The Added Value of Group CBT combined with Supported Employment Programs: Findings from a Quasi-Experimental Study in France

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Background

Supported employment (SE) programs are considered evidence based practices in helping individuals with severe mental illness obtain competitive employment (Campbell et al., 2011; Corbière, 2023; Drake et al., 2012). Recent meta-analyses revealed that SE fared much better than other programs in terms of helping people obtain employment, with risk ratios of 2.4 (Modini et al., 2016). Even though SE programs are recognized as evidence-based practices compared to other vocational services, many who enroll in SE fail to obtain a job (close to 50% obtain a regular job), and among those who do, many fail to sustain employment (Corbière & Lecomte, 2009).

Augmented SE or SE+ has been defined as a combination of SE program with evidence-based interventions, such as social skills training, cognitive remediation or cognitive behavioural therapy (Suijkerbuijk et al., 2017). A Cochrane review concluded that, overall, augmented SE programs show great promise in terms of higher job acquisition (RR = 1.40) and higher job tenure rates (RR= 10.09) compared to SE programs alone (Suijkerbuijk et al., 2017). As such, CBT-SE (Lecomte et al., 2014) was developed and became the first group CBT for individuals receiving SE. CBT-SE covers essential work-related beliefs. Indeed, individuals with severe mental illness entering or re-entering the workplace often have dysfunctional beliefs regarding their own efficacy or work abilities, or regarding the workplace.

In 2023, group interventions inspired by Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) were implemented in seven supported employment programs in France. The CBT-SE approach consists of eight weekly sessions offered to a group of individuals (from 4 to 6 individuals) with severe mental disorders (e.g., schizophrenia) undergoing a work integration process. These individuals also receive services from employment specialists working within the supported employment programs.

Aims

The **objective** of this study was to demonstrate the added value of this type of intervention in improving work integration outcomes for individuals with severe mental disorders.

Method

This study was conducted using a mixed-method approach, combining a longitudinal quasi-experimental evaluation, a 6-month comparison between an experimental group (N=48, SE + CBT) and a control group (n=48; SE only) and a qualitative evaluation, semi-structured interviews and focus groups, with employment specialists and individuals participating in CBT-SE programs.

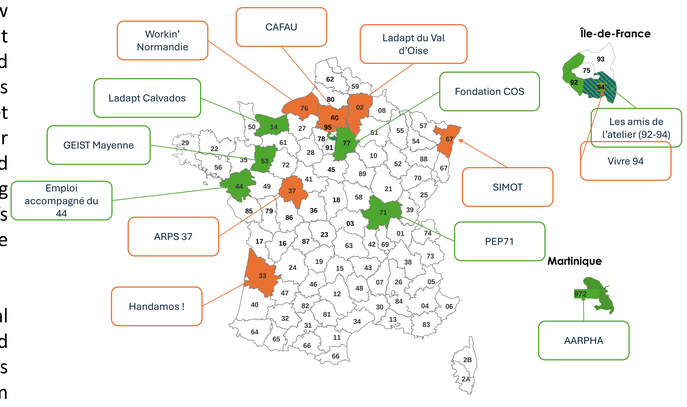

Figure 1: CBT-SE Implementation in France

Table 1: CBT-SE content

Session number	title	content
1	Coping with stress at work	- recognizing stress, its effects on body, thoughts, emotions - recognizing stress in the various steps of work integration (interview, first day, etc.) - sharing strategies to cope with stress at work
2–3	Recognizing and modifying my dysfunctional beliefs linked to work	- learning the A-B-C's of CBT - understanding the impact of negative or dysfunctional beliefs on our emotions and behaviours - getting facts and finding alternative beliefs
4	Overcoming obstacles linked to reintegrating the workplace	- recognizing personal obstacles to obtaining or maintaining a job - sharing and practicing strategies to overcoming these obstacles
5	My strengths and competencies related to work	- understanding the power of negative self-attributions - recognizing one's strengths and abilities with the help of others in the group
6	Accepting criticism and asserting myself appropriately	- using techniques learned so far when confronted with criticism (coping with stress, A-B-C, check facts, not jump to conclusions, recognize strengths) - learn relaxation and acceptance - role-play polite self-assertion - negotiating work accommodation with employer
7–8	My best coping strategies for work	- discussing disclosure of mental illness and stigma at work - reviewing coping strategies that work best for each person for personal stressors, symptoms, moods and thoughts at work - review of the manual, what was learned, liked, etc.

