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Severe COVID anxiety among adults in the United Kingdom: protocol for a cohort study and nested feasibility trial of modified Cognitive Behaviour Therapy for Health Anxiety.

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Severe COVID anxiety among adults in the United Kingdom: protocol for a cohort study and nested feasibility trial of modified Cognitive Behaviour Therapy for Health Anxiety.

Mike J Crawford¹, Verity C Leeson¹, Aisling McQuaid¹, Oluwaseun Samuel¹, Jacob D King¹, Martina Di Simplicio¹, Peter Tyrer¹, Helen Tyrer¹, Richard G Watt², Kirsten Barnicot³.

ABSTRACT

Introduction
Some people are so anxious about COVID that it impairs their functioning. However, little is known about the course of severe COVID anxiety or what can be done to help people who experience it.

Methods and analysis
Cohort study with a nested feasibility trial with follow-up at three and six months. We recruited people to the cohort study who were aged 18 and over, lived in the United Kingdom and had severe COVID anxiety (indicated by a score of nine or more on the Coronavirus Anxiety Scale). To take part in the nested feasibility trial, participants also had to have a score of 20 or more on the Short Health Anxiety Inventory. We excluded people from the trial if they had had COVID-19 within the previous four weeks, if they were currently self-isolating or if they were already receiving psychological treatment.

We publicised the study nationally through adverts, social media and posts on chat boards. We also recruited participants via clinicians working in primary and secondary care NHS services in London. All those in the active arm will be offered five to ten sessions of remotely delivered modified Cognitive Behaviour Therapy for Health Anxiety (CBT-HA). We will examine the proportion of participants who remain above threshold on the Coronavirus Anxiety Scale at three and six months and factors that influence levels of COVID anxiety over six months using mixed-effects logistic regression. The key feasibility metrics for the nested trial are the level of uptake of CBT-HA and the rate of follow-up.

Ethics and dissemination
Approved by Leicester Central Research Ethics Committee (reference: 20/EM/0238). The results of the study will be published in peer-reviewed scientific journals.

**Trial registration:** International Standard Randomised Control Trial Number Register - ISRCTN14973494

**Strengths of the study**
- The first study to explore the feasibility of CBT-HA for people with severe COVID anxiety.
- Use of remote methods for data collection and delivering the intervention, which enable participation by those who are unable to attend face-to-face meetings.

**Limitations of the study**
- The study design means that we will not be able to estimate the prevalence of severe COVID anxiety in the general population.
- Reliance on remote methods for recruitment and follow-up may impact on the follow up rate.

**INTRODUCTION**

The COVID-19 pandemic is having a major impact on mental health throughout the world.(1, 2) In the UK, there was a marked increase in the proportion of people experiencing anxiety after the first wave of the pandemic (3-5), a trend which has also been seen in many other countries.(6) Fear is an appropriate response to a new infectious disease like COVID-19 that threatens health, lives and livelihoods. At the start of the pandemic it was unclear how many people were likely to become infected, what the case fatality rate was and to what extent people who survived the initial illness would go on to experience long-term negative effects. Under these circumstances, fearfulness and anxiety are to be expected. Indeed, research conducted in the early phase of the pandemic found that fear of COVID-19 can be
adaptive, resulting in greater adherence to public health measures aimed at limiting the spread of the virus.(7, 8) However, as the pandemic has progressed it has become clear that some people have become so anxious about COVID that it is impacting on their mental health and social functioning. People with severe COVID anxiety are more likely to report harmful use of alcohol and drugs, hopelessness and suicidal thoughts.(9, 10)

Health anxiety, in which people become overwhelmed by fears of becoming ill,(11) was a major contributor to poor mental health during previous pandemics.(12-14) Emerging evidence from public surveys in Europe, Asia and North America have shown it is also contributing to poor mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic.(15-17) People with health anxiety may repeatedly search the internet and other media for information about health conditions, leading to mental distress and impaired functioning.(18, 19) People with health anxiety may misinterpret bodily sensations as symptoms of a physical illness and seek reassurance from others.(20) However, symptom monitoring and reassurance seeking may increase the amount of time that people think about being unwell and increase their level of anxiety.(11)

During the COVID pandemic people may be at greater risk of health anxiety because of widespread media coverage, misinformation about COVID and uncertainty about the course of the pandemic.(21) In addition to this people are being actively encouraged to stay alert for signs of infection and get tested for COVID-19 as soon as possible if even mild signs of infection occur. This approach is an important public health strategy for limiting the transmission of COVID,(22) but it may also increase the likelihood of people who are predisposed to being anxious about their health becoming severely anxious to the extent that reduces their quality of life and impacts on their ability to function.(13)

The link between health anxiety and poor mental health seen in previous pandemics, is important because health anxiety is treatable. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for Health Anxiety (CBT-HA) leads to long-term reductions in levels of health anxiety, generalised anxiety and depression.(23, 24) In recent years the intervention has been successfully modified to enable it to be delivered remotely.(25) As social distancing measures are relaxed and people are able to resume social and occupational roles, it is essential to
understand the course and consequences of severe COVID anxiety and examine interventions that could improve people’s mental health and functioning.

However, at this stage, we do not know the course of COVID anxiety or the contribution that health anxiety plays in maintaining it. While CBT-HA is effective under normal circumstances, we need to find out if it is an appropriate intervention to offer during a global pandemic, when people continue to be asked to be vigilant in spotting the signs of infection in an effort to prevent transmission of the virus.

**Objectives**

This study aims to fill current gaps in knowledge and contribute to the development of a more effective response to health anxiety during pandemics. The study objectives are to:

1) Assess the impact of severe COVID anxiety on people’s social functioning and health-related quality of life,
2) Examine the course of severe COVID anxiety over a six-month period,
3) Identify factors that influence the course of severe COVID anxiety, and
4) Test the feasibility of a randomised controlled trial of CBT-HA for people with severe COVID anxiety and health anxiety aimed at improving mental health and social functioning.

**METHODS AND ANALYSIS**

The COVID Anxiety Project is a cohort study with a nested feasibility trial. People taking part in the study will be followed up for six months. The trial is a researcher-blind, parallel-arm, randomised controlled feasibility trial, which is compliant with Standard Protocol Items: Recommendations for Interventional Trials guidelines.(26)

**Study population and sample**

Study participants were recruited from the general public in the United Kingdom and from those in contact with primary care and secondary care mental health services in London. We aimed to recruit people who self-identified as being anxious about COVID-19 using a broad range of methods including social media sites (Facebook, Reddit, Instagram and Twitter) and mental health charities (MQ research and Anxiety UK). We publicised the study via 19 primary care practices in north and west London and through colleagues working in
secondary care mental health services in Central and North West London NHS Foundation Trust, City and East London NHS Foundation Trust and West London NHS Trust. To be eligible to take part in the cohort study, potential participants had to be aged 18 or over, live in the United Kingdom and score nine or more on the Coronavirus Anxiety Scale. We used a threshold of nine or more on the CAS because this identifies those with moderate or severe functional impairment with 90% sensitivity, 85% specificity, and a false positive rate of 15%.

We excluded people who had a current or previous diagnosis of a psychotic mental disorder. To take part in the nested feasibility trial, participants also had to have a score of 20 or more on the Short Health Anxiety Inventory (SHAI). We excluded people from the feasibility trial if, at the time of the baseline assessment, they:

- had had COVID-19 in the prior four weeks (defined as a positive antigen test or a diagnosis by a clinician),
- were self-isolating on the advice of a doctor or the NHS Test and Trace service; or
- were already receiving psychological treatment for any condition.

The cohort study will be made up of all study participants with the exception of those offered CBT-HA as part of the feasibility trial.

**Recruitment and follow-up**

Participant flow through the study is presented in figure 1. We posted adverts on social media sites and websites of mental health charities and asked staff working in primary and secondary care NHS services to direct potential participants to a dedicated study website that was hosted by Qualtrics (www.qualtrics.com). The site included a copy of the Participant Information Sheet. Potential participants were asked to sign and date an online consent form, confirm their eligibility to take part in the study, and complete the Coronavirus Anxiety Scale. The survey was designed so that it could only be completed once from any one IP address. Those who scored nine or more on the scale and met other eligibility criteria were invited to complete the baseline survey. Those who were not eligible for the study were directed to a webpage which listed sources of mental health support.

We identified potential participants for the feasibility trial from their responses to the baseline survey. We aimed to recruit participants according to the capacity of study therapists to deliver CBT-HA to those in the active arm of the trial. When therapists had capacity to work with more people, we emailed those who recently joined the cohort study
and met the additional eligibility criteria a copy of an additional Participant Information Sheet and directed them to an online consent form. A researcher contacted these participants by telephone to answer any queries they had about the study, confirm that they met study eligibility criteria, support them to complete the online consent form and counter sign it. The researcher then contacted the trial manager who randomised the participant. Any participant who was approached to take part in the randomised trial and was ineligible or declined to take part, remained in the cohort study and will be asked to complete subsequent follow-up surveys.

Following attempts by what appeared to be automated survey-takers or ‘bots’ to take part in the study, we added a CAPTCHA question and a ‘trap’ question.(28, 29) The ‘trap’ question provided a range of valid and non-valid but plausible options for how the potential participant had heard about the study, with only those providing a valid response being invited to complete the baseline survey.

Between February 2020 and September 2021, we recruited 303 participants to the study. Of these, 127 (41.9%) met inclusion criteria for the feasibility trial. Among 108 participants offered a place on the trial 40 (37.0%) accepted and were randomised. The total sample for the cohort study is 283, comprising 176 who were ineligible for the trial, 18 who were eligible but not offered a place due to limited capacity of therapists to take on new patients, 68 who were offered a place on the trial but declined it and 20 people who were randomised to treatment as usual.

All participants in the cohort study and the feasibility trial will be sent an automated email to ask them to complete the three- and six-month follow-up survey. Those who have not responded after one week will be sent reminders. Trial participants who do not complete follow-up interviews will also be contacted by researchers by email (or telephone if contact number was available) with requests to complete the follow-up surveys.

**Randomisation and blinding**

We generated a randomisation list using the independent web-based service 'sealed envelope' (https://www.sealedenvelope.com/simple-randomiser/v1/lists). We stratified according to score on the short Health Anxiety Inventory (≤24 and ≥25) and the Dependent Personality Questionnaire (≤11 and ≥12) using a ratio of CBT-HA to control treatment of 1:1. We included the Dependent Personality Questionnaire as a stratification variable because
previous research has demonstrated that the presence of dependent personality traits may influence the uptake and impact of CBT-HA. (30)

Throughout the study, the randomisation list will be encrypted and stored electronically by the trial manager. At the end of the study the randomisation list will be unencrypted and placed in the Trial Master File. The trial manager generated the allocation of each new trial participant by allocating them to the next treatment arm in the predetermined list. The participant was informed of their allocation by telephone or email, and the first therapy session scheduled for those allocated to CBT-HA. Researchers will have very little contact with participants other than to encourage them to complete follow up surveys. In the unlikely event that researchers speak to a study participant after they have been randomised, they start by reminding them of the need to make sure they are not aware of whether the participant was offered CBT-HA or control treatment.

**Assessments**

The timing and sequence of all assessments are summarised in table 1.

**Screening assessment**

To take part in the cohort study, potential participants had to score nine or more on the Coronavirus Anxiety Scale (CAS). (9, 10) Developed by Sherman Lee in the USA, the scale was designed to provide a brief and reliable measure of the level of COVID-related anxiety that people experience. It comprises five questions on the frequency of anxious thoughts, somatic symptoms and sleep disturbance triggered by reading, thinking or hearing about COVID.

**Baseline assessment and covariates**

At baseline we collected self-reported data on demographic factors (age, gender, ethnicity, household composition, occupational status), physical health (current medical conditions), and exposure to COVID (whether they had had COVID, whether they had been admitted to hospital with COVID). We asked participants whether they live with or care for someone that might get seriously ill if infected with COVID because of their health or age and whether someone in their family or a close friend had been in hospital with COVID. We also asked participants questions about behaviours intended to reduce the risk of exposure to COVID. These questions were developed with the help of the members of the Lived Experience Advisory Panel and covered five behaviours which people had used or heard of others using in an effort to avoid catching COVID: staying at home, avoiding shops,
washing or discarding letters and parcels, increased handwashing and increased washing of
clothes. People who lived with school age children were also asked whether they had
stopped them attending school because of concerns about COVID.

