

The Clinical and Theoretical Basis for Integrated Cognitive Behavioral Treatment of Comorbid Social Anxiety and Alcohol Use Disorders

What was the aim?

Social anxiety and alcohol use disorders often go hand-in-hand. Alcohol is widely considered a confidence enhancer, and socially anxious individuals are at particular risk of relying on alcohol to cope with anxiety in social contexts. When social anxiety and alcohol use disorders do co-occur, they tend to be severe and difficult to treat because standard treatments do not address the mutually reinforcing connection between the two disorders. This paper describes an integrated treatment approach combining CBT and motivational interviewing to target both disorders at the same time and address the inter-connectedness between the disorders. The treatment is illustrated with two clinical case examples.

How did we do it?

We developed a treatment that was integrated at multiple levels: integration of the service with patients treated for both problems simultaneously by the same psychologist; integration of the therapeutic techniques to reduce complexity and provide a coherent rationale for treatment; and an integrated problem formulation that explicitly addressed the mutually-reinforcing connections between social anxiety and alcohol use.

The core components of treatment were: (a) motivational enhancement; (b) coping alternatives for high risk situations; (c) development of alternate activities and interests; (d) cognitive therapy; (e) behavioral experiments and objective feedback; (f) attention training; (g) increasing social support; and (h) relapse prevention.

Specific interventions to target the inter-relationship between social anxiety and alcohol use included cognitive therapy to address positive expectancies about the anxiety-reducing effects of alcohol, feedback regarding the actual social consequences of alcohol consumption, and behavioral experiments to challenge unrealistic expectancies and develop confidence in alternate ways of coping with anxiety in social situations.

What does this mean in practice?

Presence of concurrent social anxiety and alcohol use disorders complicates treatment. Patients perceive their anxiety and drinking to be inter-related, and require guidance to manage the mutually-reinforcing connections between the disorders. Our clinical experience suggests that integrating treatment for these disorders is a promising approach that is intuitively appealing to patients. The treatment approach described in this paper is currently being tested in a Randomised Controlled Trial (Baillie et al., 2013).

Citation

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