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Name of Journal: *World Journal of Psychiatry*

Manuscript NO: 79304

Manuscript Type: ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Observational Study

Development of a protocol for videoconferencing-based exposure and response prevention treatment of obsessive-compulsive disorder during the Covid-19 pandemic

Videoconferencing-based ERP for OCD

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Abstract

BACKGROUND

The existing literature indicates that psychotherapeutic treatment, especially exposure and response prevention (ERP) is efficacious in treating obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). The COVID-19 pandemic adversely impacted many patients with OCD and disrupted their usual treatment. Moreover, the pandemic forced a global switch to tele-mental health (TMH) services to maintain the standards and continuity of care. Consequently, clinicians are increasingly using TMH-based psychotherapeutic treatments to treat OCD. However, several challenges have made it difficult for them to implement these treatments in the changed circumstances imposed by the pandemic.

AIM

To describe the formulation, implementation, feasibility, and usefulness of videoconferencing-based ERP (VC-ERP) treatment for OCD during the pandemic.

METHODS

This prospective, observational study was conducted in the psychiatric unit of a multi-specialty hospital in north India over 12 months (July 2020 - June 2021). All patients with OCD were assessed using the home-based TMH services of the department. The VC-ERP protocol for OCD was the outcome of weekly Zoom meetings with a group of clinicians involved in administering the treatment. After a systematic evaluation of the available treatment options, an initial protocol for delivering VC-ERP was developed. Guidelines for clinicians and educational materials for patients and their families were prepared. The protocol was implemented among patients with OCD attending the TMH services and their progress was monitored. The weekly meetings were used to upgrade the protocol to meet the needs of all stakeholders. Feasibility and efficacy outcomes were examined.

RESULTS

All patients were diagnosed with OCD as a primary or a comorbid condition according to the International Classification of Diseases, 10th version criteria. Out of 115 patients who attended the services during the study period, 37 were excluded from the final analysis. Of the remaining 78 patients, VC-ERP was initiated in 43 patients. Six patients dropped out and three were hospitalized for inpatient ERP. VC-ERP has been completed in 12 patients and is ongoing in 22 patients. The protocol for VC-ERP treatment was developed and upgraded online. A large proportion of the eligible patients (79+ACU-) actively engaged in the VC-ERP treatment. Drop-out rates were low (14+ACU-). Satisfaction with the treatment was adequate among patients, caregivers, and clinicians. Apart from hospitalization in three patients, there were no other adverse events. Hybrid care and stepped care approaches could be incorporated into the VC-ERP protocol. Therefore, the feasibility of VC-ERP treatment in terms of operational viability, service utilization, service engagement, need for additional in-person services, frequency of adverse events, and user satisfaction was adequate. The VC-ERP treatment was found to be efficacious in the 11 patients who had completed the treatment. Significant reductions in symptoms and maintenance of treatment gains on follow-up were observed.

CONCLUSION

This study provides preliminary evidence for the feasibility and usefulness of VC-ERP in the treatment of OCD. The results suggest that VC-ERP can be a useful option in resource-constrained settings.

Key Words: Videoconferencing; Exposure-response-prevention; Obsessive-compulsive disorder; Telemedicine; COVID-19

Kathiravan S, Chakrabarti S. Development of a protocol for videoconferencing-based exposure and response prevention treatment of obsessive-compulsive disorder during the Covid-19 pandemic. *World J Psychiatry* 2022; In press

Core Tip: The COVID-19 pandemic adversely impacted many patients with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), compelling clinicians to increasingly use tele-mental health-based options rather than conventional psychotherapeutic treatments for OCD. This study describes the implementation of a videoconferencing-based exposure and response prevention (VC-ERP) treatment for OCD during the pandemic. The protocol was developed by an online group of clinicians involved in treating OCD. On prospective follow-up, 34 patients had either completed or were undergoing the treatment. The results, though preliminary showed that VC-ERP was a feasible and efficacious mode of treatment and may be a useful option for OCD even in low-resource settings.