We assessed self-reported functioning using the Work and Social Adjustment scale
(WSAS)(31) and health-related quality of life using the EQ-5D-3L.(32) We assessed mental
health using the Patient Health Questionnaire-9,(33) Generalised Anxiety Disorder 7-item
scale,(34) Obsessive -Compulsive Inventory -Revised,(35) the short form of the Health
Anxiety Inventory (SHAI), the Standardised Assessment of Personality – Abbreviated
Scale,(36) the Dependent Personality Questionnaire,(37) use of alcohol (AUDIT-C) (38) and a
single-question screening test for drug use. Finally, we asked participants to indicate
admissions to hospital, contacts with primary and secondary care services using items from
the Adult Service User Schedule.(39)

**Follow-up surveys**

All those taking part in the cohort study or the feasibility trial are asked to complete follow-
up surveys three and six months after the baseline survey. The content of these surveys was
similar to the baseline survey, except that we did not repeat the personality assessments
(SAPAS and DPQ), and we added a question at six months on whether people had received a
COVID-19 vaccination (see table 1).

In recognition of their time and support, all those who completed a baseline interview were
sent a £10 gift voucher and a further £20 voucher will be offered to those that complete the
six-month follow-up interview.

**Serious adverse events**

Data on Serious Adverse Event (SAE) including hospital admission are recorded at baseline,
and three and six month follow-up. Therapists will also be regularly reminded that they
should report all serious adverse events to the clinical trial team. SAEs will be recorded on a
non-CTIMP SAE form and forwarded within 24 hours to the Chief Investigator and sponsor.
The Research Ethics Committee will be notified within 15 days of the Chief Investigator
becoming aware of any SAE where the event resulted from the administration of any of the
research procedures.

**Interventions**

All those who agree to take part in the feasibility trial will be sent a self-help booklet
developed by staff at Central and North West London NHS Foundation Trust that is derived
from the work of Russ Harris on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy,(40) and aims to help people cope with the COVID crisis by building resilience, identifying and implementing healthy coping strategies and general advice on health and wellbeing.(41) All participants will be able access treatment as usual, which includes access to NHS primary care services and referral on to specialist services if required.

All those in the active arm of the feasibility trial will be offered five to ten sessions of modified Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for Health Anxiety (CBT-HA) based on a published treatment manual.(42) Therapists will start by taking a detailed history of the person’s thoughts and fears about COVID and exploring their beliefs about the impact of COVID and their ability to cope, in order to develop a formulation. Therapists will seek to identify behaviours such as symptom monitoring and reassurance seeking that could be maintaining the person’s anxiety. They will then use Socratic dialogue, diary keeping and behavioural experiments to help participants recognise the links between their thoughts and behaviour and explore ways to reduce their anxiety.

All CBT-HA sessions will be delivered by phone or videoconferencing, in accordance with the participant’s preference. Sessions will generally last between 30 and 50 minutes and be offered on a weekly or fortnightly basis. Therapists will consider delaying their final session in order to give people an opportunity to use the techniques and skills they have learned and reinforce the changes they have made. Sessions will be delivered in keeping with a published treatment manual but modified to meet the difficulties that people in the study are experiencing. Sessions will be supplemented by booklets summarising the causes of health anxiety and how patients can begin to overcome their fears. Each therapist will record the number and length of sessions they offer participants so that we can calculate the proportion of people who are offered CBT-HA who start and complete treatment and the number of sessions that people receive.

All therapists have a degree in a health-related subject and have previous experience of delivering psychological treatments. All therapists attended a 90-minute training session by Dr Helen Tyrer and will receive fortnightly supervision sessions delivered by Dr Tyrer.

**Sample size**

We aimed to recruit sufficient numbers of participants to the cohort study in order to randomise 40 participants to the feasibility trial, which is a typical size for such a trial.(43)
sample of 40 participants would enable us to detect study consent and intervention completion rates of 50%, with 95% confidence intervals of +/-11% and +/- 15% respectively. Assuming a rate of follow-up at six months of 75%, our cohort of 283 study participants will generate valid data on 212 people. A sample of 196 participants in the cohort study will enable us to estimate a remission rate of 15% +/- 5%, with 95% confidence.(44)

**Data analysis**

We will start by examining the characteristics of the study sample, including the prevalence of coexisting physical and mental health conditions, levels of disturbance in work and social functioning, quality of life, and actions taken to try to avoid catching COVID using simple descriptive statistics. For the cohort study, we will exclude those randomised to the active treatment arm of the nested feasibility trial, but include those in the control arm of the trial. We will examine the proportion who remain above threshold for severe COVID anxiety (9 or above on the CAS) and for COVID anxiety (5 or more on the CAS) at three and six months after completion of the baseline survey. We will examine factors that influence changes in scores over this period using linear regression analysis. With a condensed list of covariates we anticipate running mixed-effects linear regression models with maximum likelihood estimation, while fixing time and covariates, and utilising random effects to adjust for subject-specific heterogeneities. We will use mixed-effect logistic regression to conduct a sensitivity analysis, to examine whether factors predictive of improvement over time are also predictive of ceasing to meet the threshold for severe COVID anxiety.

We anticipate that there will be little missing data because the platform we designed for data entry requires participants to complete every item of a questionnaire before moving on to the next section. However where the number of missing items on a given measure is 20% or less, then the missing value for the items will be substituted by the individual's mean score for the remaining items on the scale. If there are more than 20% missing items in the scale the outcome measure will not be calculated for the participant at that time point.

Our criteria for determining the success of the feasibility study are: recruitment of at least 32 participants (80% of the target study sample of 40 participants), uptake of the intervention by at least 60% of participants in the active arm of the trial, and completion of follow-up interviews at six months by 75% of study participants. All data will be analysed in SPSS version 2.0 (SPSS Inc., Chicago IL) and Stata version 16.1.(45)
Patient and public involvement

Patients and the public contributed to the development of this proposal. Charlotte Green, who chaired the Patient & Carers Research Interest group at CNWL NHS Foundation Trust, helped develop the proposal and write the lay summary. We presented plans for the study to members of a local patient research interest group via Zoom. Members expressed strong support for the study and eight agreed to join a Lived Experience Advisory Group. Feedback from the group led to us to adding new questions on the impact of COVID anxiety. Members made suggestions for how to access potential participants, which we adopted. Members of the group also highlighted the importance of tailoring CBT-HA to the needs of individual patients, including making time for them to discuss broader concerns about their mental health and the impact of the pandemic. Members of the Lived Experience Advisory Group will help us prepare a plain English summary of study findings, which we will make available to all study participants and other members of the public through the study website.

ETHICS AND DISSEMINATION

Plans for the study were approved by Leicester Central Research Ethics Committee (reference: 20/EM/0238). The study will be conducted in accordance with the recommendations for physicians involved in research on human subjects adopted by the 18th World Medical Assembly, Helsinki 1964 and later revisions.

All research activity will be carried out after participants have given consent, and this documented on either an electronic or paper form. For the cohort study, the consent forms will be completed independently by the participant without researcher support but a member of the study team will be available to answer any questions prior to consent being given. Individual consent completed for the cohort study will be linked in Qualtrics to the questionnaires completed by the same participant at each timepoint in the cohort study to ensure that the person that gave consent is completing the assessments.

Separate consent to take part in the clinical trial will be completed by the participant during a telephone call with a member of the research team. The member of the research team that facilitates the completion of the consent process on the telephone will countersign the consent form to document that they were present.
Completed electronic consent forms will be downloaded from Qualtrics, printed and stored in a Master File. A copy of their completed consent form(s) will be provided to each participant. Any original paper consent forms will also be stored in the Master File. All participants are free to withdraw at any time from the cohort study or clinical trial without giving reasons and without prejudicing further treatment.

The Chief Investigator will preserve the confidentiality of participants taking part in the study and is registered under the Data Protection Act. Data from the consent forms and questionnaires, including identifiable personal data, will be stored on Qualtrics, an online survey tool. Qualtrics has ISO 27001 certification, meaning that it meets the international standard for managing confidential and sensitive data. All data transfers to Imperial College London use TLS encryption. Imperial College will be the data controller and there is a service-level agreement in place between Imperial College and Qualtrics.

Where questionnaires are administered during a telephone interview rather than online, the researcher will type the responses into Qualtrics. Other personal data that is recorded during the study (e.g. therapy notes from CBT sessions) will be typed directly onto the secure server of Imperial College London and will be identified using only the participant identifier. Qualtrics allows data erasure and all study data will be deleted from Qualtrics at the end of the study, following extraction for analysis.

Paper documentation will be minimal during this research. An option to complete paper consent form and screening questionnaires was offered but not taken up by any participant. The results of the study will be published in peer-reviewed scientific journals. We anticipate three key papers examining baseline data, follow-up data and the results of the feasibility trial. We will work with members of our Lived Experienced Advisory Panel to prepare a lay summary of findings from the study which we will post on the study website and will email all study participants the link to this summary.

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Authors’ contributions

MC is the Chief Investigator who conceived the study and led the design of the study and the study protocol and preparation of this manuscript. VL helped design the study protocol, obtained study approvals and contributed to the preparation of this manuscript. AMcQ, OS and JK recruited study participants contributed to the design of the study and the study protocol and preparation of this manuscript. HT helped to develop the study intervention and contributed to the preparation of this manuscript. MdS, RW, PT and KB, contributed to the design of the study, the development of the study protocol and the preparation of this manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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**COMPETING INTERESTS STATEMENT**

Dr Helen Tyrer is author of a book on Cognitive Behaviour Therapy for treating people with Health Anxiety. Other authors declare that they have no competing interests.

**REFERENCES**


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Table 1: Study Assessment Schedule

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For peer review only - http://bmjopen.bmj.com/site/about/guidelines.xhtml

Figure 1. Study flow diagram

CBT-HA = Cognitive Behaviour Therapy for health anxiety. sHAI = Short for of Health Anxiety Inventory. TAU = Treatment as usual
SPIRIT 2013 Checklist: Recommended items to address in a clinical trial protocol and related documents*

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<th>Item No</th>
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<td>Name and contact information for the trial sponsor</td>
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<td>Role of study sponsor and funders, if any, in study design; collection, management, analysis, and interpretation of data; writing of the report; and the decision to submit the report for publication, including whether they will have ultimate authority over any of these activities</td>
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<td>Composition, roles, and responsibilities of the coordinating centre, steering committee, endpoint adjudication committee, data management team, and other individuals or groups overseeing the trial, if applicable (see Item 21a for data monitoring committee)</td>
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<td>Introduction</td>
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<td>Background and rationale</td>
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<td>Description of research question and justification for undertaking the trial, including summary of relevant studies (published and unpublished) examining benefits and harms for each intervention</td>
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<td>Methods: Participants, interventions, and outcomes</td>
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<td>Study setting</td>
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<td>Description of study settings (eg, community clinic, academic hospital) and list of countries where data will be collected. Reference to where list of study sites can be obtained</td>
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<td>Eligibility criteria</td>
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<td>Inclusion and exclusion criteria for participants. If applicable, eligibility criteria for study centres and individuals who will perform the interventions (eg, surgeons, psychotherapists)</td>
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<td>Relevant concomitant care and interventions that are permitted or prohibited during the trial</td>
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<td>Outcomes</td>
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<td>Primary, secondary, and other outcomes, including the specific measurement variable (eg, systolic blood pressure), analysis metric (eg, change from baseline, final value, time to event), method of aggregation (eg, median, proportion), and time point for each outcome. Explanation of the clinical relevance of chosen efficacy and harm outcomes is strongly recommended</td>
<td>7-8, 11</td>
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<td>Time schedule of enrolment, interventions (including any run-ins and washouts), assessments, and visits for participants. A schematic diagram is highly recommended (see Figure)</td>
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<td>Estimated number of participants needed to achieve study objectives and how it was determined, including clinical and statistical assumptions supporting any sample size calculations</td>
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Recruitment 15 Strategies for achieving adequate participant enrolment to reach target sample size 5-6

Methods: Assignment of interventions (for controlled trials)

Allocation:

Sequence generation 16a Method of generating the allocation sequence (e.g., computer-generated random numbers), and list of any factors for stratification. To reduce predictability of a random sequence, details of any planned restriction (e.g., blocking) should be provided in a separate document that is unavailable to those who enrol participants or assign interventions 7

Allocation concealment mechanism 16b Mechanism of implementing the allocation sequence (e.g., central telephone; sequentially numbered, opaque, sealed envelopes), describing any steps to conceal the sequence until interventions are assigned 7

Implementation 16c Who will generate the allocation sequence, who will enrol participants, and who will assign participants to interventions 7

Blinding (masking) 17a Who will be blinded after assignment to interventions (e.g., trial participants, care providers, outcome assessors, data analysts), and how 6-7

17b If blinded, circumstances under which unblinding is permissible, and procedure for revealing a participant’s allocated intervention during the trial Not applicable

Methods: Data collection, management, and analysis

Data collection methods 18a Plans for assessment and collection of outcome, baseline, and other trial data, including any related processes to promote data quality (e.g., duplicate measurements, training of assessors) and a description of study instruments (e.g., questionnaires, laboratory tests) along with their reliability and validity, if known. Reference to where data collection forms can be found, if not in the protocol 8

18b Plans to promote participant retention and complete follow-up, including list of any outcome data to be collected for participants who discontinue or deviate from intervention protocols 8
Data management

Plans for data entry, coding, security, and storage, including any related processes to promote data quality (eg, double data entry; range checks for data values). Reference to where details of data management procedures can be found, if not in the protocol.

