

Evaluating a targeted support program for mental health carers

Background

Minds Together for family and friends supporting someone with their mental health is one of a suite of programs developed for partners, spouses, family members, friends and colleagues who provide unpaid support for people experiencing mental health concerns or suicidal distress in Australia.

A 2020 feasibility study found that this program is user-friendly, safe and a promising support resource for this family and friends group.

Summary of the research

This study reports the findings of a second national randomised controlled trial (RCT) to assess the benefits of integrating a social forum component into the *Minds Together* program for family and friends who support someone with their mental health.

Between July 2021 and March 2022, 127 participants (82% female) were enrolled and randomly assigned to the program-only or program paired with the social forum study group (66/61).

In addition to using the interventions, participants completed pre-program, post-program and three-month follow-up surveys to assess their experiences and outcomes.

Research results

The study had low survey completion rates, with only 42 participants completing the post-surveys and 43 completing the follow-up surveys. Moreover, social forum usage was low, with only 20% of the study group participants engaging with this program component.

Due to the limited engagement with the social forum, it was not practical to compare carers' outcomes across groups. Looking at all participants as one group, trends revealed increased coping self-efficacy and decreased carer strain for family and friends, with perceived social support and quality of life significantly increasing over time. However, it is not possible to attribute the cause of this effect to the program alone.

Nevertheless, the study provided several significant insights. It highlighted an urgent need for collaboration between researchers, consumers and sector professionals to address challenges related to missing data in online health intervention research.



Outcomes from the research

- This research is the first of its kind to examine whether integrating a social forum into an existing support program provides additional benefits to family and friends supporting a person with depressive or anxiety symptoms.
- Although the study was unable to draw definitive conclusions about this program component, it did offer important insights on how to conduct research and handle missing data in community-targeted online health interventions.
- We should use the challenges encountered in program engagement and survey completion to enhance future research and practice in this area.

[Read the full published paper](#)