INTRODUCTION

The existing literature regarding the treatment of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) indicates that ²exposure and response prevention (ERP), or cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) that includes ERP is more effective in treating OCD than any other control or active psychotherapeutic treatment^[1-5]. Moreover, the evidence also suggests that ERP is probably more efficacious than medication treatment of OCD, and the gains from treatment last longer. Nevertheless, combined treatment with medications and psychotherapy is more effective for severe OCD and is commonly used in routine clinical practice. However, despite the availability of evidence-based and effective psychotherapeutic treatments, very few patients have ready access to them. The rates of treatment-seeking are low among patients due to poor awareness, stigma, and inadequate engagement. The provision of ERP is also hampered by the shortage of professionals trained in administering ERP and scepticism among clinicians about ERP. Other hurdles include the longer duration and greater costs of ERP and the need to

travel long distances for treatment. It has been proposed that tele-mental health (TMH) treatments may help in overcoming many of these limitations of conventional ERP^[3, 4, 6-8].

TMH-based psychotherapy has been used to treat OCD for more than three decades^[6-10]. The older forms of such TMH treatments for OCD included computerized CBT and telephone-based CBT with or without therapist support. These methods were followed by videoconferencing-based ERP (VC-ERP) or CBT, with the earliest trials of these interventions starting to appear by the 1990s. The latest development in this field has been the advent of online psychotherapeutic interventions including internet-based CBT, web-based self-help groups, virtual reality-based ERP, and smartphone-based interventions. The existing evidence shows that TMH-based ERP/CBT for OCD leads to significant symptom reduction and improved functioning^[9,11-14]. Treatment gains are often maintained for several months^[8,9,11-13]. The feasibility and acceptability of these treatments are high and they are also cost-effective^[8,10,12,14,15]. There appears to be no difference in efficacy between the TMH-based and in-person treatments^[6,9,11,13,14], but this is not a consistent finding^[7, 8, 10, 16]. However, the evidence for these findings is relatively scarce and hampered by methodological inadequacies among the constituent studies^[7, 8, 11, 13, 14]. Moreover, there are concerns about technological obstacles such as connectivity, safety, privacy, and confidentiality^[7, 10, 17]. Lastly, clinicians are particularly dissatisfied with the inadequate treatment alliance and dropouts in TMH treatments^[6, 9, 16].

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected many patients with OCD^[18-21]. There was an increase in new-onset OCDs and exacerbations of symptoms in those already suffering from OCD. However, studies have differed in their estimation of the impact of the pandemic on OCD. It seems that around two-thirds of the patients have been unaffected, whereas about one-third of them have worsened^[22]. The delivery of in-person ERP was also adversely affected because of the disruption in mental health services during the pandemic. While some studies found that ERP services were curtailed, or that clinicians found it difficult to adapt to the changed circumstances^[19, 23],

others reported no difference between the pre-pandemic and post-pandemic phases^[22]. Nevertheless, the forced switch to TMH-based services during the pandemic in several countries^[24] has meant that many clinicians are using TMH-based rather than conventional ERP for OCD^[22, 23, 25].

A major lacuna in the existing literature on TMH-based psychotherapy for OCD is that most of the studies have been conducted in Western countries^[13,14]. This applies to studies of internet-based CBT, VC-ERP, and other online interventions. Only a few studies of these interventions from Japan^[26,27], Korea^[28], and the Middle East^[29] could be identified. In general, research on the efficacy of TMH in the treatment of psychiatric disorders from developing countries is limited and reviews of the subject have not included trials on TMH-based treatment of OCD^[30-32]. Apart from the lack of evidence, cultural acceptability of TMH-based treatments, their efficacy, and engagement with these treatments are also quite different in these countries. The situation in India is similar. Though VC-based TMH services were used in India before the pandemic and there was an upsurge in these services during it, there are large gaps in the delivery of these services^[33, 34]. Controlled trials on TMH-based psychotherapy of OCD are not available. Therefore, a new beginning had to be made. This study describes the formulation and implementation of VC-ERP treatment for OCD during the pandemic and its current status in terms of feasibility and usefulness.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This report⁴ followed the Strengthening the Reporting of Observational Studies in Epidemiology (STROBE) guidelines for reporting observational studies.