Statistical methods

20a Statistical methods for analysing primary and secondary outcomes. Reference to where other details of the statistical analysis plan can be found, if not in the protocol.

20b Methods for any additional analyses (eg, subgroup and adjusted analyses)

20c Definition of analysis population relating to protocol non-adherence (eg, as randomised analysis), and any statistical methods to handle missing data (eg, multiple imputation)

Methods: Monitoring

Data monitoring

21a Composition of data monitoring committee (DMC); summary of its role and reporting structure; statement of whether it is independent from the sponsor and competing interests; and reference to where further details about its charter can be found, if not in the protocol. Alternatively, an explanation of why a DMC is not needed.

21b Description of any interim analyses and stopping guidelines, including who will have access to these interim results and make the final decision to terminate the trial.

Harms

22 Plans for collecting, assessing, reporting, and managing solicited and spontaneously reported adverse events and other unintended effects of trial interventions or trial conduct.

Auditing

23 Frequency and procedures for auditing trial conduct, if any, and whether the process will be independent from investigators and the sponsor.

Ethics and dissemination

Research ethics approval

24 Plans for seeking research ethics committee/institutional review board (REC/IRB) approval.
Protocol amendments  25  Plans for communicating important protocol modifications (e.g., changes to eligibility criteria, outcomes, analyses) to relevant parties (e.g., investigators, REC/IRBs, trial participants, trial registries, journals, regulators)  Not applicable

Consent or assent  26a  Who will obtain informed consent or assent from potential trial participants or authorised surrogates, and how (see Item 32)  11-12

                             26b  Additional consent provisions for collection and use of participant data and biological specimens in ancillary studies, if applicable  Not applicable

Confidentiality  27  How personal information about potential and enrolled participants will be collected, shared, and maintained in order to protect confidentiality before, during, and after the trial  12

Declaration of interests  28  Financial and other competing interests for principal investigators for the overall trial and each study site  14

Access to data  29  Statement of who will have access to the final trial dataset, and disclosure of contractual agreements that limit such access for investigators  14

Ancillary and post-trial care  30  Provisions, if any, for ancillary and post-trial care, and for compensation to those who suffer harm from trial participation  Not applicable

Dissemination policy  31a  Plans for investigators and sponsor to communicate trial results to participants, healthcare professionals, the public, and other relevant groups (e.g., via publication, reporting in results databases, or other data sharing arrangements), including any publication restrictions  12-13

                                             31b  Authorship eligibility guidelines and any intended use of professional writers  Not applicable

                                             31c  Plans, if any, for granting public access to the full protocol, participant-level dataset, and statistical code  Not applicable

Appendices

Informed consent materials  32  Model consent form and other related documentation given to participants and authorised surrogates  Available on request

Biological specimens  33  Plans for collection, laboratory evaluation, and storage of biological specimens for genetic or molecular analysis in the current trial and for future use in ancillary studies, if applicable  Not applicable
It is strongly recommended that this checklist be read in conjunction with the SPIRIT 2013 Explanation & Elaboration for important clarification on the items. Amendments to the protocol should be tracked and dated. The SPIRIT checklist is copyrighted by the SPIRIT Group under the Creative Commons “Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported” license.
Severe COVID anxiety among adults in the United Kingdom: protocol for a cohort study and nested feasibility trial of modified Cognitive Behaviour Therapy for Health Anxiety.

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<td>24-May-2022</td>
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<td>Crawford, Mike; Imperial College London, Psychological Medicine Leeson, Verity; Imperial College London McQuaid, Aisling; Imperial College London Samuel, Oluwaseun; Imperial College London King, Jacob D; Imperial College London Di Simplicio, Martina; Imperial College London Tyrer, Peter; Imperial College London, Psychological medicine Tyrer, Helen; Imperial College London Watt, Richard; University College London, Epidemiology and Public Health Barnicot, Kirsten; City University of London</td>
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Severe COVID anxiety among adults in the United Kingdom: protocol for a cohort study and nested feasibility trial of modified Cognitive Behaviour Therapy for Health Anxiety.


ABSTRACT

Introduction
Some people are so anxious about COVID that it impairs their functioning. However, little is known about the course of severe COVID anxiety or what can be done to help people who experience it.

Methods and analysis
Cohort study with a nested feasibility trial with follow-up at three and six months. We recruited 306 people who were aged 18 and over, lived in the United Kingdom and had severe COVID anxiety (indicated by a score of nine or more on the Coronavirus Anxiety Scale). To take part in the nested feasibility trial, participants also had to have a score of 20 or more on the Short Health Anxiety Inventory. We excluded people from the trial if they had had COVID-19 within the previous four weeks, if they were currently self-isolating or if they were already receiving psychological treatment.

We publicised the study nationally through adverts, social media and posts on chat boards. We also recruited participants via clinicians working in primary and secondary care NHS services in London. All those in the active arm will be offered five to ten sessions of remotely delivered modified Cognitive Behaviour Therapy for Health Anxiety (CBT-HA). We will examine the proportion of participants who remain above threshold on the Coronavirus Anxiety Scale at three and six months and factors that influence levels of COVID anxiety over six months using mixed-effects logistic regression. The key feasibility metrics for the nested trial are the level of uptake of CBT-HA and the rate of follow-up.

Ethics and dissemination
Approved by Leicester Central Research Ethics Committee (reference: 20/EM/0238). The results of the study will be published in peer-reviewed scientific journals.
**Trial registration:** International Standard Randomised Control Trial Number Register - ISRCTN14973494

**Strengths of the study**
- The first study to explore the feasibility of using a modified form of CBT-HA for people with severe COVID anxiety.
- Use of remote methods for data collection and delivering the intervention, which enable participation by those who are unable to attend face-to-face meetings.

**Limitations of the study**
- The study design means that we will not be able to estimate the prevalence of severe COVID anxiety in the general population.
- Reliance on remote methods for recruitment and follow-up may impact on the follow up rate.

**INTRODUCTION**
The COVID-19 pandemic is having a major impact on mental health throughout the world.(1, 2) In the UK, there was a marked increase in the proportion of people experiencing anxiety after the first wave of the pandemic,(3-5) a trend which has also been seen in many other countries.(6) Evidence from longitudinal studies in the UK suggest that a range of factors including social isolation, job insecurity and financial problems were important.(3, 7) Qualitative data collected during his period reinforce the importance of these factors and have also highlighted disruption to work and other routines and a sense of lack of control.(8, 9)

Fear is an appropriate response to a new infectious disease like COVID-19 that threatens health, lives and livelihoods. At the start of the pandemic it was unclear how many people...
were likely to become infected, what the case fatality rate was and to what extent people who survived the initial illness would go on to experience long-term negative effects. Under these circumstances, fearfulness and anxiety are to be expected. Indeed, research conducted in the early phase of the pandemic found that fear of COVID-19 can be adaptive, resulting in greater adherence to public health measures aimed at limiting the spread of the virus.(10, 11) However, as the pandemic has progressed it has become clear that some people have become so anxious about COVID that it is impacting on their mental health and social functioning. People with severe COVID anxiety are more likely to report harmful use of alcohol and drugs, hopelessness and suicidal thoughts.(12, 13) To date, researchers investigating this topic have used slightly different definitions of ‘COVID anxiety’. One of the first teams to investigate the subject, led by Lee and colleagues in Virginia (USA), used a narrow definition based on the cognitive, behavioural and physiological components of anxiety.(12-13) More recently teams such as Spada and colleagues in London (UK), have adopted a broader definition that incorporates a wider range of behavioural responses including avoidance, checking and threat monitoring.(14, 15) Nonetheless, all those investigating COVID anxiety agree that core symptoms are those found in other anxiety disorders, and it impacts on behaviour and social functioning.

At the start of the pandemic it was unclear what could be done to help people who appeared to have severe COVID anxiety. In the absence of evidence, governments, professional organisations and mental health services recommended general public mental health measures, such as maintaining contact with family and friends, keeping regular routines and sleeping times, and avoiding drug use and excessive use of alcohol.(16, 17). However, in our discussions with patients referred to mental health services who had severe COVID anxiety, we found that some appeared to be suffering from health anxiety. Health anxiety, formerly referred to as hypochondriasis, is a condition in which people become overwhelmed by fears of becoming ill.(18)

Health anxiety was a major contributor to poor mental health during previous pandemics.(19, 20) Emerging evidence from public surveys in Europe, Asia and North America have shown it is also contributing to poor mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic.(21-23) People with health anxiety may repeatedly search the internet and other
media for information about health conditions, leading to mental distress and impaired functioning. (24, 25) People with health anxiety may misinterpret bodily sensations as symptoms of a physical illness and seek reassurance from others. (26) However, symptom monitoring and reassurance seeking may increase the amount of time that people think about being unwell and increase their level of anxiety. (18) During the COVID pandemic people may be at greater risk of health anxiety because of widespread media coverage, misinformation about COVID and uncertainty about the course of the pandemic. (27) In addition to this people are being actively encouraged to stay alert for signs of infection and get tested for COVID-19 as soon as possible if even mild signs of infection occur. This approach is an important public health strategy for limiting the transmission of COVID, (28) but it may also increase the likelihood of people who are predisposed to being anxious about their health becoming severely anxious to the extent that reduces their quality of life and impacts on their ability to function. (20)

The link between health anxiety and poor mental health seen in previous pandemics, is important because health anxiety is treatable. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for Health Anxiety (CBT-HA) leads to long-term reductions in levels of health anxiety, generalised anxiety and depression. (29, 30) In recent years the intervention has been successfully modified to enable it to be delivered remotely. (31)

As social distancing measures are relaxed and people are able to resume social and occupational roles, it is essential to understand the course and consequences of severe COVID anxiety and examine interventions that could improve people’s mental health and functioning. However, at this stage, we do not know the course of COVID anxiety or the contribution that health anxiety plays in maintaining it. While CBT-HA is effective under normal circumstances, we need to find out if it is an appropriate intervention to offer during a global pandemic, when people continue to be asked to be vigilant in spotting the signs of infection in an effort to prevent transmission of the virus.

Objectives
This study aims to reduce current gaps in knowledge and contribute to the development of a more effective response to health anxiety during pandemics. The study objectives are to;
1) Assess the impact of severe COVID anxiety on people’s social functioning and health-related quality of life,
2) Examine the course of severe COVID anxiety over a six-month period,
3) Identify factors that influence the course of severe COVID anxiety, and
4) Test the feasibility of a randomised controlled trial of CBT-HA for people with severe COVID anxiety and health anxiety aimed at improving mental health and social functioning.

METHODS AND ANALYSIS
The COVID Anxiety Project is a cohort study with a nested feasibility trial. People taking part in the study will be followed up for six months. The trial is a researcher-blind, parallel-arm, randomised controlled feasibility trial, which is compliant with Standard Protocol Items: Recommendations for Interventional Trials guidelines.(32)

Study population and sample
Study participants were recruited from the general public in the United Kingdom and from those in contact with primary care and secondary care mental health services in London. We aimed to recruit people who self-identified as being anxious about COVID-19 using a broad range of methods including social media sites (Facebook, Reddit, Instagram and Twitter) and mental health charities (MQ research and Anxiety UK). We publicised the study via 19 primary care practices in north and west London and through colleagues working in secondary care mental health services in Central and North West London NHS Foundation Trust, City and East London NHS Foundation Trust and West London NHS Trust.

