

## **Improving the Mental Health of Low-Income Single Mothers: A 12-month Longitudinal Study**

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**Purpose:** To test the effectiveness of a cognitive-behavioral group intervention in reducing negative thoughts, depressive symptoms, and chronic stressors, and enhancing self-esteem in low-income single mothers.

**Methods :** A randomized controlled intervention trial with single mothers at risk for depression was conducted. 136 low-income single mothers at least 18 years of age participated in this community based study. Inclusion criteria included not currently under psychiatric care, at least one child 2 to 6 years old in the home, and high depressive symptoms (CES-D  $\geq$  16 and/or Beck Depression Inventory  $\geq$  10).

**Methods:** Women were randomly assigned to the control ( $n = 74$ ) or intervention ( $n = 62$ ) group. Self-report data on the outcome variables were collected via in-home interviews at baseline and at 1, 6, and 12-months post-intervention. The intervention consists of six one-hour or four 90-minute group sessions that target identification of negative thinking as it affects feelings and depressive behaviors. Thought stopping and the use of affirmations are taught. Outcomes included self-esteem, chronic stressors, depressive symptoms, and negative thinking. Repeated measures analysis of variance was used to test for group and time differences.

**Findings:** Compared with those in the control group, women assigned to the intervention group had a greater decrease in chronic stressors, depressive symptoms, and negative thinking at 1-month post-intervention and these beneficial effects were maintained over a 12-month period. Women in the control group demonstrated a significant decline in these outcomes, relative to baseline, at both 6- and 12-months after the intervention period, perhaps due to the repeated interaction with study interviewers. Both intervention and control participants increased in self-esteem over the course of the study.

**Discussion:** The findings document the effectiveness of this intervention and provide empirical support for the beneficial effects of reducing negative thinking on mothers' mental health. Interventions designed to reduce negative thinking in low-income single mothers may be the key to decreasing depressive symptoms and increasing self-esteem in this high risk group.

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