Comparing Alliance in Two Cognitive-Behavioural Therapies for Adolescents With ADHD Using a Randomized Controlled Trial

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Abstract

Alliance is defined as the client-therapist bond and their ability to collaborate on therapeutic activities. Treatment for adolescents with ADHD is rarely studied in terms of alliance. In this study, two cognitive-behavioral treatments (CBT; one structured treatment aimed at planning skills and one less-structured solution-focused treatment, both delivered in the style of Motivational Interviewing) were compared with regard to alliance and alliance-outcome association. The influence of therapist competence on this alliance-outcome association was also evaluated. The alliance between 69 adolescents diagnosed with ADHD and their therapists was measured early in treatment, using the Therapy Process Observational Coding System for Child Psychotherapy—Alliance scale. Observer-rated therapist competence was measured using the Motivational Interviewing Treatment Integrity scale (version 3.1.1.). Outcome variables were the adolescents' reduction in planning problems and ADHD symptoms. The alliance, and, more specifically, collaboration on therapeutic activities, was significantly higher for the more structured CBT ($p = .04$; moderate effect size). Alliance was not related to outcome in the more structured CBT, while the alliance was positively related to the reduction in planning problems in the less structured CBT. Finally, alliance was a significant mediator between therapist competence and treatment outcome for the less-structured CBT. The clarity and structure of CBT may help facilitate alliance formation for adolescents with ADHD who often have difficulty implementing structure themselves. Therapists may need to invest more in alliance formation in less structured CBT as the alliance affects outcome. Moreover, enhancing therapist competence in less structured CBT may help improve outcomes in less structured CBT, as therapist competence may impact outcome through alliance.