To be eligible to take part in the cohort study, potential participants had to be aged 18 or over, live in the United Kingdom and score nine or more on the Coronavirus Anxiety Scale.(12) We used a threshold of nine or more on the CAS because this identifies those with moderate or severe functional impairment with 90% sensitivity, 85% specificity, and a false positive rate of 15%.(12)

We excluded people who had a current or previous diagnosis of a psychotic mental disorder. To take part in the nested feasibility trial, participants also had to have a score of 20 or more on the Short Health Anxiety Inventory (SHAI).(33) We excluded people from the feasibility trial if, at the time of the baseline assessment, they:

• had had COVID-19 in the prior four weeks (defined as a positive antigen test or a diagnosis by a clinician),
were self-isolating on the advice of a doctor or the NHS Test and Trace service; or
were already receiving psychological treatment for any condition.

The cohort study will be made up of all study participants with the exception of those
offered CBT-HA as part of the feasibility trial.

**Recruitment and follow-up**

Participant flow through the study is presented in figure 1. We posted adverts on social
media sites and websites of mental health charities and asked staff working in primary and
secondary care NHS services to direct potential participants to a dedicated study website
that was hosted by Qualtrics (www.qualtrics.com). The site included a copy of the
Participant Information Sheet. Potential participants were asked to sign and date an online
consent form, confirm their eligibility to take part in the study, and complete the
Coronavirus Anxiety Scale. The survey was designed so that it could only be completed once
from any one IP address. Those who scored nine or more on the scale and met other
eligibility criteria were invited to complete the baseline survey. Those who were not eligible
for the study were directed to a webpage which listed sources of mental health support.

We identified potential participants for the feasibility trial from their responses to the
baseline survey. We aimed to recruit participants according to the capacity of study
therapists to deliver CBT-HA to those in the active arm of the trial. When therapists had
capacity to work with more people, we emailed those who recently joined the cohort study
and met the additional eligibility criteria a copy of an additional Participant Information
Sheet and directed them to an online consent form. A researcher contacted these
participants by telephone to answer any queries they had about the study, confirm that
they met study eligibility criteria, support them to complete the online consent form and
counter sign it. The researcher then contacted the trial manager who randomised the
participant. Any participant who was approached to take part in the randomised trial and
was ineligible or declined to take part, remained in the cohort study and will be asked to
complete subsequent follow-up surveys.

Following attempts by what appeared to be automated survey-takers or ‘bots’ to take part
in the study, we added a CAPTCHA question and a ‘trap’ question. The ‘trap’
question provided a range of valid and non-valid but plausible options for how the potential
participant had heard about the study, with only those providing a valid response being
invited to complete the baseline survey.
Between February 2021 and September 2021, we recruited 306 participants to the study. Of these, 127 (41.5%) met inclusion criteria for the feasibility trial. Among 108 participants offered a place on the trial 40 (37.0%) accepted and were randomised. The total sample for the cohort study is 285 comprising 179 who were ineligible for the trial, 19 who were eligible but not offered a place due to limited capacity of therapists to take on new patients, 68 who were offered a place on the trial but declined it and 19 people who were randomised to treatment as usual.

All participants in the cohort study and the feasibility trial will be sent an automated email to ask them to complete the three- and six-month follow-up survey. Those who have not responded after one week will be sent reminders. Trial participants who do not complete follow-up interviews will also be contacted by researchers by email (or telephone if contact number is available) with requests to complete the follow-up surveys.

**Randomisation and blinding**

We generated a randomisation list using the independent web-based service 'sealed envelope' (https://www.sealedenvelope.com/simple-randomiser/v1/lists). We stratified according to score on the short Health Anxiety Inventory (≤24 and ≥25) and the Dependent Personality Questionnaire (≤11 and ≥12) using a ratio of CBT-HA to control treatment of 1:1. We included the Dependent Personality Questionnaire as a stratification variable because previous research has demonstrated that the presence of dependent personality traits may influence the uptake and impact of CBT-HA.(36)

Throughout the study, the randomisation list will be encrypted and stored electronically by the trial manager. At the end of the study the randomisation list will be unencrypted and placed in the Trial Master File. The trial manager generated the allocation of each new trial participant by allocating them to the next treatment arm in the predetermined list. The participant was informed of their allocation by telephone or email, and the first therapy session scheduled for those allocated to CBT-HA. Researchers will have very little contact with participants other than to encourage them to complete follow up surveys. In the unlikely event that researchers speak to a study participant after they have been randomised, they will start by reminding them of the need to make sure they are not aware of whether the participant was offered CBT-HA or control treatment.

**Assessments**

The timing and sequence of all assessments are summarised in table 1.
Screening assessment

To take part in the cohort study, potential participants had to score nine or more on the Coronavirus Anxiety Scale (CAS). (12, 13) Developed by Sherman Lee in the USA, the scale was designed to provide a brief and reliable measure of the level of COVID-related anxiety that people experience. It comprises five questions on the frequency of anxious thoughts, somatic symptoms and sleep disturbance triggered by reading, thinking or hearing about COVID.

Baseline assessment and covariates

At baseline we collected self-reported data on demographic factors (age, gender, ethnicity, household composition, occupational status), physical health (current medical conditions), and exposure to COVID (whether they had had COVID, whether they had been admitted to hospital with COVID). We asked participants whether they live with or care for someone that might get seriously ill if infected with COVID because of their health or age and whether someone in their family or a close friend had been in hospital with COVID.

We also asked participants questions about behaviours intended to reduce the risk of exposure to COVID. These questions were developed with the help of the members of the Lived Experience Advisory Panel and covered five behaviours which people had used or heard of others using in an effort to avoid catching COVID: staying at home, avoiding shops, washing or discarding letters and parcels, increased handwashing and increased washing of clothes. People who lived with school age children were also asked whether they had stopped them attending school because of concerns about COVID.

We assessed self-reported functioning using the Work and Social Adjustment scale (WSAS) (37) and health-related quality of life using the EQ-5D-3L. (38) We assessed mental health using the Patient Health Questionnaire-9, (39) Generalised Anxiety Disorder 7-item scale, (40) Obsessive -Compulsive Inventory -Revised, (41) the short form of the Health Anxiety Inventory (SHAI), (33) the Standardised Assessment of Personality – Abbreviated Scale, (42) the Dependent Personality Questionnaire, (43) use of alcohol (AUDIT-C) (44) and a single-question screening test for drug use. (45) Finally, we asked participants to indicate admissions to hospital, contacts with primary and secondary care services using items from the Adult Service User Schedule. (46)

Follow-up surveys
All those taking part in the cohort study or the feasibility trial are asked to complete follow-up surveys three and six months after the baseline survey. The content of these surveys was similar to the baseline survey, except that we did not repeat the personality assessments (SAPAS and DPQ), and we added a question at six months on whether people had received a COVID-19 vaccination (see table 1).

In recognition of their time and support, all those who completed a baseline interview were sent a £10 gift voucher and a further £20 voucher will be offered to those that complete the six-month follow-up interview.

**Serious adverse events**

Adverse events that are identified in the survey (e.g. worsening or newly emerging clinical phenomena) will be added to an adverse event log. Data on Serious Adverse Event (SAE) including death, hospitalisation and life-threatening events are recorded at baseline, and three and six month follow-up. Therapists will also be regularly reminded that they should report all serious adverse events to the clinical trial team. SAEs will be recorded on a non-CTIMP SAE form and forwarded within 24 hours to the Chief Investigator and sponsor if judged to be unexpected and related to the research procedures. The Research Ethics Committee will be notified within 15 days of the Chief Investigator becoming aware of any such SAE.

**Interventions**

All those who agree to take part in the feasibility trial will be sent a self-help booklet developed by staff at Central and North West London NHS Foundation Trust that is derived from the work of Russ Harris on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy,(47) and aims to help people cope with the COVID crisis by building resilience, identifying and implementing healthy coping strategies and general advice on health and wellbeing.(48) All participants will be able access treatment as usual, which includes access to NHS primary care services and referral on to specialist services if required.

All those in the active arm of the feasibility trial will be offered five to ten sessions of modified Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for Health Anxiety (CBT-HA) based on a published treatment manual.(49) Therapists will start by taking a detailed history of the person’s thoughts and fears about COVID and exploring their beliefs about the impact of COVID and their ability to cope, in order to develop a formulation. Therapists will seek to identify behaviours such as symptom monitoring and reassure seeking that could be maintaining
the person’s anxiety. They will then use Socratic dialogue, diary keeping and behavioural experiments to help participants recognise the links between their thoughts and behaviour and explore ways to reduce their anxiety.

All CBT-HA sessions will be delivered by phone or videoconferencing, in accordance with the participant’s preference. Sessions will generally last between 30 and 50 minutes and be offered on a weekly or fortnightly basis. Therapists will consider delaying their final session in order to give people an opportunity to use the techniques and skills they have learned and reinforce the changes they have made. Sessions will be delivered in keeping with a published treatment manual but modified to meet the difficulties that people in the study are experiencing. Sessions will be supplemented by booklets summarising the causes of health anxiety and how patients can begin to overcome their fears.

Each therapist will record the number and length of sessions they offer participants so that we can calculate the proportion of people who are offered CBT-HA who start and complete treatment and the number of sessions that people receive.

All therapists have a degree in a health-related subject and have previous experience of delivering psychological treatments. All therapists attended a 90-minute training session by Dr Helen Tyrer and will receive fortnightly supervision sessions delivered by Dr Tyrer. The nature of modifications to the original CBT-HA model will be recorded during the study and presented alongside the results of the feasibility trial.

Sample size

We aimed to recruit sufficient numbers of participants to the cohort study in order to randomise 40 participants to the feasibility trial, which is a typical size for such a trial.(50) A sample of 40 participants would enable us to detect study consent and intervention completion rates of 50%, with 95% confidence intervals of +/-11% and +/- 15% respectively. Assuming a rate of follow-up at six months of 75%, our cohort of 285 study participants will generate valid data on 213 people. A sample of 196 participants in the cohort study will enable us to estimate a remission rate of 15% +/- 5%, with 95% confidence.(51)

Data analysis

We will start by examining the characteristics of the study sample, including the prevalence of coexisting physical and mental health conditions, levels of disturbance in work and social functioning, quality of life, and actions taken to try to avoid catching COVID using simple descriptive statistics. For the cohort study, we will examine the proportion who remain
above threshold for severe COVID anxiety (9 or above on the CAS) and for COVID anxiety (5 or more on the CAS) at three and six months after completion of the baseline survey. We will examine factors that influence changes in CAS scores over this period using linear regression analysis. The analysis will be performed in two stages. Initially the separate association between each factor and CAS at each outcome timepoint will be assessed separately. CAS score at baseline will be included in all these analyses, as the inclusion of this factor will mean that the analyses reflect factors associated with change in CAS from baseline. The second stage of the analysis will examine the joint association between the factors and CAS score in a multivariable analysis. To restrict the number of variables in this stage of the analysis, only factors showing some association with the outcome (p<0.2) from the first stage of the analysis will be considered in the multivariable analyses. A selection procedure (e.g. backwards selection) will be considered to identify factors significantly associated with the outcome and to be included in the final model.

We anticipate that there will be little missing data because the platform we designed for data entry requires participants to complete every item of a questionnaire before moving on to the next section. However where the number of missing items on a given measure is 20% or less, then the missing value for the items will be substituted by the individual’s mean score for the remaining items on the scale. If there are more than 20% missing items in the scale the outcome measure will not be calculated for the participant at that time point. Our criteria for determining the success of the feasibility study, which are based on thresholds used in other recent feasibility and pilot studies, (52, 53) are: recruitment of at least 32 participants (80% of the target study sample of 40 participants), uptake of the intervention by at least 60% of participants in the active arm of the trial, and completion of follow-up interviews at six months by 75% of study participants. All data will be analysed in SPSS version 2.0 (SPSS Inc., Chicago IL) and Stata version 16.1.

**Patient and public involvement**

Patients and the public contributed to the development of this proposal. Charlotte Green, who chaired the Patient & Carers Research Interest group at CNWL NHS Foundation Trust, helped develop the proposal and write the lay summary. We presented plans for the study to members of a local patient research interest group via Zoom. Members expressed strong support for the study and eight agreed to join a Lived Experience Advisory Group. Feedback
from the group led to us to adding new questions on the impact of COVID anxiety. Members made suggestions for how to access potential participants, which we adopted. Members of the group also highlighted the importance of tailoring CBT-HA to the needs of individual patients, including making time for them to discuss broader concerns about their mental health and the impact of the pandemic. Members of the Lived Experience Advisory Group will help us prepare a plain English summary of study findings, which we will make available to all study participants and other members of the public through the study website.