Quantitative Results

The results showed a post-intervention employment rate of 28,6% in the experimental group compared to 16,8% in the control group. With respect to participants with employment at the beginning of the study, job tenure rate is 77% for the experimental group at 3-month follow-up compared to 66,8% in the control group (table 2).

Table 2: Employment and job tenure rates for both groups

		3-month follow-up	6-month follow-up
Individuals **without** employment at the beginning of the study	Experimental group (SE+)	**22%**	**28,6%**
	Control group (SE only)	13,4 %	16,8 %
Individuals **with** employment at the beginning of the study	Experimental group (SE+)	**77%**	70,4%
	Control group (SE only)	66,8%	80%

The results showed a post-intervention decrease of depressive and anxiety symptoms for both groups. However, the drop for depressive (-5,5) and anxiety symptoms (-5,3) is more marked for the experimental group compared to the control group (table 3).

Table 3: Symptom evaluation for both groups

		Pre-intervention	Post-intervention	Variation T1-T0
PHQ-9 (depressive symptoms)	Experimental group (SE+)	10.6	5.1	**- 5,5**
	Control group (SE only)	11.5	7.6	- 3,8
GAD-7 (anxiety symptoms)	Experimental group (SE+)	10.8	5.5	**-5,3**
	Control group (SE only)	9.8	6.6	- 3,2

Qualitative Results

Results of the qualitative evaluation **on access to employment** showed:

Themes emerging from CBT-SE participants:

- **Re-engagement** and a renewed commitment in a **positive dynamic;**
- Improved **self-confidence;**
- **Awareness of their strengths** in the workplace;
- **Contributing to refining their professional project**;
- **Reduction of fear related to work**;
- Enhanced ability to **better manage stress during interviews.**

Themes emerging from Employment Specialists:

- **Ability to envision solutions** to overcome perceived barriers to employment;
- **Progress in self-expression and openess** regarding disability in teh job search process.

Qualitative Results

Results of the qualitative evaluation on **job tenure** showed:

Themes emerging from CBT-SE participants:

- **Greater baility to discuss** the impact of disability with the employer;
- **Improved emptional regulation interactions** with the manager and colleagues;
- **Better stress management** and the ability to take a step back from situations perceived as stressful;
- **New strategies to facilitate the adaptation of working conditions.**

Themes emerging from ES:

- **Ability to manage unusual situations** arising at work;
- **Ability to speak up in group settings**;
- **Normalization of challenges** encountered in the workplace;
- **Interactions** with colleagues.

Discussion and conclusion

CBT-SE has previously been validated in Canada and now appears promising in France as well. Results suggest that the CBT-SE intervention may facilitate competitive employment and job retention more effectively than SE programs alone. However, employment rates observed in the study were lower than expected for SE and SE+ programs, which may attributed to the small sample size of subgroups (i.e., individuals with or without employment at the study's onset). Additionally, the quasi-experimental design limits direct comparisons between groups.

In both, the control and experimental groups, results showed improvements in clinical symptoms (depression and anxiety) with a significantly greater reduction observed in the experimental group (SE+) at the 3-month follow-up. Regarding qualitative findings, CBT-SE participants and employment specialists highlighted the positive impacts and changes attributed to CBT-SE.

Future studies should employ RCTs to enhance the evidence base and facilitate broader implementation.

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