Abstract

Depression is a serious mental health problem, affecting more young people than ever before. This research reports on the short term effectiveness of an Optimism and Lifeskills program in “immunising” preadolescents against depression. The program, which employs cognitive-behavioural techniques, was adapted for the West Australian school curriculum and consisted of eight, 1 hour, 20 minute sessions. It was implemented in two schools. All students were randomised to prevention or waitlist control groups.

In Study One, self reports were used to assess the program’s effect on depressive and lonely symptoms, attributional style and self-worth in a sample of 47 grade seven girls at posttest and six month follow-up. Results showed fewer depressive symptoms and more positive self-perceptions were evident in the prevention group at six month follow-up.

In Study Two, the program was administered to 27 grade seven girls and boys. In addition to the measures used in the first study, self report scores of anxiety and the number of colds and flu experienced over the course of the research project were examined. Parent reports of children’s internalising behaviour problems at home were also assessed. Children in the prevention group reported making fewer negative attributions for bad events at posttest and at the six month follow-up. Anxiety scores in the prevention group were also significantly lower than the control group following the program’s implementation and at follow-up. Moreover, results indicated the prevention children experienced significantly fewer colds and flu symptoms than the control group. This improvement in physical health was significantly correlated with attributional style change for the prevention group. No such effect was observed for the control group.

Overall, this research indicates that this intervention provides a cost effective means of preventing depression in young people. However, caution should be exercised in interpreting the results due to the small sample size of the studies. Ideas for further research on depression prevention programs are discussed.