ETHICS AND DISSEMINATION

Plans for the study were approved by Leicester Central Research Ethics Committee (reference: 20/EM/0238). The study will be conducted in accordance with the recommendations for physicians involved in research on human subjects adopted by the 18th World Medical Assembly, Helsinki 1964 and later revisions.

All research activity will be carried out after participants have given consent, and this documented on either an electronic or paper form. For the cohort study, the consent forms will be completed independently by the participant without researcher support but a member of the study team will be available to answer any questions prior to consent being given. Individual consent completed for the cohort study will be linked in Qualtrics to the questionnaires completed by the same participant at each timepoint in the cohort study to ensure that the person that gave consent is completing the assessments.

Separate consent to take part in the clinical trial will be completed by the participant during a telephone call with a member of the research team. The member of the research team that facilitates the completion of the consent process on the telephone will countersign the consent form to document that they were present.

Completed electronic consent forms will be downloaded from Qualtrics, printed and stored in a Master File. A copy of their completed consent form(s) will be provided to each participant. Any original paper consent forms will also be stored in the Master File. All participants are free to withdraw at any time from the cohort study or clinical trial without giving reasons and without prejudicing further treatment.

The Chief Investigator will preserve the confidentiality of participants taking part in the study and is registered under the Data Protection Act. Data from the consent forms and
questionnaires, including identifiable personal data, will be stored on Qualtrics, an online survey tool. Qualtrics has ISO 27001 certification, meaning that it meets the international standard for managing confidential and sensitive data. All data transfers to Imperial College London use TLS encryption. Imperial College will be the data controller and there is a service-level agreement in place between Imperial College and Qualtrics. Where questionnaires are administered during a telephone interview rather than online, the researcher will type the responses into Qualtrics. Other personal data that is recorded during the study (e.g. therapy notes from CBT sessions) will be typed directly onto the secure server of Imperial College London and will be identified using only the participant identifier. Qualtrics allows data erasure and all study data will be deleted from Qualtrics at the end of the study, following extraction for analysis.

Paper documentation will be minimal during this research. An option to complete paper consent form and screening questionnaires was offered but not taken up by any participant. The results of the study will be published in peer-reviewed scientific journals. We anticipate three key papers examining baseline data, follow-up data and the results of the feasibility trial. We will work with members of our Lived Experienced Advisory Panel to prepare a lay summary of findings from the study which we will post on the study website and will email all study participants the link to this summary.

DISCUSSION

This study aims to build on the results of previous research that has highlighted the impact of COVID anxiety on mental health during the current pandemic. By collecting prospective data on a sample of people who have high levels of COVID anxiety, we will examine its course over a six-month period. Having collected detailed information on demographic and clinical factors at baseline we will be able to examine the role these factors play in maintaining COVID anxiety over time. By conducting a nested feasibility trial we will be able to examine the uptake and acceptability of an intervention for health anxiety, a condition which is strongly linked to anxiety during pandemics and has the potential to benefit people who experience these problems.

This study has a number of strengths and limitations. We believe that it is the first to examine the feasibility of offering people with severe COVID anxiety a psychological
intervention for their distress. While many studies have examined the prevalence and
aetiology of mental health problems during the COVID crisis, far fewer have started to
explore the impact of interventions for mental health problems, and we are not aware of
any studies examining the impact of CBT-HA for those who have coexisting health anxiety.
By using remote methods for collecting study data and delivering the intervention, we have
been able to include people in the study who were so anxious about COVID that they were
unlikely to attend face-to-face appointments.
Because we did not use a general population sample for the survey, we will not be able to
estimate the prevalence of severe COVID anxiety in the general population. Our reliance on
remote means for data collection may have put off some people from taking part in the
study. We did make provision for people taking part in the study via telephone interviews,
telephone-based therapy and signing paper copies of consent forms. However, people with
limited or no access to the internet may have been put off from taking part.
We are using the Coronavirus Anxiety Scale as our primary outcome measure.(12) Since the
start of the study, other measures have been developed which assess a wider range of
behaviours that are associated with COVID anxiety.(14) While we are also asking study
participants to describe the frequency of avoidant behaviours associated with COVID
anxiety, the psychometric properties of these questions have not be tested.
Our reliance on remote methods for recruitment and following up study participants may
have limited our ability to develop a rapport with them and this could, in turn, affect our
response rate.(55) We will keep in touch with study participants by email and offer people
an honoraria to complete the follow-up surveys in an effort to minimise loss to follow up.
While the nested clinical trial is large enough to examine the feasibility of a future
explanatory trial of CBT-HA for people with severe COVID anxiety it has not been powered
to examine the clinical effectiveness of this intervention.

Figure 1. Study flow diagram
AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

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10) Paul Bassett, Statsconsultancy Ltd, Amersham, Buckinghamshire, UK. paul@statsconsultancy.co.uk

11) Dr Kirsten Barnicot. Division of Health Services Research and Management, City, University of London, Northampton Square, London EC1V 0HB, UK. Kirsten.Barnicot@city.ac.uk

Authors’ contributions

MC is the Chief Investigator who conceived the study and led the design of the study and the study protocol and preparation of this manuscript. VL helped design the study protocol, obtained study approvals and contributed to the preparation of this manuscript. AMcQ, OS and JK recruited study participants contributed to the design of the study and the study
protocol and preparation of this manuscript. HT helped to develop the study intervention and contributed to the preparation of this manuscript. MdS, RW, PT and KB, contributed to the design of the study, the development of the study protocol and the preparation of this manuscript. JK and MC developed the statistical analysis plan. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

**Acknowledgements**

We are grateful to the members of a Combined Independent Oversight Committee which will oversee project governance, data management and review safety data (Dr John Green (chair), Professor Khalida Ismail and Mr Robert Koch). We thank Paul Bassett, freelance statistician, for reviewing the protocol and revising a draft of the Statistical Analysis Plan. We also thank members of the lived experience reference group including Manisha Ahya, Anjie Chhapia, Charlotte Green, Sandra Jayacodi, Niruben Patel and Vikas Sharma.

**Funding statement**

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**COMPETING INTERESTS STATEMENT**

Dr Helen Tyrer is author of a book on Cognitive Behaviour Therapy for treating people with Health Anxiety. Other authors declare that they have no competing interests.
REFERENCES


### Table 1: Study Assessment Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessments</th>
<th>Screening</th>
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<th>3-month follow-up</th>
<th>6-month follow-up</th>
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<td>Patient Health Questionnaire-9</td>
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<td>Work and Social Adjustment Scale</td>
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<td>Trial participants only: number and length of therapy sessions received</td>
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</table>
CBT-HA = Cognitive Behaviour Therapy for health anxiety. sHAI = Short for of Health Anxiety Inventory. TAU = Treatment as usual

Figure 1. Study flow diagram
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section/item</th>
<th>Item No</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page number</th>
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<td>Administrative information</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2b</td>
<td>All items from the World Health Organization Trial Registration Data Set</td>
<td>throughout</td>
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<td>Protocol version</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Date and version identifier</td>
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<td>Funding</td>
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<td>Sources and types of financial, material, and other support</td>
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<td>Roles and responsibilities</td>
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<td>Names, affiliations, and roles of protocol contributors</td>
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<td>Name and contact information for the trial sponsor</td>
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<td>Role of study sponsor and funders, if any, in study design; collection, management, analysis, and interpretation of data; writing of the report; and the decision to submit the report for publication, including whether they will have ultimate authority over any of these activities</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Composition, roles, and responsibilities of the coordinating centre, steering committee, endpoint adjudication committee, data management team, and other individuals or groups overseeing the trial, if applicable (see Item 21a for data monitoring committee)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
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<tr>
<td>Background and rationale</td>
<td>6a</td>
<td>Description of research question and justification for undertaking the trial, including summary of relevant studies (published and unpublished) examining benefits and harms for each intervention</td>
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<td>6b</td>
<td>Explanation for choice of comparators</td>
<td>9-10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Objectives</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Specific objectives or hypotheses</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trial design</td>
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<td>Description of trial design including type of trial (eg, parallel group, crossover, factorial, single group), allocation ratio, and framework (eg, superiority, equivalence, noninferiority, exploratory)</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Methods: Participants, interventions, and outcomes</td>
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<td>Description of study settings (eg, community clinic, academic hospital) and list of countries where data will be collected. Reference to where list of study sites can be obtained</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eligibility criteria</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Inclusion and exclusion criteria for participants. If applicable, eligibility criteria for study centres and individuals who will perform the interventions (eg, surgeons, psychotherapists)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interventions</td>
<td>11a</td>
<td>Interventions for each group with sufficient detail to allow replication, including how and when they will be administered</td>
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<td>11b</td>
<td>Criteria for discontinuing or modifying allocated interventions for a given trial participant (eg, drug dose change in response to harms, participant request, or improving/worsening disease)</td>
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<td>11c</td>
<td>Strategies to improve adherence to intervention protocols, and any procedures for monitoring adherence (eg, drug tablet return, laboratory tests)</td>
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<tr>
<td>11d</td>
<td>Relevant concomitant care and interventions that are permitted or prohibited during the trial</td>
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<tr>
<td>Outcomes</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Primary, secondary, and other outcomes, including the specific measurement variable (eg, systolic blood pressure), analysis metric (eg, change from baseline, final value, time to event), method of aggregation (eg, median, proportion), and time point for each outcome. Explanation of the clinical relevance of chosen efficacy and harm outcomes is strongly recommended</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participant timeline</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Time schedule of enrolment, interventions (including any run-ins and washouts), assessments, and visits for participants. A schematic diagram is highly recommended (see Figure)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sample size</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Estimated number of participants needed to achieve study objectives and how it was determined, including clinical and statistical assumptions supporting any sample size calculations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Recruitment 15 Strategies for achieving adequate participant enrolment to reach target sample size 5-6

**Methods: Assignment of interventions (for controlled trials)**

**Allocation:**

- **Sequence generation**
  - 16a Method of generating the allocation sequence (e.g., computer-generated random numbers), and list of any factors for stratification. To reduce predictability of a random sequence, details of any planned restriction (e.g., blocking) should be provided in a separate document that is unavailable to those who enrol participants or assign interventions 7

- **Allocation concealment mechanism**
  - 16b Mechanism of implementing the allocation sequence (e.g., central telephone; sequentially numbered, opaque, sealed envelopes), describing any steps to conceal the sequence until interventions are assigned 7

- **Implementation**
  - 16c Who will generate the allocation sequence, who will enrol participants, and who will assign participants to interventions 7

- **Blinding (masking)**
  - 17a Who will be blinded after assignment to interventions (e.g., trial participants, care providers, outcome assessors, data analysts), and how 6-7
  - 17b If blinded, circumstances under which unblinding is permissible, and procedure for revealing a participant’s allocated intervention during the trial Not applicable

**Methods: Data collection, management, and analysis**

- **Data collection methods**
  - 18a Plans for assessment and collection of outcome, baseline, and other trial data, including any related processes to promote data quality (e.g., duplicate measurements, training of assessors) and a description of study instruments (e.g., questionnaires, laboratory tests) along with their reliability and validity, if known. Reference to where data collection forms can be found, if not in the protocol 8
  - 18b Plans to promote participant retention and complete follow-up, including list of any outcome data to be collected for participants who discontinue or deviate from intervention protocols 8
| Data management | 19 | Plans for data entry, coding, security, and storage, including any related processes to promote data quality (eg, double data entry; range checks for data values). Reference to where details of data management procedures can be found, if not in the protocol |
| Statistical methods | 20a | Statistical methods for analysing primary and secondary outcomes. Reference to where other details of the statistical analysis plan can be found, if not in the protocol |
| | 20b | Methods for any additional analyses (eg, subgroup and adjusted analyses) |
| | 20c | Definition of analysis population relating to protocol non-adherence (eg, as randomised analysis), and any statistical methods to handle missing data (eg, multiple imputation) |

