

# Self-guided versus therapist-guided online CBT for prolonged grief, posttraumatic stress, and depression in adults bereaved during the COVID-19 pandemic: a randomized controlled trial and controlled trial

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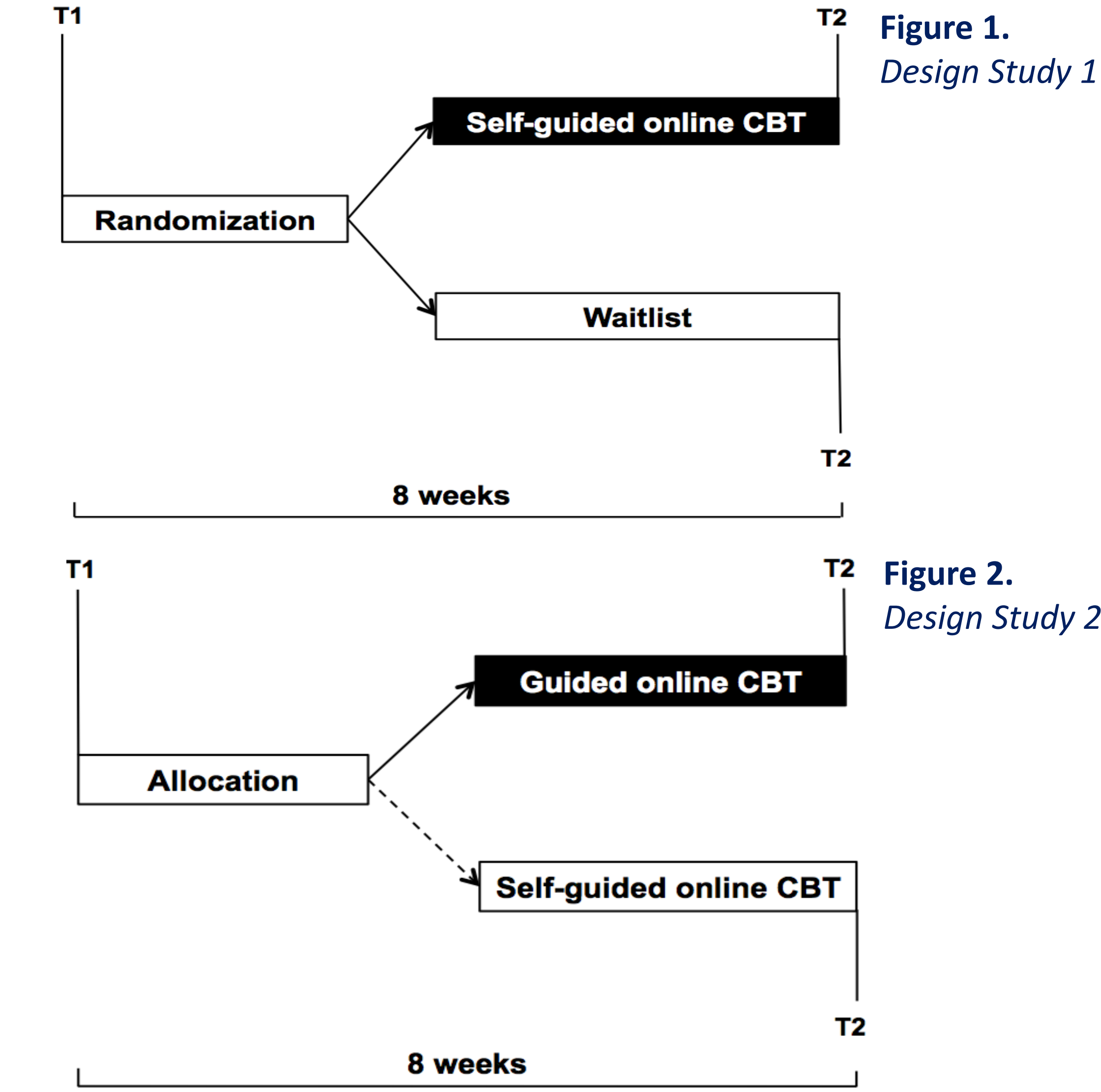
## Background

- The COVID-19 pandemic is associated with an increase in mortality rate globally.
- The death of a loved one during the COVID-19 pandemic is a potentially traumatic loss, which increases the risk of developing prolonged grief disorder (PGD), posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and depression symptoms<sup>[1]</sup>.
- Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an increase in need for remote psychological support, such as via the Internet.
- Research into the effectiveness of online grief-specific cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) for bereaved people is scarce, and therefore more research is needed<sup>[2]</sup>.

