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**A pilot randomized controlled trial to evaluate the efficacy, acceptability, and feasibility of a counselling intervention, delivered by nurses, for the prevention of non-fatal self-poisoning in Sri Lanka**

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Aim and objectives: i) To assess the acceptability and feasibility of a brief counselling intervention (BCI) delivered by nurses to recent self-poisoning attempt survivors. ii) to determine the BCI's effectiveness in enhancing coping skills for acute emotional distress, and reducing depression rates, suicidal ideation, and future self-poisoning attempts.

Methodology: A mixed-method design was employed: a pilot randomized controlled trial (RCT) with embedded qualitative methods. Participants (n=300) were admitted to Teaching Hospital Peradeniya after non-fatal self-poisoning incidents. The BCI consisted of a counselling session that encouraged participants to explore alternative strategies for dealing with emotional distress and future stressors. Ward nurses received training to administer the BCI to assigned 'case' patients during the study. Quantitative self-report data were collected at baseline, six months, and twelve months post-intervention. Qualitative insights were gathered from participants and the nurse delivering the BCI through semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS 20, while thematic analysis was applied to the qualitative findings.

Results: At the six-month follow-up, the RCT demonstrated the BCI's effectiveness in significantly reducing anxiety and promoting positive coping strategies. However, there were no significant differences in depression rates and alcohol use disorder compared to baseline. Qualitative interviews indicated that participants, particularly those aged 16-25, found the brief counselling valuable for emotional support and guidance in managing future interpersonal conflicts and stressors. While most ward nurses were eager to enhance their counselling skills, practical delivery in busy medical wards was influenced by time constraints, workload, and individual nurses' aptitude and inclination.



Conclusions: This study suggests that brief counselling interventions can be useful for supporting the mental health of those at risk of self-poisoning and encouraging alternative coping strategies. When offering counselling support to individuals who have attempted self-poisoning, it is more feasible to assign dedicated, trained nurses for this purpose than to expect all nurses to contribute.