**Methods: Monitoring**

| Data monitoring | 21a | Composition of data monitoring committee (DMC); summary of its role and reporting structure; statement of whether it is independent from the sponsor and competing interests; and reference to where further details about its charter can be found, if not in the protocol. Alternatively, an explanation of why a DMC is not needed |
| | 21b | Description of any interim analyses and stopping guidelines, including who will have access to these interim results and make the final decision to terminate the trial |
| Harms | 22 | Plans for collecting, assessing, reporting, and managing solicited and spontaneously reported adverse events and other unintended effects of trial interventions or trial conduct |
| Auditing | 23 | Frequency and procedures for auditing trial conduct, if any, and whether the process will be independent from investigators and the sponsor |

**Ethics and dissemination**

<p>| Research ethics approval | 24 | Plans for seeking research ethics committee/institutional review board (REC/IRB) approval |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Protocol amendments</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Plans for communicating important protocol modifications (e.g., changes to eligibility criteria, outcomes, analyses) to relevant parties (e.g., investigators, REC/IRBs, trial participants, trial registries, journals, regulators)</td>
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<td>Consent or assent</td>
<td>26a</td>
<td>Who will obtain informed consent or assent from potential trial participants or authorised surrogates, and how (see Item 32)</td>
<td>11-12</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>26b</td>
<td>Additional consent provisions for collection and use of participant data and biological specimens in ancillary studies, if applicable</td>
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<td>Confidentiality</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>How personal information about potential and enrolled participants will be collected, shared, and maintained in order to protect confidentiality before, during, and after the trial</td>
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<td>Declaration of interests</td>
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<td>Financial and other competing interests for principal investigators for the overall trial and each study site</td>
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<tr>
<td>Access to data</td>
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<td>Statement of who will have access to the final trial dataset, and disclosure of contractual agreements that limit such access for investigators</td>
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<td>Ancillary and post-trial care</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Provisions, if any, for ancillary and post-trial care, and for compensation to those who suffer harm from trial participation</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
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<td>Dissemination policy</td>
<td>31a</td>
<td>Plans for investigators and sponsor to communicate trial results to participants, healthcare professionals, the public, and other relevant groups (e.g., via publication, reporting in results databases, or other data sharing arrangements), including any publication restrictions</td>
<td>12-13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>31b</td>
<td>Authorship eligibility guidelines and any intended use of professional writers</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>31c</td>
<td>Plans, if any, for granting public access to the full protocol, participant-level dataset, and statistical code</td>
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**Appendices**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Reference</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Informed consent materials</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Model consent form and other related documentation given to participants and authorised surrogates</td>
<td>Available on request</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biological specimens</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Plans for collection, laboratory evaluation, and storage of biological specimens for genetic or molecular analysis in the current trial and for future use in ancillary studies, if applicable</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
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</table>
*It is strongly recommended that this checklist be read in conjunction with the SPIRIT 2013 Explanation & Elaboration for important clarification on the items. Amendments to the protocol should be tracked and dated. The SPIRIT checklist is copyrighted by the SPIRIT Group under the Creative Commons “Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported” license.
Severe COVID anxiety among adults in the United Kingdom: protocol for a cohort study and nested feasibility trial of modified Cognitive Behaviour Therapy for Health Anxiety.

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<td>Protocol</td>
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<tr>
<td>Date Submitted by the Author:</td>
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| Complete List of Authors: | Crawford, Mike; Imperial College London, Psychological Medicine  
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| Keywords: | COVID-19, Anxiety disorders < PSYCHIATRY, Clinical trials < THERAPEUTICS |
Severe COVID anxiety among adults in the United Kingdom: protocol for a cohort study and nested feasibility trial of modified Cognitive Behaviour Therapy for Health Anxiety.


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ABSTRACT

Introduction
Some people are so anxious about COVID that it impairs their functioning. However, little is known about the course of severe COVID anxiety or what can be done to help people who experience it.

Methods and analysis
Cohort study with a nested feasibility trial with follow-up at three and six months. We recruited 306 people who were aged 18 and over, lived in the United Kingdom and had severe COVID anxiety (indicated by a score of nine or more on the Coronavirus Anxiety Scale). To take part in the nested feasibility trial, participants also had to have a score of 20 or more on the Short Health Anxiety Inventory. We excluded people from the trial if they had had COVID-19 within the previous four weeks, if they were currently self-isolating or if they were already receiving psychological treatment.

We publicised the study nationally through adverts, social media and posts on chat boards. We also recruited participants via clinicians working in primary and secondary care NHS services in London. All those in the active arm will be offered five to ten sessions of remotely delivered modified Cognitive Behaviour Therapy for Health Anxiety (CBT-HA). We will examine the proportion of participants who remain above threshold on the Coronavirus Anxiety Scale at three and six months and factors that influence levels of COVID anxiety over
six months using mixed-effects logistic regression. The key feasibility metrics for the nested trial are the level of uptake of CBT-HA and the rate of follow-up.

**Ethics and dissemination**

Approved by Leicester Central Research Ethics Committee (reference: 20/EM/0238). The results of the study will be published in peer-reviewed scientific journals.

**Trial registration:** International Standard Randomised Control Trial Number Register - ISRCTN14973494

**Strengths of the study**

- The first study to explore the feasibility of using a modified form of CBT-HA for people with severe COVID anxiety.
- Use of remote methods for data collection and delivering the intervention, which enable participation by those who are unable to attend face-to-face meetings.

**Limitations of the study**

- The study design means that we will not be able to estimate the prevalence of severe COVID anxiety in the general population.
- Reliance on remote methods for recruitment and follow-up may impact on the follow up rate.

**INTRODUCTION**

The COVID-19 pandemic is having a major impact on mental health throughout the world.(1, 2) In the UK, there was a marked increase in the proportion of people experiencing anxiety after the first wave of the pandemic,(3-5) a trend which has also been seen in many other countries.(6) Evidence from longitudinal studies in the UK suggest that a range of factors including social isolation, job insecurity and financial problems were important.(3, 7) Qualitative data collected during his period reinforce the importance of these factors and
have also highlighted disruption to work and other routines and a sense of lack of control. (8, 9)

Fear is an appropriate response to a new infectious disease like COVID-19 that threatens health, lives and livelihoods. At the start of the pandemic it was unclear how many people were likely to become infected, what the case fatality rate was and to what extent people who survived the initial illness would go on to experience long-term negative effects. Under these circumstances, fearfulness and anxiety are to be expected. Indeed, research conducted in the early phase of the pandemic found that fear of COVID-19 can be adaptive, resulting in greater adherence to public health measures aimed at limiting the spread of the virus. (10, 11) However, as the pandemic has progressed it has become clear that some people have become so anxious about COVID that it is impacting on their mental health and social functioning. People with severe COVID anxiety are more likely to report harmful use of alcohol and drugs, hopelessness and suicidal thoughts. (12, 13) To date, researchers investigating this topic have used slightly different definitions of ‘COVID anxiety’. One of the first teams to investigate the subject, led by Lee and colleagues in Virginia (USA), used a narrow definition based on the cognitive, behavioural and physiological components of anxiety. (12-13) More recently teams such as Spada and colleagues in London (UK), have adopted a broader definition that incorporates a wider range of behavioural responses including avoidance, checking and threat monitoring. (14, 15) Nonetheless, all those investigating COVID anxiety agree that core symptoms are those found in other anxiety disorders, and it impacts on behaviour and social functioning.

At the start of the pandemic it was unclear what could be done to help people who appeared to have severe COVID anxiety. In the absence of evidence, governments, professional organisations and mental health services recommended general public mental health measures, such as maintaining contact with family and friends, keeping regular routines and sleeping times, and avoiding drug use and excessive use of alcohol. (16, 17). However, in our discussions with patients referred to mental health services who had severe COVID anxiety, we found that some appeared to be suffering from health anxiety. Health anxiety, formerly referred to as hypochondriasis, is a condition in which people become overwhelmed by fears of becoming ill. (18)
Health anxiety was a major contributor to poor mental health during previous pandemics. (19, 20) Emerging evidence from public surveys in Europe, Asia and North America have shown it is also contributing to poor mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. (21-23) People with health anxiety may repeatedly search the internet and other media for information about health conditions, leading to mental distress and impaired functioning. (24, 25) People with health anxiety may misinterpret bodily sensations as symptoms of a physical illness and seek reassurance from others. (26) However, symptom monitoring and reassurance seeking may increase the amount of time that people think about being unwell and increase their level of anxiety. (18) During the COVID pandemic people may be at greater risk of health anxiety because of widespread media coverage, misinformation about COVID and uncertainty about the course of the pandemic. (27) In addition to this people are being actively encouraged to stay alert for signs of infection and get tested for COVID-19 as soon as possible if even mild signs of infection occur. This approach is an important public health strategy for limiting the transmission of COVID, (28) but it may also increase the likelihood of people who are predisposed to being anxious about their health becoming severely anxious to the extent that reduces their quality of life and impacts on their ability to function. (20)

The link between health anxiety and poor mental health seen in previous pandemics, is important because health anxiety is treatable. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for Health Anxiety (CBT-HA) leads to long-term reductions in levels of health anxiety, generalised anxiety and depression. (29, 30) In recent years the intervention has been successfully modified to enable it to be delivered remotely. (31)

As social distancing measures are relaxed and people are able to resume social and occupational roles, it is essential to understand the course and consequences of severe COVID anxiety and examine interventions that could improve people’s mental health and functioning. However, at this stage, we do not know the course of COVID anxiety or the contribution that health anxiety plays in maintaining it. While CBT-HA is effective under normal circumstances, we need to find out if it is an appropriate intervention to offer during a global pandemic, when people continue to be asked to be vigilant in spotting the signs of infection in an effort to prevent transmission of the virus.
**Objectives**

This study aims to reduce current gaps in knowledge and contribute to the development of a more effective response to health anxiety during pandemics. The study objectives are to:

1) Assess the impact of severe COVID anxiety on people’s social functioning and health-related quality of life,
2) Examine the course of severe COVID anxiety over a six-month period,
3) Identify factors that influence the course of severe COVID anxiety, and
4) Test the feasibility of a randomised controlled trial of CBT-HA for people with severe COVID anxiety and health anxiety aimed at improving mental health and social functioning.

**METHODS AND ANALYSIS**

The COVID Anxiety Project is a cohort study with a nested feasibility trial. People taking part in the study will be followed up for six months. The trial is a researcher-blind, parallel-arm, randomised controlled feasibility trial, which is compliant with Standard Protocol Items: Recommendations for Interventional Trials guidelines.(32)

**Study population and sample**

Study participants were recruited from the general public in the United Kingdom and from those in contact with primary care and secondary care mental health services in London. We aimed to recruit people who self-identified as being anxious about COVID-19 using a broad range of methods including social media sites (Facebook, Reddit, Instagram and Twitter) and mental health charities (MQ research and Anxiety UK). We publicised the study via 19 primary care practices in north and west London and through colleagues working in secondary care mental health services in Central and North West London NHS Foundation Trust, City and East London NHS Foundation Trust and West London NHS Trust.

To be eligible to take part in the cohort study, potential participants had to be aged 18 or over, live in the United Kingdom and score nine or more on the Coronavirus Anxiety Scale.(12) We used a threshold of nine or more on the CAS because this identifies those with moderate or severe functional impairment with 90% sensitivity, 85% specificity, and a false positive rate of 15%.(12)

We excluded people who had a current or previous diagnosis of a psychotic mental disorder.

To take part in the nested feasibility trial, participants also had to have a score of 20 or more
on the Short Health Anxiety Inventory (SHAI). We excluded people from the feasibility trial if, at the time of the baseline assessment, they:

- had had COVID-19 in the prior four weeks (defined as a positive antigen test or a diagnosis by a clinician),
- were self-isolating on the advice of a doctor or the NHS Test and Trace service; or
- were already receiving psychological treatment for any condition.

The cohort study will be made up of all study participants with the exception of those offered CBT-HA as part of the feasibility trial.

**Recruitment and follow-up**

Participant flow through the study is presented in figure 1. We posted adverts on social media sites and websites of mental health charities and asked staff working in primary and secondary care NHS services to direct potential participants to a dedicated study website that was hosted by Qualtrics (www.qualtrics.com). The site included a copy of the Participant Information Sheet. Potential participants were asked to sign and date an online consent form, confirm their eligibility to take part in the study, and complete the Coronavirus Anxiety Scale (see supplementary file 1). The survey was designed so that it could only be completed once from any one IP address. Those who scored nine or more on the scale and met other eligibility criteria were invited to complete the baseline survey. Those who were not eligible for the study were directed to a webpage which listed sources of mental health support.

