

New therapy for children and young teenagers who have unusual experiences

Psychologists and researchers in south London have developed a version of cognitive behaviour therapy for children and young teenagers who are having unusual experiences – such as hearing voices or feeling someone is watching them.

Locally-based mental health services for children and adolescents say a large number of children referred to them – by GPs and teachers, for example – have these ‘psychotic-like experiences’ (PLEs) and are distressed by them. Hearing voices and thinking in a confused or paranoid way are the most common.

The new therapy is an adaptation of cognitive behaviour therapy for psychosis, recommended for adults with a diagnosis of schizophrenia by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence. It focuses on helping children to recognise, understand and cope with both unusual experiences and unhelpful thinking. The new materials and activities used in the therapy have been piloted and are tailored to the needs of children aged eight to 14.

‘Unusual experiences of this kind can be very distressing for children, and children who are upset by them are potentially at risk of developing problems in other areas of their lives – with friendships or school work, for example – because of their worries,’ says research clinical psychologist Dr Suzanne Jolley, from the Institute of Psychiatry (IoP), King’s College London, and a member of the group behind the new therapy.

‘Offering therapy at this stage, with the aim of helping children to improve their coping skills and resilience, has the potential to prevent future mental ill health and distress,’ she says.

The talking therapy has been tested with the help of a small number of children, and a research trial will now evaluate whether the new therapy can help eight to 14-year-olds who are on the waiting list for ‘Tier 2’ child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) run by South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust. These sort of services offer help to children who have emotional and behavioural problems. The therapy will not replace the assessment and care offered by CAMHS.

Children on the waiting list who agree to take part in the trial will have between nine and 12 weekly one-to-one sessions with a specially trained therapist over two to three months, depending on their individual needs and difficulties.

The research team includes therapists who work in child and adolescent mental health services, Professor Elizabeth Kuipers and Dr Kristin Laurens, both at the IoP, Dr. Sophie Browning from Snowfields Adolescent Unit at Guy’s Hospital, and Professor Sheilagh Hodgins, formerly head of the Department of Forensic Mental Health Science at the IoP.

The ‘Coping with Unusual Experiences in children’ (CUE) study is funded by Guy’s and St Thomas’ Charity, will start in the summer of 2011 and be complete by 2014. If the pilot study shows the therapy to be effective, the next step will be a larger trial.

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