## Aim

To examine the effectiveness of grief-specific self-guided vs. guided online CBT in reducing PGD, PTSD, and depression symptoms for adults who lost a loved one during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Method



**Design:** In **Study 1**, 65 people were randomized to a self-guided online CBT ( $N = 32$ ) or waitlist condition ( $N = 33$ ). PGD, PTSD, and depression symptoms were assessed via telephone interviews at pre-treatment/pre-waiting period (T1) and post-treatment/post-waiting period (T2). In **Study 2**, people from **Study 1** were compared to people who were assigned to a therapist-guided online CBT ( $N = 45$ ). PGD, PTSD, and depression levels were assessed at pre-treatment (T1) and post-treatment (T2)<sup>[3]</sup>.

**Participants:** Dutch people ( $\geq 18$  years) who lost a loved one at least three months earlier during the COVID-19 pandemic with clinically relevant symptom-levels of PGD, PTSD, and/or depression.

**Treatment:** Eight online CBT sessions, consisting of exposure, cognitive restructuring and behavioral activation. In **Study 1** the treatment is completed without therapist support. In **Study 2** the treatment is guided by an online therapist via email contact. The treatment is presented in Therapieland ([www.therapieland.nl](http://www.therapieland.nl)).

**Outcomes:** PGD (TGI-CA)<sup>[4]</sup>, PTSD (PCL-5)<sup>[5]</sup>, and depression (PHQ-9)<sup>[6]</sup>. Analyses of Covariance were performed.

## Results Study 1

Findings are based on the intention-to-treat (ITT) sample ( $N = 65$ ). Intention-to-treat analyses indicated that people in the online CBT condition showed significantly lower PGD, PTSD, and depression levels post-treatment compared to waitlist controls post-waiting, while taking baseline symptoms and use of professional psychological co-intervention into account.

**Table 1.**  
*Participant characteristics ( $N = 65$ )*

	CBT ( $N = 32$ )	Waitlist ( $N = 33$ )
Gender, $N$ (%)		
Female	29 (90.6)	26 (78.8)
Male	3 (9.4)	7 (21.2)
Age, $M$ (SD)	53.34 (10.62)	54.28 (14.96)
Days since death, $M$ (SD)	188.94 (84.97)	171.00 (66.37)

**Table 2.**  
*Descriptive statistics and effect sizes for the online CBT ( $N = 32$ ) and waitlist condition ( $N = 33$ )*

		T1 $M$ (SD)	T2 $M$ (SD)	Cohen's d Between-groups
PGD	CBT	52.34 (7.64)	40.09 (9.92)	0.90***
	Waitlist	48.27 (9.97)	45.08 (11.20)	
PTSD	CBT	38.19 (9.26)	24.16 (13.84)	0.71*
	Waitlist	35.73 (12.54)	30.35 (15.21)	
Depression	CBT	14.03 (3.72)	9.27 (4.87)	0.57*
	Waitlist	13.61 (4.44)	11.44 (4.81)	

**Note.** \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

## Discussion Study 1

The online CBT proved to be an effective intervention, reducing PGD, PTSD, and depression symptoms. However, the study suffered from a high drop-out rate in the online CBT condition (40.6%) and the sample was overrepresented by women (84.6%). Future research should examine long-term treatment effectiveness<sup>[3]</sup>.

## Preliminary results Study 2

Based on the ITT sample, no significant differences in PGD, PTSD, and depression symptom-levels were found between people in the therapist-guided and self-guided online CBT conditions.

## Conclusions

Preliminary findings suggest that therapist-guided and self-guided online CBT seem both effective in reducing PGD, PTSD, and depression symptom-levels in people who lost a loved one during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, no superior effect of therapist-guidance was shown.

## More info:

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