Setting

The VC-ERP protocol¹ was developed in the psychiatric unit of a multi-specialty hospital in north India. Patients with OCD attending the unit were already being treated with in-person ERP mostly on an inpatient basis. Inpatient ERP was associated with good short-term outcomes, but the long-term outcomes were unclear because of the high dropout rate after discharge^[35]. Similar outcomes for inpatient ERP had been reported from

another Indian centre^[36]. The department had also been running a home-based TMH service on a smaller scale since September 2018. This service was used for VC-based follow-up of patients who had completed in-person ERP. Following the shutdown of the outpatient clinics in March 2020, the home-based TMH service was upgraded and scaled up to cater to all outpatients. The features of this service have been described elsewhere^[37]. This expanded platform allowed the delivery of VC-ERP based on the treatment protocol for in-person ERP.

Videoconferencing-based ERP for OCD

The in-person ERP protocol was modified to allow it to be delivered through the VC platform using the Zoom software. The use of VC was supplemented by WhatsApp video calls and messaging, phone calls (landline or smartphones), and e-mail. Virtual prescriptions sent by WhatsApp messages were used to convey advice regarding investigations and medications. The use of multiple digital modes of patient-clinician communication was consonant with the hybrid model of care, which had been recommended particularly during the pandemic^[38]. This improves the flexibility and versatility of TMH-based care and maintains its continuity by switching between different modes when one of them fails.

The modified VC-ERP protocol was developed based on feedback from a weekly Zoom group of clinicians actively involved in VC-ERP treatment for OCD. The group consists mainly of trainee psychiatrists, (post-MD) senior residents, and a consultant psychiatrist. Apart from group supervision of the trainees administering the treatment, the activities undertaken by this group have included carrying out a detailed review of the literature on ERP for OCD, TMH-based treatment options, and VC-ERP for OCD. Standardized guidelines for VC-ERP were prepared and it was ensured that clinicians adhered to these standards of care. Educational materials for patients and their families were also prepared. The final protocol for VC-ERP is shown in Tables 1 and 2.

Tables 1 and 2 here

Differences between videoconferencing and in-person ERP

The differences between ERP by VC or by in-person treatment and the difficulties encountered during VC-ERP were the primary focus of many group discussions. The consensus views on this aspect are included in Table 3. These considerations provided the basis for the modifications made in the VC-ERP treatment protocol.

Table 3 here

Modifications in technique required for conducting videoconferencing-based ERP

Introductory education sessions with the patients and their caregivers were felt to be essential to improve their understanding and motivation for ERP. Although detailed psychoeducation sessions were carried out as a part of the ERP later, during this phase the objective was to provide enough information to ensure patients' and caregivers' cooperation with the process of assessment^[39]. The contents of the brief information leaflet used for this purpose are depicted in Table 2.

A structured procedure for assessment was used. The ⁵ **clinician-administered version of the Yale-Brown Obsessive Compulsive Scale** (YBOCS) was used to screen for different obsessions/compulsions as well as to rate the severity of obsessive-compulsive symptoms. The YBOCS is the most commonly used instrument for these purpose because of its reliable psychometric properties^[1, 4, 13]. Standardized procedures such as those by Hawton *et al*^[40] were used to conduct the behavioural analysis in the ABC format (antecedents, behaviours, consequences). Subjective units of distress were used to rate the severity of behaviours and also construct an ascending hierarchy of problem behaviours. The construction of the hierarchy was a key step in the process of planning for VC-ERP. Inputs were actively solicited from patients and caregivers during this stage. They were asked to keep a daily record of symptoms for about a week to make the hierarchy as comprehensive as possible. Google sheets or WhatsApp messages that could be regularly updated were used for this purpose. The assessment process often took up to two weeks, but a prolonged and comprehensive assessment had many advantages such as increasing awareness about symptoms among the patients and caregivers, reducing their distress, and acquainting them with the VC-ERP treatment to follow. Finally, the hierarchies made were continuously upgraded during treatment

based on the new information provided by patients or caregivers. Therefore, the process of assessment continued throughout the treatment.

