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Riverside County, California

Web-based therapies increase likelihood of people with severe mental illness finding work

Oct 11 2017

Patients living with severe mental illness are being helped to return to work courtesy of new research from Sydney's Westmead Institute for Medical Research.

The study shows that web-based cognitive remediation therapies, together with supported employment programs, significantly increase the likelihood of individuals with severe mental illness obtaining and staying in work.

On average, study participants using web-based therapies worked for 3 times the number of hours and earnt almost $2000 more than the control study group.

Lead researcher and psychiatrist Dr Anthony Harris said that people living with severe mental illness face many barriers in finding and keeping meaningful employment.

"People with severe mental illness want to work, but find it very difficult to find and stay in work.

"There are many reasons for such poor rates of employment. These include the negative symptoms of their disease, interruption to education and training, and impairment of cognitive function due to psychosis.

"Cognitive training, such as our web-based therapies, is an alternate approach to treating these problems.

"These therapies work by helping people to practice their thinking skills, which is a good way of helping the brain," Dr Harris explained.

Dr Harris said that a key advantages of web-based therapies is that they can upscale and reach a large population. They are also good for regional and remote communities were access to adequate mental health care is an issue.

In any month around 75,000 Australians live with a psychotic illness,

including schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, psychosis, schizoaffective disorder and psychotic mood disorders. Only 22.4 percent of people with a psychotic disorder in Australia are in either part or full time employment.

Dr Harris acknowledged that web-based therapies can only be successful with the support of disability support programs such as One Door Mental Health.

"Supported employment programs, like One Door, that aim to return people with severe mental illness to work are extremely successful, but there is still significant number of individuals who are unemployed.

"If we can successfully marry web-based therapies with proven support programs, I am optimistic we can improve employment outcomes for people living with severe mental illness," Dr Harris said.

Dr Harris stressed the value of finding work to achieving broader treatment outcomes.

"Meaningful employment has real potential to help these individuals break through into the wider community and lift at least some of these people out of poverty," he said.

Dr Harris now hopes to use similar techniques to help young people get back into education as well as work. He also hopes to roll these programs out through other Disability Employment Service programs.

The trial included 86 people with a range of severe mental illness - including schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and psychotic depression - from across New South Wales.

Source:

http://www.westmeadinstitute.org.au/