We identified potential participants for the feasibility trial from their responses to the baseline survey. We aimed to recruit participants according to the capacity of study therapists to deliver CBT-HA to those in the active arm of the trial. When therapists had capacity to work with more people, we emailed those who recently joined the cohort study and met the additional eligibility criteria a copy of an additional Participant Information Sheet and directed them to an online consent form (see supplementary file 2). A researcher contacted these participants by telephone to answer any queries they had about the study, confirm that they met study eligibility criteria, support them to complete the online consent form and counter sign it. The researcher then contacted the trial manager who randomised the participant. Any participant who was approached to take part in the randomised trial and was ineligible or declined to take part, remained in the cohort study and will be asked to complete subsequent follow-up surveys.
Following attempts by what appeared to be automated survey-takers or ‘bots’ to take part in the study, we added a CAPTCHA question and a ‘trap’ question. The ‘trap’ question provided a range of valid and non-valid but plausible options for how the potential participant had heard about the study, with only those providing a valid response being invited to complete the baseline survey.

Between February 2021 and September 2021, we recruited 306 participants to the study. Of these, 127 (41.5%) met inclusion criteria for the feasibility trial. Among 108 participants offered a place on the trial 40 (37.0%) accepted and were randomised. The total sample for the cohort study is 285 comprising 179 who were ineligible for the trial, 19 who were eligible but not offered a place due to limited capacity of therapists to take on new patients, 68 who were offered a place on the trial but declined it and 19 people who were randomised to treatment as usual.

All participants in the cohort study and the feasibility trial will be sent an automated email to ask them to complete the three- and six-month follow-up survey. Those who have not responded after one week will be sent reminders. Trial participants who do not complete follow-up interviews will also be contacted by researchers by email (or telephone if contact number is available) with requests to complete the follow-up surveys.

Randomisation and blinding

We generated a randomisation list using the independent web-based service 'sealed envelope' (https://www.sealedenvelope.com/simple-randomiser/v1/lists). We stratified according to score on the short Health Anxiety Inventory (≤24 and ≥25) and the Dependent Personality Questionnaire (≤11 and ≥12) using a ratio of CBT-HA to control treatment of 1:1. We included the Dependent Personality Questionnaire as a stratification variable because previous research has demonstrated that the presence of dependent personality traits may influence the uptake and impact of CBT-HA.(36)

Throughout the study, the randomisation list will be encrypted and stored electronically by the trial manager. At the end of the study the randomisation list will be unencrypted and placed in the Trial Master File. The trial manager generated the allocation of each new trial participant by allocating them to the next treatment arm in the predetermined list. The participant was informed of their allocation by telephone or email, and the first therapy session scheduled for those allocated to CBT-HA. Researchers will have very little contact with participants other than to encourage them to complete follow up surveys. In the
unlikely event that researchers speak to a study participant after they have been randomised, they will start by reminding them of the need to make sure they are not aware of whether the participant was offered CBT-HA or control treatment.

Assessments

The timing and sequence of all assessments are summarised in table 1.

Table 1: Study Assessment Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessments</th>
<th>Screening</th>
<th>Baseline</th>
<th>3-month follow-up</th>
<th>6-month follow-up</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coronavirus Anxiety Scale</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single item psychosis history</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic and clinical data (Age, gender, ethnicity, household composition, occupational status, medical history)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standardised Assessment of Personality – Abbreviated Scale</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent Personality Questionnaire</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of alcohol and drugs (AUDIT-C and the single-question screening test for drug use)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generalised Anxiety Disorder 7-item scale</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short Health Anxiety Inventory</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patient Health Questionnaire-9</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work and Social Adjustment Scale</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaviours intended to reduce the risk of exposure to COVID-19</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obsessive -Compulsive Inventory</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Health-related quality of life (EQ-5D-3L)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource use (ADSUS)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serious Adverse Events</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaccination status</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Screening assessment

To take part in the cohort study, potential participants had to score nine or more on the Coronavirus Anxiety Scale (CAS).(12, 13) Developed by Sherman Lee in the USA, the scale was designed to provide a brief and reliable measure of the level of COVID-related anxiety that people experience. It comprises five questions on the frequency of anxious thoughts, somatic symptoms and sleep disturbance triggered by reading, thinking or hearing about COVID.

Baseline assessment and covariates

At baseline we collected self-reported data on demographic factors (age, gender, ethnicity, household composition, occupational status), physical health (current medical conditions), and exposure to COVID (whether they had had COVID, whether they had been admitted to hospital with COVID). We asked participants whether they live with or care for someone that might get seriously ill if infected with COVID because of their health or age and whether someone in their family or a close friend had been in hospital with COVID.

We also asked participants questions about behaviours intended to reduce the risk of exposure to COVID. These questions were developed with the help of the members of the Lived Experience Advisory Panel and covered five behaviours which people had used or heard of others using in an effort to avoid catching COVID: staying at home, avoiding shops, washing or discarding letters and parcels, increased handwashing and increased washing of clothes. People who lived with school age children were also asked whether they had stopped them attending school because of concerns about COVID.

We assessed self-reported functioning using the Work and Social Adjustment scale (WSAS)(37) and health-related quality of life using the EQ-5D-3L.(38) We assessed mental health using the Patient Health Questionnaire-9,(39) Generalised Anxiety Disorder 7-item scale,(40) Obsessive -Compulsive Inventory -Revised,(41) the short form of the Health Anxiety Inventory (SHAI),(33) the Standardised Assessment of Personality – Abbreviated Scale,(42) the Dependent Personality Questionnaire,(43) use of alcohol (AUDIT-C)(44) and a single-question screening test for drug use.(45) Finally, we asked participants to indicate...
admissions to hospital, contacts with primary and secondary care services using items from the Adult Service User Schedule. (46)

**Follow-up surveys**

All those taking part in the cohort study or the feasibility trial are asked to complete follow-up surveys three and six months after the baseline survey. The content of these surveys was similar to the baseline survey, except that we did not repeat the personality assessments (SAPAS and DPQ), and we added a question at six months on whether people had received a COVID-19 vaccination (see table 1).

In recognition of their time and support, all those who completed a baseline interview were sent a £10 gift voucher and a further £20 voucher will be offered to those that complete the six-month follow-up interview.

**Serious adverse events**

Adverse events that are identified in the survey (e.g. worsening or newly emerging clinical phenomena) will be added to an adverse event log. Data on Serious Adverse Event (SAE) including death, hospitalisation and life-threatening events are recorded at baseline, and three and six month follow-up. Therapists will also be regularly reminded that they should report all serious adverse events to the clinical trial team. SAEs will be recorded on a non-CTIMP SAE form and forwarded within 24 hours to the Chief Investigator and sponsor if judged to be unexpected and related to the research procedures. The Research Ethics Committee will be notified within 15 days of the Chief Investigator becoming aware of any such SAE.

**Interventions**

All those who agree to take part in the feasibility trial will be sent a self-help booklet developed by staff at Central and North West London NHS Foundation Trust that is derived from the work of Russ Harris on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, (47) and aims to help people cope with the COVID crisis by building resilience, identifying and implementing healthy coping strategies and general advice on health and wellbeing. (48) All participants will be able access treatment as usual, which includes access to NHS primary care services and referral on to specialist services if required.

All those in the active arm of the feasibility trial will be offered five to ten sessions of modified Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for Health Anxiety (CBT-HA) based on a published treatment manual. (49) Therapists will start by taking a detailed history of the person’s
thoughts and fears about COVID and exploring their beliefs about the impact of COVID and their ability to cope, in order to develop a formulation. Therapists will seek to identify behaviours such as symptom monitoring and reassurance seeking that could be maintaining the person’s anxiety. They will then use Socratic dialogue, diary keeping and behavioural experiments to help participants recognise the links between their thoughts and behaviour and explore ways to reduce their anxiety.

All CBT-HA sessions will be delivered by phone or videoconferencing, in accordance with the participant’s preference. Sessions will generally last between 30 and 50 minutes and be offered on a weekly or fortnightly basis. Therapists will consider delaying their final session in order to give people an opportunity to use the techniques and skills they have learned and reinforce the changes they have made. Sessions will be delivered in keeping with a published treatment manual but modified to meet the difficulties that people in the study are experiencing. Sessions will be supplemented by booklets summarising the causes of health anxiety and how patients can begin to overcome their fears.

Each therapist will record the number and length of sessions they offer participants so that we can calculate the proportion of people who are offered CBT-HA who start and complete treatment and the number of sessions that people receive.

All therapists have a degree in a health-related subject and have previous experience of delivering psychological treatments. All therapists attended a 90-minute training session by Dr Helen Tyrer and will receive fortnightly supervision sessions delivered by Dr Tyrer. The nature of modifications to the original CBT-HA model will be recorded during the study and presented alongside the results of the feasibility trial.

**Sample size**

We aimed to recruit sufficient numbers of participants to the cohort study in order to randomise 40 participants to the feasibility trial, which is a typical size for such a trial.(50) A sample of 40 participants would enable us to detect study consent and intervention completion rates of 50%, with 95% confidence intervals of +/-11% and +/- 15% respectively. Assuming a rate of follow-up at six months of 75%, our cohort of 285 study participants will generate valid data on 213 people. A sample of 196 participants in the cohort study will enable us to estimate a remission rate of 15% +/- 5%, with 95% confidence.(51)

**Data analysis**
We will start by examining the characteristics of the study sample, including the prevalence of coexisting physical and mental health conditions, levels of disturbance in work and social functioning, quality of life, and actions taken to try to avoid catching COVID using simple descriptive statistics. For the cohort study, we will examine the proportion who remain above threshold for severe COVID anxiety (9 or above on the CAS) and for COVID anxiety (5 or more on the CAS) at three and six months after completion of the baseline survey. We will examine factors that influence changes in CAS scores over this period using linear regression analysis. The analysis will be performed in two stages. Initially the separate association between each factor and CAS at each outcome timepoint will be assessed separately. CAS score at baseline will be included in all these analyses, as the inclusion of this factor will mean that the analyses reflect factors associated with change in CAS from baseline. The second stage of the analysis will examine the joint association between the factors and CAS score in a multivariable analysis. To restrict the number of variables in this stage of the analysis, only factors showing some association with the outcome (p<0.2) from the first stage of the analysis will be considered in the multivariable analyses. A selection procedure (e.g. backwards selection) will be considered to identify factors significantly associated with the outcome and to be included in the final model.

We anticipate that there will be little missing data because the platform we designed for data entry requires participants to complete every item of a questionnaire before moving on to the next section. However where the number of missing items on a given measure is 20% or less, then the missing value for the items will be substituted by the individual’s mean score for the remaining items on the scale. If there are more than 20% missing items in the scale the outcome measure will not be calculated for the participant at that time point.

Our criteria for determining the success of the feasibility study, which are based on thresholds used in other recent feasibility and pilot studies,(52, 53) are: recruitment of at least 32 participants (80% of the target study sample of 40 participants), uptake of the intervention by at least 60% of participants in the active arm of the trial, and completion of follow-up interviews at six months by 75% of study participants. All data will be analysed in SPSS version 2.0 (SPSS Inc., Chicago IL) and Stata version 16.1.(54)

Patient and public involvement
Patients and the public contributed to the development of this proposal. Charlotte Green, who chaired the Patient & Carers Research Interest group at CNWL NHS Foundation Trust, helped develop the proposal and write the lay summary. We presented plans for the study to members of a local patient research interest group via Zoom. Members expressed strong support for the study and eight agreed to join a Lived Experience Advisory Group. Feedback from the group led to us to adding new questions on the impact of COVID anxiety. Members made suggestions for how to access potential participants, which we adopted. Members of the group also highlighted the importance of tailoring CBT-HA to the needs of individual patients, including making time for them to discuss broader concerns about their mental health and the impact of the pandemic. Members of the Lived Experience Advisory Group will help us prepare a plain English summary of study findings, which we will make available to all study participants and other members of the public through the study website.

ETHICS AND DISSEMINATION

Plans for the study were approved by Leicester Central Research Ethics Committee (reference: 20/EM/0238). The study will be conducted in accordance with the recommendations for physicians involved in research on human subjects adopted by the 18th World Medical Assembly, Helsinki 1964 and later revisions.

All research activity will be carried out after participants have given consent, and this documented on either an electronic or paper form. For the cohort study, the consent forms will be completed independently by the participant without researcher support but a member of the study team will be available to answer any questions prior to consent being given. Individual consent completed for the cohort study will be linked in Qualtrics to the questionnaires completed by the same participant at each timepoint in the cohort study to ensure that the person that gave consent is completing the assessments.