A five-step approach to VC-ERP was used. These five steps of ERP were based on standard protocols of ERP or CBT [1, 39, 41-43]. Benson's relaxation technique^[44] was the preferred mode of teaching relaxation exercises. The only other modification was that "processing" was used instead of cognitive restructuring. Processing involved discussing the patients' experience and understanding of ERP and how this matched their expectations of the treatment^[13, 42]. Processing also allowed for discussions on the reality of the patient's beliefs, explanations about neutralization strategies, and suggestions about using more adaptive coping strategies. Modifications to the other components of the ERP are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4 here

Outcomes of videoconferencing-based ERP

The main focus of this study was on the ¹ feasibility outcomes including operational viability, service utilization, service engagement, need for additional services, frequency of adverse events, and treatment satisfaction and treatment preferences among patients, caregivers, and clinicians. The information about treatment engagement and the dropout rate was obtained from the medical records of patients who were offered ERP and either consented or refused the treatment. For all other outcomes, only patients who had agreed to undertake ERP and those who had completed or were actively engaged in the treatment were included. Patients were not interviewed separately for this part. Rather, the information was obtained from their treatment records. Therefore, any patient with incomplete treatment records was excluded. For the efficacy outcomes, only 11 patients who had completed ERP were considered. Pre- and post-treatment YBOCS scores were extracted from their records to determine the efficacy of VC-ERP treatment. Information about the maintenance of gains post-treatment over 13 mo was also extracted from the treatment records.

Statistical analysis

The sample was characterized by using frequencies, means, and standard deviations. Loss to follow-up at any time was considered a dropout. Pre- and post-treatment comparisons were carried out using the Wilcoxon Signed Rank test.

Ethical considerations

This observational study was a part of a larger study on home-based TMH services for all patients^[37]. The ¹protocol was approved by the institute's ethics committee. Due to the restrictions imposed by the pandemic, verbal informed consent over the phone was allowed. As explained above, data regarding outcomes were obtained only from patients who had verbally consented to undertake ERP and had actively engaged in the process of treatment. However, patients were not contacted or assessed separately to determine these outcomes. Rather, all data regarding outcomes were extracted from routine medical and treatment records. Patient identities have not been revealed. Therefore, written informed consent from patients was not obtained for information about treatment outcomes. All the methods followed the guidelines ²of the Declaration of Helsinki for medical research involving human subjects.

RESULTS

Participants

During the period of this study (July 2020 - June 2021), the home-based TMH service was used to treat 3442 new and 12,126 old patients. Of these, 115 new patients (3%) had a diagnosis of OCD as a primary or a comorbid condition according to the International Classification of Diseases, 10th version criteria. During subsequent follow-up, one patient whose diagnosis was changed from OCD to personality disorder was excluded; 28 patients had dropped out of treatment, and details regarding the status of eight ³patients were not available. So, 78 patients were included in the final analysis.

Patient profiles

Out of 78 patients, 38 were men and 40 were women. In general, ¹patients seen during the pandemic were more likely to be older, married, better educated, and from higher-income families living near the hospital ^[37]. However, many patients were barely

literate, impoverished, and from distant, rural locations. Three patients had late-onset OCD. Twenty-one patients had a comorbid psychiatric illness. OCD as a primary condition included the following comorbidities: Single depressive episode ($n = 6$), recurrent depressive disorder ($n = 4$), dysthymia ($n = 1$), agoraphobia ($n = 1$), hypochondriasis ($n = 1$), and impulse control disorder ($n = 1$). OCD as a secondary comorbidity was present in schizophrenia ($n = 3$), bipolar disorder ($n = 2$), dementia ($n = 1$), and traumatic brain injury ($n = 1$). Most patients were on pharmacological treatment for OCD and comorbid conditions.

Videoconferencing-based ERP for OCD: feasibility, acceptability, and efficacy

Table 5 provides these details.

Table 5 here

VC-ERP was considered in the majority of patients with OCD, but because of different reasons only about half of them (55%) started VC-ERP. Of the 43 patients who started VC-ERP, six dropped out early and three had to be hospitalized for inpatient ERP. Thus, a large proportion of the eligible patients (79%) underwent ($n = 12$) or were currently undergoing ERP ($n = 22$). One patient improved following the initial sessions and did not have to complete the entire treatment. Hybrid treatment was more commonly used by many of these patients ($n = 20$) once the outpatient services resumed. Most patients and caregivers considered this to be a better option and preferred hybrid care.

