Cognitive training in affective disorders improves memory: A preliminary study using the NEAR approach

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Abstract: Background: Neuropsychological deficits in depression include difficulties with psychomotor speed, executive functions and memory. Some of these changes persist despite antidepressant treatment. While research in other areas of psychiatry has shown cognitive training techniques to be effective, only one study has evaluated this approach in depression. Methods: Sixteen patients (mean age = 33.5 years) with a lifetime diagnosis of major depressive disorder were administered a standardised battery of neuropsychological tests and allocated to treatment (n = 8) or waitlist control (n = 8) conditions. The treatment consisted of 10-weeks of twice weekly cognitive training using the Neuropsychological Educational Approach to Remediation. All participants were re-assessed after 10-weeks by interviewers blinded to group allocation. Results: Participants in the treatment condition demonstrated greater improvements on tests of memory encoding and memory retention than the waitlist control group. There were no observable benefits in terms of psychomotor speed or executive functions or in self-reported levels of disability. Affective symptoms also remained stable. Limitations: This study included a small sample of participants and treatment allocation was not randomised. Conclusions: Cognitive training in affective disorders improves memory performance. It may be an effective non-pharmacological treatment option for improving cognitive functions, which in turn, may improve psychosocial functioning and reduce disability. This study supports theories suggesting cognitive training may promote neuroplasticity. © 2009 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.
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