

Online counselling for concerned significant others in rural Australia: A randomized controlled trial

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Introduction: Community Reinforcement and Family Training (CRAFT) is an evidence-based program designed to support Concerned Significant Others (CSOs) of individuals experiencing alcohol and other drug (AOD) problems. By teaching CSOs strategies to reinforce positive behaviours and reduce reinforcement of substance use, CRAFT aims to improve both family wellbeing and treatment engagement. Despite widespread use of CRAFT in the United States and parts of Europe, CRAFT is not available in rural Australia. This study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of an online CRAFT program for Concerned Significant Others (CSOs) supporting individuals with substance use problems in rural Australian communities.

Methods: A randomized controlled trial using a two-arm, parallel-group design was conducted. Participants (N = 126) were randomized 1:1 to either a six-session online CRAFT intervention (n = 64) or a waitlist control group (n = 62). Psychological wellbeing was assessed using the DASS-21, Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS), Flourishing Scale (FS), and Brief COPE. Primary outcomes focused on psychological wellbeing; secondary outcomes assessed coping style engagement.

Results: Compared to the waitlist group, CRAFT participants showed significant improvements post-intervention. Depression scores (DASS-21) decreased with an adjusted mean difference of -2.71 (95% CI: -5.36 to -0.06). Satisfaction with life (SWLS) increased with a mean difference of 1.98 (95% CI: 0.45 to 3.50). Problem-focused coping strategies also improved significantly (mean difference 2.92; 95% CI: 1.33 to 4.51).

Discussions and Conclusions: Online CRAFT delivery led to decreased depression symptoms, increased life satisfaction, and greater use of problem-focused coping among CSOs. These findings support CRAFT as an effective, accessible intervention for rural Australian populations.

Implications for Practice or Policy: CRAFT is an intervention that is well-suited to the needs of CSOs in rural Australian settings. Online delivery improves accessibility, offering a practical and effective approach for rural health services to support families affected by substance use.

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