



Planned dream interventions: a pragmatic randomised controlled trial to evaluate the effectiveness of a psychological treatment for traumatic nightmares in UK armed forces veterans

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Abstract

Nightmares are a hallmark symptom of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and can affect up to 90% of trauma-exposed adults. They tend to be underreported, can be resistant to traditional trauma psychotherapy and are linked to serious mental illness and higher risk of suicide. Existing treatments (e.g. Exposure and Image Rehearsal Therapy) have been shown to be efficacious with some populations but require multiple sessions and can only be applied to repetitive nightmares.

The focus of this research was an alternative approach for treating traumatic nightmares called Planned Dream Interventions® (PDI), conceived and developed by a US Military Psychologist, but which had not been empirically evaluated. The aim of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of the PDI approach for use with UK Armed Forces (UKAF) veterans to assess: its safety and acceptability; improvement in sleep; reduction in nightmares and associated sleep disturbance and trauma symptoms, and any potential benefits over existing treatments approaches.

A mixed methods pilot trial ($n = 7$) indicated the intervention had merit and that a larger trial was warranted. A pragmatic Randomised Controlled Trial was conducted comprising an intervention group ($n = 62$) which compared outcomes from a single 2.5-hour PDI session with two control groups. One received a Sleep Hygiene session of similar duration ($n = 30$) and the other was a Waitlist ($n = 24$). Self-report measures for sleep quality, nightmares and PTSD symptoms were completed pre- and post-session, which were attended by 127 UKAF veterans across the UK.

Statistically significant differences were reported across all measures between the PDI and control groups with a mean between group effect size of $d = 1.1$. However, there were several methodological issues with how the main trial was conducted relating to randomisation, imbalance in trial arms and participants lost to follow-up.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the preliminary findings suggest the PDI approach to be: safe and acceptable for use with UKAF veterans; resource efficient and effective; offering potential benefits over existing treatments, and potentially a preparatory treatment for PTSD. Further independent research is required to replicate findings under more stable trial conditions, and to further develop how the PDI approach is taught in other formats and settings.

Biography

Justin specialises in the psychological treatment of trauma and PTSD. He is an accredited as an EMDR Consultant by EMDR Europe and a psychological therapist by the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP). He currently works in private practice and specialises in trauma and PTSD. He has recently completed a PhD evaluating a novel approach to stopping traumatic nightmares, whose results were published in the US Journal of Military Behavioural Health. He is currently launching an innovative 5 minute animated video to teach this nightmare stopping technique to all. His previous career included time as an Army Officer, Manufacturing Engineer, Production Manager and a Management Consultant.



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