Separate consent to take part in the clinical trial will be completed by the participant during a telephone call with a member of the research team. The member of the research team that facilitates the completion of the consent process on the telephone will countersign the consent form to document that they were present.

Completed electronic consent forms will be downloaded from Qualtrics, printed and stored in a Master File. A copy of their completed consent form(s) will be provided to each
participant. Any original paper consent forms will also be stored in the Master File. All participants are free to withdraw at any time from the cohort study or clinical trial without giving reasons and without prejudicing further treatment.

The Chief Investigator will preserve the confidentiality of participants taking part in the study and is registered under the Data Protection Act. Data from the consent forms and questionnaires, including identifiable personal data, will be stored on Qualtrics, an online survey tool. Qualtrics has ISO 27001 certification, meaning that it meets the international standard for managing confidential and sensitive data. All data transfers to Imperial College London use TLS encryption. Imperial College will be the data controller and there is a service-level agreement in place between Imperial College and Qualtrics.

Where questionnaires are administered during a telephone interview rather than online, the researcher will type the responses into Qualtrics. Other personal data that is recorded during the study (e.g. therapy notes from CBT sessions) will be typed directly onto the secure server of Imperial College London and will be identified using only the participant identifier. Qualtrics allows data erasure and all study data will be deleted from Qualtrics at the end of the study, following extraction for analysis.

Paper documentation will be minimal during this research. An option to complete paper consent form and screening questionnaires was offered but not taken up by any participant. The results of the study will be published in peer-reviewed scientific journals. We anticipate three key papers examining baseline data, follow-up data and the results of the feasibility trial. We will work with members of our Lived Experienced Advisory Panel to prepare a lay summary of findings from the study which we will post on the study website and will email all study participants the link to this summary.

**DISCUSSION**

This study aims to build on the results of previous research that has highlighted the impact of COVID anxiety on mental health during the current pandemic. By collecting prospective data on a sample of people who have high levels of COVID anxiety, we will examine its course over a six-month period. Having collected detailed information on demographic and clinical factors at baseline we will be able to examine the role these factors play in maintaining COVID anxiety over time. By conducting a nested feasibility trial we will be able
to examine the uptake and acceptability of an intervention for health anxiety, a condition which is strongly linked to anxiety during pandemics and has the potential to benefit people who experience these problems.

This study has a number of strengths and limitations. We believe that it is the first to examine the feasibility of offering people with severe COVID anxiety a psychological intervention for their distress. While many studies have examined the prevalence and aetiology of mental health problems during the COVID crisis, far fewer have started to explore the impact of interventions for mental health problems, and we are not aware of any studies examining the impact of CBT-HA for those who have coexisting health anxiety. By using remote methods for collecting study data and delivering the intervention, we have been able to include people in the study who were so anxious about COVID that they were unlikely to attend face-to-face appointments.

Because we did not use a general population sample for the survey, we will not be able to estimate the prevalence of severe COVID anxiety in the general population. Our reliance on remote means for data collection may have put off some people from taking part in the study. We did make provision for people taking part in the study via telephone interviews, telephone-based therapy and signing paper copies of consent forms. However, people with limited or no access to the internet may have been put off from taking part.

We are using the Coronavirus Anxiety Scale as our primary outcome measure.(12) Since the start of the study, other measures have been developed which assess a wider range of behaviours that are associated with COVID anxiety.(14) While we are also asking study participants to describe the frequency of avoidant behaviours associated with COVID anxiety, the psychometric properties of these questions have not be tested.

Our reliance on remote methods for recruitment and following up study participants may have limited our ability to develop a rapport with them and this could, in turn, affect our response rate.(55) We will keep in touch with study participants by email and offer people an honoraria to complete the follow-up surveys in an effort to minimise loss to follow up.

While the nested clinical trial is large enough to examine the feasibility of a future explanatory trial of CBT-HA for people with severe COVID anxiety it has not been powered to examine the clinical effectiveness of this intervention.
Figure 1. Study flow diagram

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

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Authors’ contributions
MC is the Chief Investigator who conceived the study and led the design of the study and the study protocol and preparation of this manuscript. VL helped design the study protocol, obtained study approvals and contributed to the preparation of this manuscript. AMcQ, OS and JK recruited study participants contributed to the design of the study and the study protocol and preparation of this manuscript. HT helped to develop the study intervention and contributed to the preparation of this manuscript. MdS, RW, PT and KB, contributed to the design of the study, the development of the study protocol and the preparation of this manuscript. JK and MC developed the statistical analysis plan. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Acknowledgements
We are grateful to the members of a Combined Independent Oversight Committee which will oversee project governance, data management and review safety data (Dr John Green (chair), Professor Khalida Ismail and Mr Robert Koch). We thank Paul Bassett, freelance statistican, for reviewing the protocol and revising a draft of the Statistical Analysis Plan. We also thank members of the lived experience reference group including Manisha Ahya, Anjie Chhapia, Charlotte Green, Sandra Jayacodi, Niruben Patel and Vikas Sharma.

Funding statement
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COMPETING INTERESTS STATEMENT
Dr Helen Tyrer is author of a book on Cognitive Behaviour Therapy for treating people with Health Anxiety. Other authors declare that they have no competing interests.
REFERENCES


CBT-HA = Cognitive Behaviour Therapy for health anxiety. sHAI = Short for of Health Anxiety Inventory. TAU = Treatment as usual

Figure 1. Study flow diagram
Consent Form for the COVID Anxiety Project

This consent form should be completed after reading the COVID Anxiety Project Information Sheet version 1.0, date 09.01.2021

Please sign your initials in each box to confirm the statements

I am 18 years or older.

I have read and understand the information sheet for the COVID Anxiety Project. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and any questions were answered satisfactorily.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without my medical care or legal rights being affected.

I agree for my data to be recorded and stored on the Qualtrics server in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR). I agree to Imperial College keeping my data and using it for the purpose of this research. I understand that the responses that I give will be anonymised and kept for 10 years.

I understand that my contact details will be kept by Imperial College until then end of the project and then deleted.

I understand that I will be offered a £30 voucher when I have completed the six month questionnaire.

I agree to take part in the COVID Anxiety Project.

Please write your full name, today’s date and add your signature below

Name of individual ___________________________ Date ___________ Signature ___________________________

Chief Investigator: Prof. Mike Crawford
Division of Psychiatry, Imperial College London
7th Floor Commonwealth Building, Du Cane Road
London. W12 0NN

IRAS Project ID: 284331

For peer review only - http://bmjopen.bmj.com/site/about/guidelines.xhtml
Consent Form for the COVID Anxiety Project Separate consent for Clinical Trial of CBT for Health Anxiety

This consent form should be completed after reading the COVID Anxiety Project: Clinical Trial Information Sheet

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions which have been answered fully

I understand that by taking part in the trial, I have an equal chance of being offered therapy or no therapy. If I allocated to the group that receives therapy, I will be asked to take part in a series of one-to-one telephone sessions of cognitive behavioural therapy.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without my medical care or legal rights being affected.

I agree to Imperial College keeping my data and using it for the purpose of this research. I understand that the responses that I give will be anonymised and kept for 10 years.

I understand that therapy sessions will be audio recorded so that a senior member of the research team may listen to the session and provide feedback to the therapist. The recordings will be deleted at the end of the study.

I consent to take part in the above study.

Please write your full name, today’s date and add your signature below

Name ______________________ Date ______________ Signature ___________________
# SPIRIT 2013 Checklist: Recommended items to address in a clinical trial protocol and related documents*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section/item</th>
<th>Item No</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<td>Role of study sponsor and funders, if any, in study design; collection, management, analysis, and interpretation of data; writing of the report; and the decision to submit the report for publication, including whether they will have ultimate authority over any of these activities</td>
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<td>Composition, roles, and responsibilities of the coordinating centre, steering committee, endpoint adjudication committee, data management team, and other individuals or groups overseeing the trial, if applicable (see Item 21a for data monitoring committee)</td>
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<td>Objectives</td>
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Recruitment Strategies for achieving adequate participant enrolment to reach target sample size 5-6

Methods: Assignment of interventions (for controlled trials)

Allocation:

Sequence generation 16a Method of generating the allocation sequence (e.g., computer-generated random numbers), and list of any factors for stratification. To reduce predictability of a random sequence, details of any planned restriction (e.g., blocking) should be provided in a separate document that is unavailable to those who enrol participants or assign interventions 7

Allocation concealment mechanism 16b Mechanism of implementing the allocation sequence (e.g., central telephone; sequentially numbered, opaque, sealed envelopes), describing any steps to conceal the sequence until interventions are assigned 7

Implementation 16c Who will generate the allocation sequence, who will enrol participants, and who will assign participants to interventions 7

Blinding (masking) 17a Who will be blinded after assignment to interventions (e.g., trial participants, care providers, outcome assessors, data analysts), and how 6-7

17b If blinded, circumstances under which unblinding is permissible, and procedure for revealing a participant’s allocated intervention during the trial Not applicable

Methods: Data collection, management, and analysis

Data collection methods 18a Plans for assessment and collection of outcome, baseline, and other trial data, including any related processes to promote data quality (e.g., duplicate measurements, training of assessors) and a description of study instruments (e.g., questionnaires, laboratory tests) along with their reliability and validity, if known. Reference to where data collection forms can be found, if not in the protocol 8

18b Plans to promote participant retention and complete follow-up, including list of any outcome data to be collected for participants who discontinue or deviate from intervention protocols 8
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<th>Section</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Data management</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Plans for data entry, coding, security, and storage, including any related processes to promote data quality (eg, double data entry; range checks for data values). Reference to where details of data management procedures can be found, if not in the protocol</td>
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<td>Statistical methods</td>
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**Methods: Monitoring**

| Data monitoring         | 21a  | Composition of data monitoring committee (DMC); summary of its role and reporting structure; statement of whether it is independent from the sponsor and competing interests; and reference to where further details about its charter can be found, if not in the protocol. Alternatively, an explanation of why a DMC is not needed | 14      |
|                         | 21b  | Description of any interim analyses and stopping guidelines, including who will have access to these interim results and make the final decision to terminate the trial | Not applicable |
| Harms                   | 22   | Plans for collecting, assessing, reporting, and managing solicited and spontaneously reported adverse events and other unintended effects of trial interventions or trial conduct | 8-9     |
| Auditing                | 23   | Frequency and procedures for auditing trial conduct, if any, and whether the process will be independent from investigators and the sponsor | 12      |

**Ethics and dissemination**

| Research ethics approval | 24   | Plans for seeking research ethics committee/institutional review board (REC/IRB) approval                                                                                                                   | 1, 11-12 |
Plans for communicating important protocol modifications (eg, changes to eligibility criteria, outcomes, analyses) to relevant parties (eg, investigators, REC/IRBs, trial participants, trial registries, journals, regulators)

Who will obtain informed consent or assent from potential trial participants or authorised surrogates, and how (see Item 32)

Additional consent provisions for collection and use of participant data and biological specimens in ancillary studies, if applicable

How personal information about potential and enrolled participants will be collected, shared, and maintained in order to protect confidentiality before, during, and after the trial

Financial and other competing interests for principal investigators for the overall trial and each study site

Statement of who will have access to the final trial dataset, and disclosure of contractual agreements that limit such access for investigators

Provisions, if any, for ancillary and post-trial care, and for compensation to those who suffer harm from trial participation

Plans for investigators and sponsor to communicate trial results to participants, healthcare professionals, the public, and other relevant groups (eg, via publication, reporting in results databases, or other data sharing arrangements), including any publication restrictions

Authorship eligibility guidelines and any intended use of professional writers

Plans, if any, for granting public access to the full protocol, participant-level dataset, and statistical code

Model consent form and other related documentation given to participants and authorised surrogates

Plans for collection, laboratory evaluation, and storage of biological specimens for genetic or molecular analysis in the current trial and for future use in ancillary studies, if applicable

Available on request

Not applicable

Not applicable

Not applicable

Not applicable

Not applicable

Not applicable

For peer review only - http://bmjopen.bmj.com/site/about/guidelines.xhtml
*It is strongly recommended that this checklist be read in conjunction with the SPIRIT 2013 Explanation & Elaboration for important clarification on the items. Amendments to the protocol should be tracked and dated. The SPIRIT checklist is copyrighted by the SPIRIT Group under the Creative Commons “Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported” license.