

Q. What is problem-solving therapy?

A. Problem-solving therapy (PST) is a cognitive-behavioral intervention that teaches adaptive problem-solving skills for effectively managing negative stressful events. The patient and therapist work collaboratively to identify specific problem areas and manage those problem areas by breaking them down into small tasks that can be managed with problem solving and coping behaviors (D’Zurilla & Nezu, 1982).

Q. What is the treatment model underlying PST for major depressive disorder (MDD)?

A. PST is based on a problem-solving model of stress, where problem solving plays an important role in the relationship between stressful events and well-being (Bell & D’Zurilla, 2009). One’s ability to engage in effective problem solving is believed to reduce the negative impact of stressful life events on well-being.

Q. Is PST recommended as a treatment for MDD in the Military Health System (MHS)?

A. Yes. The 2016 VA/DoD *Clinical Practice Guideline for the Management of Major Depressive Disorder* recommends PST as a first-line treatment for uncomplicated mild to moderate MDD, with a “Strong For” strength of recommendation.

The MHS relies on the VA/DoD clinical practice guidelines (CPGs) to inform best clinical practices. The CPGs are developed under the purview of clinical experts and are derived through a transparent and systematic approach that includes, but is not limited to, systematic reviews of the literature on a given topic and development of recommendations using a graded system that takes into account the overall quality of the evidence and the magnitude of the net benefit of the recommendation. A further description of this process and CPGs on specific topics can be found on the VA clinical practice guidelines website.

Q. Do other authoritative reviews recommend PST as a treatment for MDD?

A. No. Other authoritative reviews have not recommended the use of PST for MDD.

Several other recognized organizations conduct systematic reviews and evidence syntheses on psychological health topics using similar grading systems as the VA/DoD CPGs. These include the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) and Cochrane.

- AHRQ: A comparative effectiveness review of pharmacological versus nonpharmacological treatments for adults with MDD identified one eligible study comparing PST to a second-generation antidepressant, but did not make any specific conclusions about PST (Garthlehner et al., 2015).
- Cochrane: A 2007 systematic review of psychosocial interventions by general practitioners found evidence supporting the effectiveness of problem-solving treatment by general practitioners for MDD, but noted that more research is needed to establish the effectiveness of problem-solving treatment in routine practice (Huibers, Beurskens, Bleijenbergh, & van Schayck, 2007).

Q. What conclusions can be drawn about the use of PST as a treatment for MDD in the MHS?

A. PST is recommended as a front-line treatment for MDD. Clinicians should consider several factors when choosing an evidence-based treatment for their patients. Treatment decisions should incorporate clinical judgment and expertise, patient characteristics and treatment history, and patient preferences that might influence treatment engagement and retention.

References

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