

Skills Squad

An adapted DBT therapy for youth with cognitive challenges

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Summary

Foundry-Vancouver Granville provides care to youth struggling with complex mental health challenges (trauma, addictions, multiple diagnoses). To add to the complexity, impaired cognition can be part of the picture, contributing to further social and emotional challenges. Previous group therapy developed for these socioemotional challenges rarely accounted for the needs of individuals with cognitive challenges. We aim to implement a therapy that helps youth to develop emotion and social skills considering their cognitive capacity. Specifically, an adaptation called the Skills System (Brown, 2011) was implemented. This program originated from Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT), a therapy designed initially for individuals with Borderline Personality Disorder and emotion regulation challenges. The Skills System teaches concepts of DBT in a way that is more suitable for individuals with developmental and intellectual disabilities (e.g. relatable language, visuals, real-life examples, repetition). We aim to explore the effectiveness of implementing this program to the youth population we serve.

Engagement

"Skills System" could be seen as a less approachable title for a therapy. Thus, we reached out to our Youth Advisory Committee who chose the group name "Skills Squad." In continuing to listen to the voices of both youth participants and further their family members, support persons and care providers, we ensured that we included feedback measures for both groups: scales of degree of social-emotional success, wellness functioning, how acceptable the therapy is, as well as tracking youth goals of therapy.

Learning objectives

- 1) For participants to gain a basic understanding of the concept and principles of Skills System Therapy.
- 2) For participants to walk away feeling inspired to consider how their agency and population may benefit from developing and implementing a Skills Squad Group.
- 3) For participants to appreciate how the Skills Squad Program can lead to system transformation, and effective, evidence based services for youth, their families, and care providers.

Key messages and takeaways

We have an expansive DBT program at Foundry Granville, however, we wanted to make sure that this effective therapy was accessible to all, particularly meeting the needs of our most vulnerable populations.

Skills System, a modified form of DBT is a burgeoning form of therapy not yet widely known. Our presentation will provide knowledge translation, alerting organizations to Skills System Therapy, a therapy that is relatively easily to implement, which will hopefully motivate other organizations to consider their own implementation.

Summary of evidence

This project is both evidence-informed and evidence-generating. This project is an evaluation of the effectiveness and acceptability of the DBT Skills System delivered to youth with complex mental health care needs. Following the framework of Dialectical Behavioural Therapy (DBT; Linehan, 1993a/b), DBT Skills System aims to help adults and youth to refine their skills and develop strategies of emotional regulation, manage distress, and improve interpersonal relations (Brown, 2011). However, the DBT Skills System was designed specifically for adults with developmental and intellectual disabilities. As such, DBT Skills System uses simplified language, relatable images, real-world examples, repetition, and opportunities for practicing skills. A study conducted with adolescent students in Spain (Gasol et al., 2022) found that 64% of students found the course useful, 62% enjoyed the program, and 42% self-reported using the skills learned from the program. To date there has been no evaluation of the program in a sample of youth with impaired cognitive functioning, that also includes an evaluation from the caregiver's perspective. Thus, we aim to measure the effectiveness and acceptability of the DBT Skills System in a sample of youth with co-occurring impaired cognitive functioning and mental health care needs. We will be measuring the effectiveness of the DBT Skills System by evaluating the youth's emotional difficulties and social-interpersonal functioning using validated tools such as the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale Short-Form (DERS-SF Kaufman et al 2016), Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale-Provider Version (DERS-P; Bunford et al 2020) and Life Problems Inventory (LPI; Rathus et al 2015). Additionally, we will be assessing the caregiver's evaluation of their youth's changes (pre-post) in emotional regulation and social-interpersonal functioning. Acceptability of the program will be evaluated using an acceptability scale where caregivers and participants can rate the program on a 5- point likert scale (AS; Sekhon et al, 2022- adapted to use similar language). The results of the evaluation will be used to determine the expansion of the program through the Foundry network. Additionally, the results of the evaluation will be submitted to an academic journal for publication to inform a broader audience of the effectiveness of the program with youth with developmental and intellectual disabilities.

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