



Systems training for emotional predictability and problem solving (STEPPS): an evidence-based cognitive-behavioural group treatment for Borderline Personality Disorder

Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) has moderately high prevalence rates in inpatient and outpatient populations, and represents a major health problem, since it is associated with a high degree of morbidity, functional impairment, and frequent, (often excessive) health care utilization. Premature death from suicide has been reported to occur in 5% to 10% of patients with BPD. The STEPPS manual has been translated into several languages and has been used extensively in the US, the UK, The Netherlands, and has recently been introduced in Italy, Spain, and Germany.

This course describes and illustrates the STEPPS (Systems Training for Emotional Predictability and Problem Solving) treatment program for BPD. The program can be implemented effectively by facilitators from diverse training backgrounds and in a variety of settings (e.g., partial hospitals, residential facilities, prisons, therapeutic communities, and most recently an inpatient mood disorders unit in Italy).

The typical format is a 20-week (2 hrs/week) outpatient psychoeducational, cognitive-behavioral, skills training approach. The STEPPS model characterizes BPD as an emotional intensity disorder (EID) that clients learn to manage with specific emotion and behavioral management skills. Modifications of the program or application of key elements in non-outpatient settings previously mentioned will also be highlighted. Key professionals, friends, and family members referred to as the client's "reinforcement team" also learn to support and reinforce these skills. Thus the STEPPS program does not disrupt the patient's ongoing treatment regimen or social and professional support system, but trains patients to use their support system more effectively and to receive consistent responses from that system.

The program has three components: awareness of illness, emotion management, and behavior management skills. A detailed facilitator and client manual with specific lesson plans will be described. Poetry, artwork, relaxation exercises, and music supplement the worksheets and homework assignments, and examples will be shared in the workshop, as well as examples of specific components of the program. This program has been supported by both controlled and uncontrolled studies in the US and The Netherlands. Data show that clients with BPD have improvement in multiple domains, including mood, behavior, and health care utilization variables. The description of the treatment program will be preceded by an overview of empirical data supportive of STEPPS.