Feasibility outcomes among the 34 patients engaged in VC-ERP showed that it was possible to implement the treatment in usual clinical settings. Drop-out rates were low (14%). Apart from the three patients (9%) with severe OCD who did not respond to VC-ERP and required hospitalization, there were no other adverse events. The number of patients treated with VC-ERP in a year was more than those who had received inpatient ERP for a year during the pre-pandemic period. Satisfaction with the treatment was adequate among patients, caregivers, and clinicians. Therefore, the feasibility of VC-ERP treatment in terms of operational viability, service utilization, service engagement,

need for additional in-person services, frequency of adverse events, and user satisfaction was adequate.

The 11 patients who completed the treatment had moderate levels of OCD for several years. VC-ERP led to significant reductions in the YBOCS scores on completion. Treatment gains have been maintained in these patients on follow-up for a year after completing the VC-ERP. More than half of them (54%) had comorbid conditions, but this did not affect their improvement with VC-ERP.

DISCUSSION

TMH-based services are efficacious and suitable alternatives to in-person care and have proved to be particularly useful during the pandemic. By promoting ready access to psychiatric care, they can remove several barriers associated with conventional services, enhance satisfaction among users, and empower the underserved population from remote areas^[24, 31, 32].

The efficacy, advantages, and disadvantages of videoconferencing-based ERP for OCD. Several reviews^[6-10] and meta-analyses^[11, 13] of TMH-based treatments for OCD have found that VC-based treatment is useful, but they have only included a few trials of VC-ERP for OCD. Similarly, meta-analyses^[25, 45, 46] and reviews^[17, 47-50] that have found VC-based treatments to be effective for psychiatric disorders have included a limited number of VC-ERP studies of OCD. This is not surprising because there are only three randomized-controlled trials (RCTs) of VC-ERP in OCD^[51-53]. A fourth RCT of VC treatment for anxiety and mood disorders included four patients with OCD^[54]. These RCTs have shown that VC-ERP is more efficacious than neutral or active control treatments and equal in efficacy to in-person ERP. Treatment gains are maintained for several months and VC-ERP had a more positive impact on the treatment alliance and patient engagement. Open trials have similarly shown that VC-ERP is an effective, feasible, acceptable, and cost-saving treatment, which can be used to supplement in-person ERP^[27, 55-58]. However, the RCTs have small sample sizes and are of brief duration. Therefore, without properly conducted RCTs with non-inferiority or

equivalence designs, the current evidence in favour of VC-ERP for OCD cannot be considered adequate^[59].

Like other TMH-based treatments, VC-ERP has several advantages compared to in-person ERP^[7, 13, 17, 50, 52]. It leads to wider dissemination of ERP and greater patient access to evidence-based ERP. Home-based ERP allows greater flexibility, greater involvement of family members in ERP, and more opportunities to address the negative attitudes or accommodations by the family. It can be cost-effective because it reduces travel costs and absence from work. Since patients receive treatment at home, the stigma associated with seeking psychiatric treatment is lessened. However, VC-ERP has its challenges. It is heavily dependent on external factors such as technological infrastructure, internet penetration and affordability, network connectivity, and the user's familiarity with technology. Patient and family motivation might be poor, forging effective treatment alliances may be difficult, and supervision and monitoring may not be optimal^[50, 52, 56].

Videoconferencing-based ERP for OCD *vs* internet-based CBT

Currently, there seems to be a greater emphasis on delivering online or internet-based ERP or CBT for OCD particularly in high-income countries^[9]. The two types of treatment have their advantages and disadvantages. Internet-based CBT has a broader evidence base and the number of trials including RCTs is much more than those of VC-ERP^[10, 11-14]. Its efficacy is comparable to in-person CBT. Internet-based CBT is particularly useful as an initial option for mild or moderate OCD. Moreover, it is more readily accessible and offers a wider choice of techniques and varying levels of clinician assistance. The treatment is efficacious and cost-effective even with low levels of clinician support^[15]. Moreover, greater levels of clinician support can help minimize dropouts, and treatment gains are usually enduring.

