

# Treating Subthreshold Depression in Older Adults in Community-Based Rehabilitation

## Background and Significance

Depression is a major health problem and is strongly associated with disability among the elderly. This relationship is particularly evident among older adults with age-related vision impairments, one of the most common and potentially disabling conditions of later life, with as many as one-third estimated to experience depression. The majority of these elders suffer from a subthreshold depression, defined as clinically significant depressive symptomatology that does not meet diagnostic criteria for a major depressive disorder. However, recent research has clearly indicated that the impact of a subthreshold depression on quality of life is similar to that of a major depression. These negative impacts, coupled with the growing evidence regarding the negative consequences of depression for rehabilitation utilization and outcomes, clearly indicate that the development of evidence-based treatments for depression incorporated within rehabilitation settings is an important public health need in order to improve life quality and reduce excess disability among older people.

One of the most promising interventions for depression is Problem-Solving Treatment for Primary Care (PST). PST is a cognitive-behavioral therapy that treats depression by teaching patients how to systemically solve psychosocial problems. The social problem-solving process consists of a general motivational component (problem orientation) and a set of specific goal-directed skills (problem definition, generation of alternative solutions, decision making, and solution implementation). While there has been a good deal of evidence supporting the effectiveness of PST in treating major depression in primary care settings, there has been virtually no work done examining the feasibility of integrating PST in community-based rehabilitation settings for older adults, nor addressing its potential treatment effects on both depressive symptomatology and rehabilitation outcomes.

## Study Objectives

The goal of this intervention development study is to evaluate the feasibility and tolerability of PST with visually disabled elders to treat subthreshold depression with the context of community-based rehabilitation. Specific objectives include:

1. To demonstrate PST implementation fidelity including recruitment, acceptance, and adherence to the protocol.
2. To identify the potential of PST for older visually impaired adults with subthreshold depression relative to (a) primary outcomes of depression remission and clinically significant reductions in depressive symptoms, and (b) secondary outcomes of retention in rehabilitation programs, extent and type of services received, and improvement in functional ability in activities of daily living.

## **Methods**

Sixty participants, age 60 years and older, with subthreshold depression (minor depression and/or Hamilton Depression Rating Scale score of 10 or greater) will be recruited and will be randomized to treatment and comparison groups. Treatment participants will receive six one-hour sessions of PST (two prior to the commencement of rehabilitation services), and usual rehab care (excluding any mental health services or referrals). Social Contact comparison group participants will receive usual care; i.e., rehabilitation services that may include non-specific counseling and/or referrals to mental health services. They will also receive six weekly "friendly visitor" telephone calls by volunteers to control for attention. Assessments will occur at pre-assignment, at week 11 (following PST treatment) and 3 months post treatment for longer term effects. Treatment fidelity will be assessed, including systematic documentation and evaluation of the recruitment process, methods to reduce attrition, provider training, treatment delivery and receipt, and enactment of treatment skills.

## **Current Status**

Participant recruitment, intervention, and data collection is in progress.

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## **Presentations**

Horowitz, A., & Reinhardt, J.P. (2009, November). Problem Solving Treatment for Older Adults with Subthreshold Depression in Vision Rehabilitation. Paper presented at the Annual Scientific Meeting of the Gerontological Society of America. Atlanta Georgia November, 2009.

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