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**Online therapy** better than face-to-face for body issues  
  
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People suffering from body dysmorphia and other self-image anxieties could be treated more effectively with **online** **therapy** than face-to-face counselling.

The largest clinical study of **body dysmorphic disorder** - and the first to examine the effectiveness of treating it with **internet**-based cognitive behavioural **therapy** - has found that 12 weeks of regular**online** sessions can eliminate symptoms.

Up to one person in 100 in the UK is thought to have BDD, an anxiety disorder characterised by the sufferer's distorted view of their appearance and an unmanageable obsession with how they are seen. Sufferers may be convinced that a small scar is a great flaw or that their weight is much greater than it is. BDD can lead to hospitalisation, substance abuse and suicide.

Researchers from King's College London working with staff at Karolinska University Hospital and Linkoping University in Sweden found that **internet** CBT could deliver significant improvements in sufferers' symptoms. The work is published today in the BMJ.

CBT is a practical talking **therapy** that is recommended by the NHS for anxiety and depression, but the high cost means that many patients do not have access to it.

The researchers monitored 94 BDD sufferers over 12 weeks of treatment and for three months afterwards. Of those receiving **online** CBT, 56 per cent experienced a reduction in their symptoms of 30 per cent or more. Only 13 per cent of those who had supportive **therapy** benefited that much.

Thirty-nine per cent of patients treated **online** no longer met the diagnostic criteria for BDD after 12 weeks. The authors of the study say that **internet**-based CBT should be implemented as a cost effective solution for a wide range of mental health disorders.

The NHS has been working to increase the use of **internet**-based resources in mental health services. Initiatives such as Digital First aim to reduce face-to-face contact to increase output and reduces costs.

However, some experts are wary of replacing face-to-face counselling with technology-based **therapy**. Elizabeth Cotton, a former NHS psychotherapist, warned that **online** CBT was "so diluted it cannot be classed as **therapy**".

"There is a lot of anger from clinicians around the super-slick magic solution model of CBT that is being promoted through technology," she said. "It gives NHS the ability to say 'yes, we deliver mental health services at none of the cost' because they're not actually paying for therapists.

"The tech companies don't have to pick up the pieces when your patient is suicidal."