Despite these advantages, there is no difference in efficacy between VC-ERP and internet-based treatments^[13]. Indeed, some of the evidence seems to indicate that VC-ERP may be more efficacious than internet-based treatments^[45, 60]. Moreover, VC-ERP resembles the “gold-standard” in-person ERP more closely than internet-based ERP^[13],

16, 17, 45, 46]. Since VC-ERP is conducted at home, it has the advantage of greater convenience, more chances of the behavioural gains generalizing to natural settings, increased involvement of the family, and a better insight into the patient's home environment[6, 16, 17, 45, 50]. Some reviews also suggest that VC-ERP is more suitable for those with severe OCD[8, 9] and patients from remote locations[16, 45-47, 50], whereas internet-based treatments are more useful in milder OCD and for people with better access to the internet[8-10]. Lastly, the main advantage of VC-ERP seems to be the greater therapeutic contact it provides particularly in comparison to internet-based treatments with minimal therapist contact. There is considerable evidence to indicate that higher levels of therapeutic contact are associated with greater efficacy of TMH-based treatments for OCD[7, 9, 14, 61, 62].

The choice of VC-ERP in this study was influenced by these considerations along with the prior experience of in-person ERP in the department, the availability of a home-based platform for VC-ERP, and the unavailability of internet-based treatments.

Findings of the present study and its limitations

Being a preliminary report, this study had several obvious limitations. It was largely a descriptive account of the development and implementation of VC-ERP for OCD from a relatively under-resourced setting. The number of patients who had completed the treatment was very small and all data related to the efficacy of VC-ERP are therefore prone to a high risk of bias. This risk is increased further because patients were not randomized to VC-ERP treatment and there was no control group. A selection bias toward better-motivated patients is also possible. Since this was a naturalistic observational study, it was not possible to control for confounding factors such as the effect of pharmacological treatment or comorbid conditions.

Nevertheless, some of the findings were encouraging and could have some implications for further efforts in this area. The principal focus of this study was to describe the process of developing a protocol for VC-ERP treatment of OCD during the pandemic. Due to the restrictions imposed by the pandemic the entire process of development and subsequent implementation had to be carried out online. The primary aim of the study

was to examine the operational viability and feasibility of conducting VC-ERP according to the treatment protocol developed in this study. The examination of these outcomes among 34 patients who had completed the treatment or were actively engaged in it indicated that the VC-ERP protocol was a feasible and viable means of treating OCD. The VC-ERP treatment provided access to a larger number of patients who could benefit from ERP. Dropout rates were low and adverse events were relatively rare. The treatment was acceptable to patients, caregivers, and clinicians, and the levels of satisfaction were adequate. Since this was a naturalistic observation study among patients from routine care settings, these results can be generalized to other patients from similar clinical settings. Moreover, since the treatment was conducted in a low-resource setting of a developing country like India, these results could be particularly relevant for countries with similar resource constraints. Although the treatment was mostly conducted during the pandemic, the findings showed that it was feasible to implement the treatment even after the pandemic had subsided. Moreover, such naturalistic studies also fulfil the pressing need to conduct VC-ERP trials for OCD in real-world settings^[9, 16, 60]. Its findings corresponded to the recent studies of OCD, which indicate that VC-ERP may be equally effective in routine treatment settings^[22, 63, 64]. The use of hybrid treatment both in terms of multiple platforms for hosting VC-ERP and combining it with in-person care offers a greater degree of flexibility and has the potential for greater effectiveness^[15, 16, 38, 45, 50]. Similarly, this study found that hybrid care was considered to be more advantageous and preferred by patients, caregivers, and clinicians. Another unexpected gain of the VC-ERP treatment was the opportunity to incorporate stepped care into the treatment protocol. Stepped care refers to the use of low-intensity treatments such as internet-based CBT for patients with less severe OCD with the option to transition to more intensive treatments if the illness is more severe. It has been advocated for a long time but is being re-emphasized because of the wide range of TMH-based treatments currently available for OCD^[7, 9, 13, 14, 16]. In this study patients with milder OCD improved after the initial sessions, while many with more severe OCD moved on to hybrid care, and a few with the most severe illnesses could

move on to inpatient ERP when VC-ERP failed. This was consistent with the stepped care approach.

