibility**
- **S5: Emotional behaviour**
- **S6-7Emotional exposure**
- **S8: Relapse prevention**

Conclusions

The preliminary results of the project are promising. It showed that UP protocols can be delivered in a relatively low intensity group format. The large effect sizes in depression, anxiety, and stress for participants with severe and extremely severe levels of symptoms showed that the 8-session UP protocol can effectively reduce their emotional distress.

The collaborative effort also ensured the protocol was both **evidence-based and practical for frontline implementation**, marking a significant step toward delivering **accessible and sustainable** group-based psychological interventions. Further research is needed to strengthen the evidence base of the variant of the UP protocol.

Results

Among the 118 participants who completed the post-test, 78.6% were female. Regarding participants' age, 39.2% were aged 36 to 45, and 24.8% were aged 46 to 60. Regarding marital status, 61.1% were married, and 19.9% were divorced or widowed. Only 45 of them had mental health diagnoses at the time of participating in the program, reflecting the NGO service targeted for users with subclinical mental health conditions in a non-stigmatising community service.

Using a paired-sample t-test for all participants, it shows significant improvements, with small to moderate effect sizes in depression ($t = 6.42$, $d = 0.59$), anxiety ($t = 5.00$, $d = 0.46$), stress ($t = 4.48$, $d = 0.41$), and experiential avoidance ($t = 5.30$, $d = 0.49$).

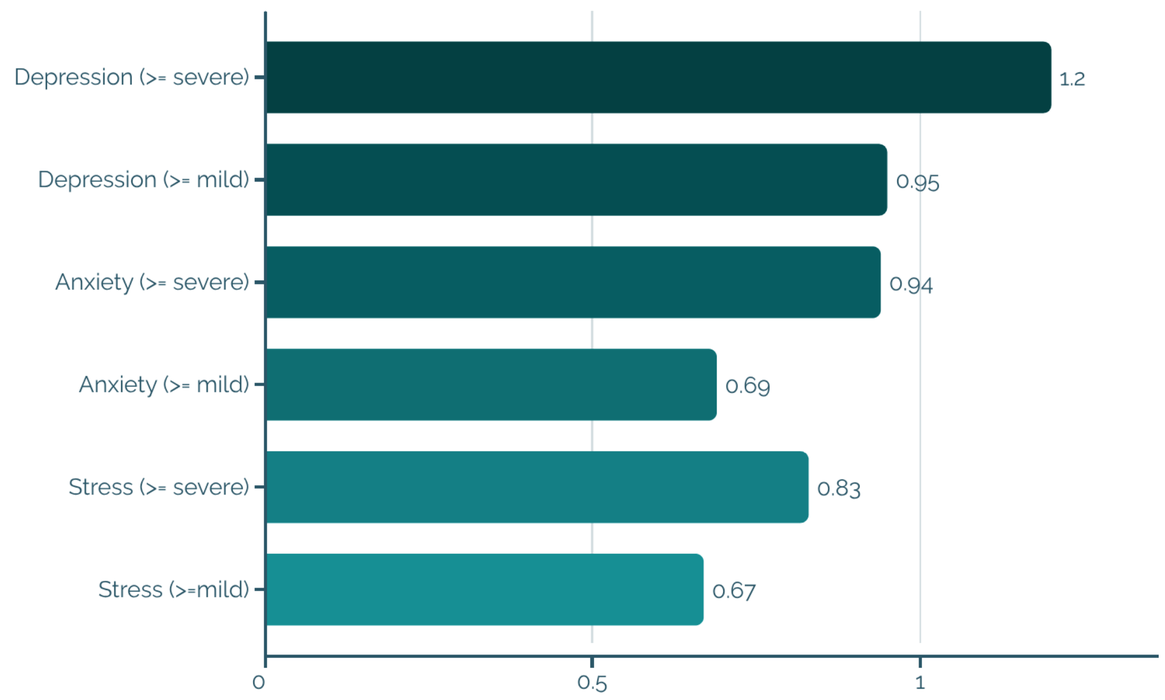

Fig 1: Pre-post effective sizes for depression, anxiety and stress for participants with mild or above *versus* severe or above level of symptoms

> With the help of UP, I understand myself, and I can have better ways to cope with my stress. This also helps improve my relationship with children. Thank you to the group!
>
> – Group Participant

> As social workers, our greatest blessing is to help our users overcome their different life challenges, and UP is definitely a very effective way in our intervention.
>
> – Social Worker

References

Barlow, D. H., Harris, B. A., Eustis, E. H., & Farchione, T. J. (2020). The unified protocol for transdiagnostic treatment of emotional disorders. *World Psychiatry, 19*, 245-256.

Cassiello-Robbins, C., Southward, M. W., Tirpak, J. W., & Sauer-Zavala, S. (2020). A systematic review of Unified Protocol applications with adult populations: Facilitating widespread dissemination via adaptability. *Clinical Psychology Review, 78*, 101852.

Longley, S. L., & Gleiser, T. S. (2023). Efficacy of the Unified Protocol: A systematic review and meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice, 30*, 208-221.

THE HONG KONG POLYTECHNIC UNIVERSITY 香港理工大學

家福會 HKFWS

mindhk 香港心聆