The findings regarding the efficacy of VC-ERP among 11 patients who had completed the treatment were very preliminary and had several limitations that have been listed above. Nevertheless, they did suggest that the VC-ERP treatment of this study was an effective means of managing OCD in terms of significant symptom reduction and maintenance of gains post-treatment. The extent of improvement was similar to other Indian studies of inpatient ERP for OCD^[35, 36]. However, the long-term outcome of VC-ERP was likely to be better because of the improved treatment engagement and follow-up with the treatment. These results were also in line with much of the existing evidence on the efficacy of VC-ERP from RCTs^[51-54] and open trials^[27, 55-58]. Lastly, the findings suggested that VC-ERP treatment could be useful for a population with moderately severe OCD and high rates of comorbidity. Though most of the evidence appears to indicate that VC-ERP is ineffective in treating comorbid depression^[7, 11, 22], some studies have shown that it is equally effective in those with comorbid conditions^[22, 64].

CONCLUSION

+ADw-html+AD4APA-p+AD4-In conclusion, the present study has shown that despite many barriers it is possible to develop a structured form of VC-ERP for OCD that is feasible and acceptable to the users. The findings, though preliminary suggest that VC-ERP could ³ be a viable option for the treatment of OCD in low- and middle-income countries where the treatment gap for OCD is greater and TMH services are relatively underdeveloped. However, much ¹ more will need to be done to improve this treatment and prove its efficacy before it can be integrated into the wider system of mental healthcare in these countries.+ADw-/p+AD4APA-/html+AD4-

ARTICLE HIGHLIGHTS

Research background

The existing literature indicates that ² exposure and response prevention (ERP) is efficacious in treating obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). However, despite the availability of such effective psychotherapeutic treatments, very few patients have ready access to them. Tele-mental health (TMH) treatments may help in overcoming these limitations of conventional ERP.

Research motivation

+ADw-html+AD4APA-p+AD4-The COVID-19 pandemic adversely impacted many patients with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), compelling clinicians to increasingly use tele-mental health-based options rather than conventional psychotherapeutic treatments for OCD. However, research on the efficacy of TMH in the treatment of psychiatric disorders from developing countries is limited and trials on TMH-based treatment of OCD are rare. This study from India describes the formulation and implementation of videoconferencing-based ERP (VC-ERP) treatment for OCD during the pandemic and its current status in terms of feasibility and usefulness.+ADw-/p+AD4APA-/html+AD4-

Research objectives

To describe the formulation of a treatment-protocol for VC-ERP developed by an online group of clinicians. To describe the implementation of the protocol and its upgradation. To examine the feasibility and usefulness of the VC-ERP treatment for OCD during the pandemic and after it.

Research methods

+ADw-html+AD4APA-p+AD4-This prospective, observational study was ¹conducted in the psychiatric unit of a multi-specialty hospital in north India over 12 mo (July 2020 - June 2021). All patients with OCD were assessed using the home-based TMH services of the department. The VC-ERP protocol for OCD was the outcome of weekly Zoom meetings with a group of clinicians involved in administering the treatment. The

protocol was implemented among patients with OCD attending the TMH services and upgraded to meet their needs. Feasibility and efficacy outcomes were examined.+ADw-/p+AD4APA-/html+AD4-

Research results

One hundred and fifteen patients with OCD attended the TMH services during the study period; 37 of these were excluded. Of the remaining 78 patients, VC-ERP was initiated in 43 patients. Six patients dropped out and three were hospitalized for inpatient ERP. VC-ERP has been completed in 12 patients and is ongoing in 22 patients. The feasibility of VC-ERP treatment in terms of operational viability, service utilization, service engagement, need for additional in-person services, frequency of adverse events, and user satisfaction was adequate. Significant reductions in symptoms and maintenance of treatment gains on follow-up were observed in 11 patients who completed the treatment.

Research conclusions

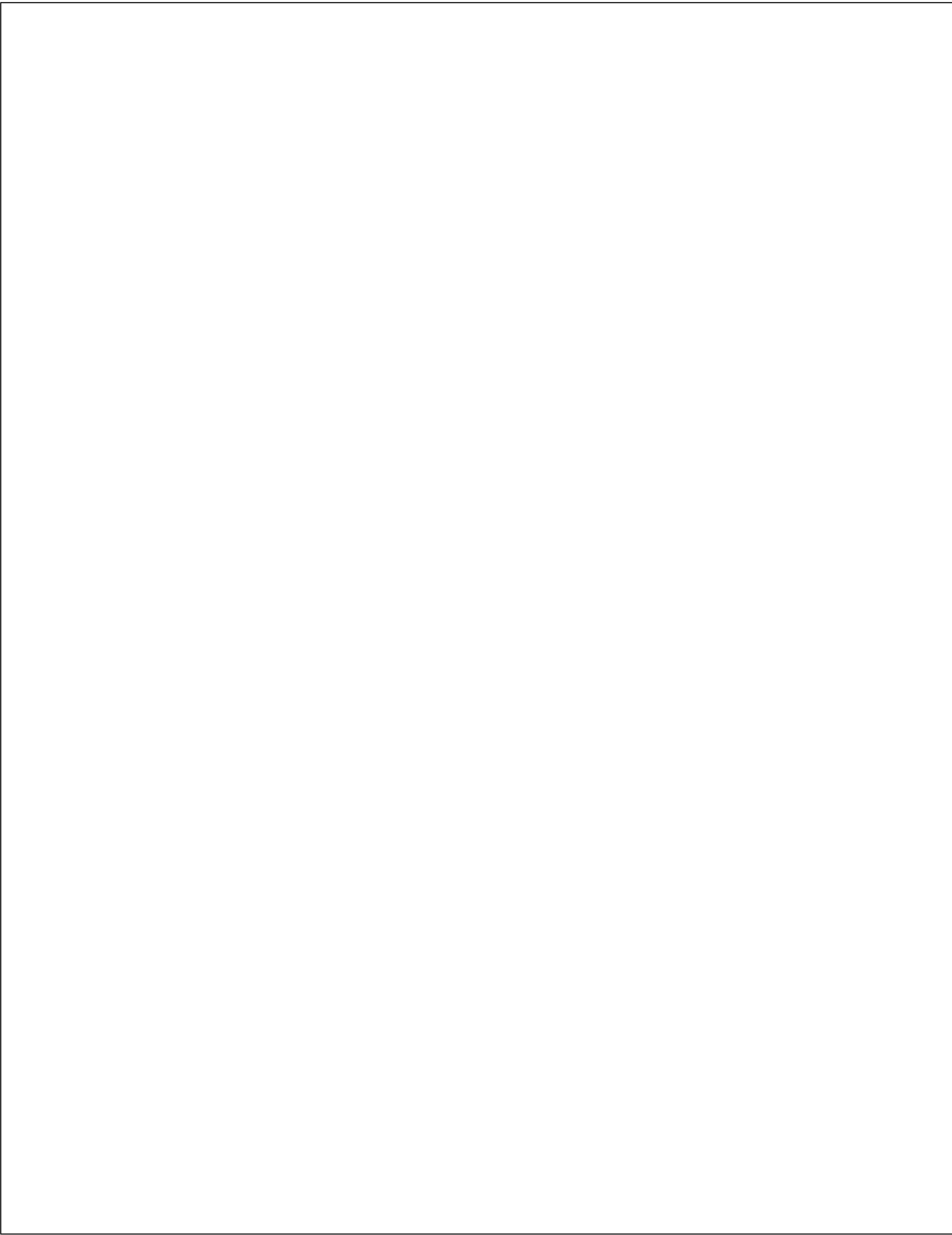
This study provides preliminary evidence for the feasibility and usefulness of VC-ERP in the treatment of OCD. It suggests that VC-ERP could be a viable option for the treatment of OCD in low- and middle-income countries with a greater treatment gap for OCD and underdeveloped TMH services.

Research perspectives

Further research is needed to improve the VC-ERP treatment and prove its efficacy before it can be integrated into the wider system of mental healthcare.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We wish to thank B. Sai Chaitanya Reddy, Aarzoo Suman, and all the residents who have taken part in the group for VC-ERP. Their active and invaluable contribution to the group has made all this possible.



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