

UNIVERSITY OF TWENTE.

## Supporting self-help ACT with e-mail counseling

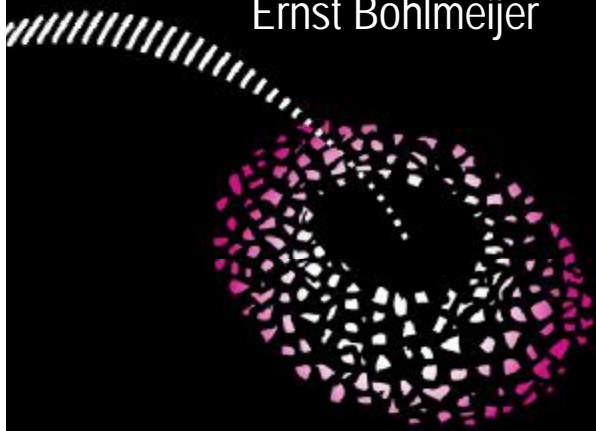
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With many thanks to:

Fonds Psychische Gezondheid  
(Fund Psychological Health)





# Contents

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- § Research on self-help ACT and mindfulness with e-mail counseling
- § Training students in providing e-mail counseling
- § How to provide supportive e-mail counseling?
- § Practicing with writing of supportive e-mails
- § Concluding remarks

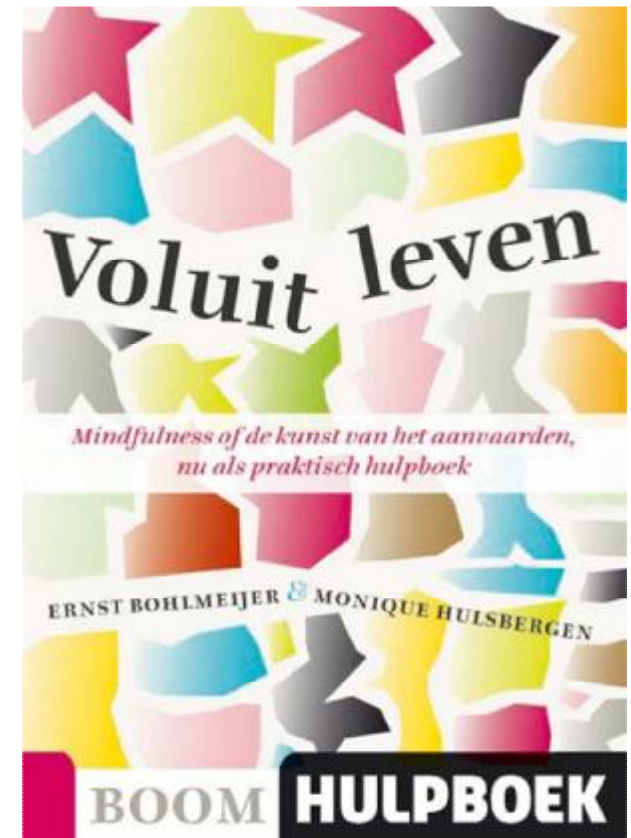




## Intervention

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- § Self-help book “Living to the fullest”
- § ACT & mindfulness
- § 9 modules, 9 weeks





# Intervention

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Three parts:

1. What is living to the fullest? (week 1-3)
2. Resources of full living (week 4-6)
3. Full living into practise (week 7-9)



## Intervention – Part 1: What is full living?

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§ Effects of EA strategies

§ Metaphors

§ Mindfulness exercises: body-scan, observing breath



## Intervention – Part 2: Resources of full living

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§ Acceptance

§ Cognitive defusion

§ Observing versus judging (observing self)

§ Daily routine with mindfulness



## Intervention – Part 3: Full living into practise

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§ Choosing values

§ Committed action



## Intervention – E-mail counseling

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§ 5 students of University Twente

§ Wednesday:

§ Student counselor send standard invitation e-mail

§ Thursday:

§ Participant responds

§ Friday:

§ Student counselor responds



## Intervention – E-mail counseling

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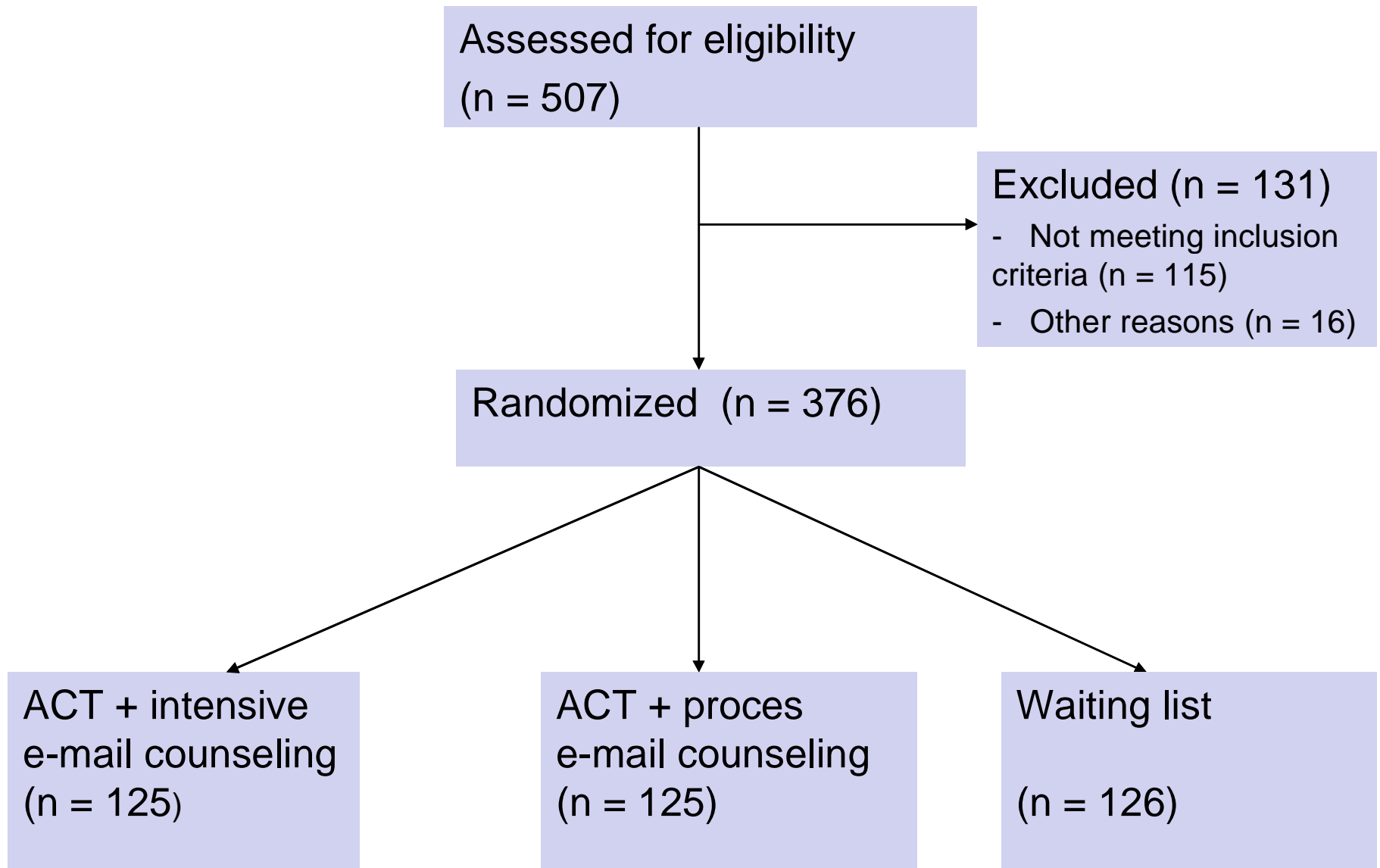
- § Self-help book with proces e-mail counseling
  - § What have you done in the past week?
  
- § Self-help book with proces AND intensive e-mail counseling
  - § What have you learned or discovered in the past week?
  - § 1 question every week
  
- § Waiting list



## Participants

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- § Adults with mild to moderate depression or anxiety
- § Recruitment via advertisement
  - § “I want to get more out of my life!”
- § 625 people responded!





## Measurements

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- § Baseline and post-intervention (after 9 weeks)
  
- § Experimental conditions: 3 weeks, 6 weeks, follow-up (three months)
  - § Depression (CES-D)
  - § Anxiety (HADS-A)
  - § Acceptance (AAQ-II)
  - § Mindfulness (FFMQ)
  - § Mental health (MHC-SF)



## Measurements and drop-out

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Condition	Completed all measurements	Drop-out percentage
ACT + intensive e-mail counseling (n = 125)	75%	22%
ACT + proces e-mail counseling (n = 125)	79%	18%
Waiting list (n = 126)	98%	



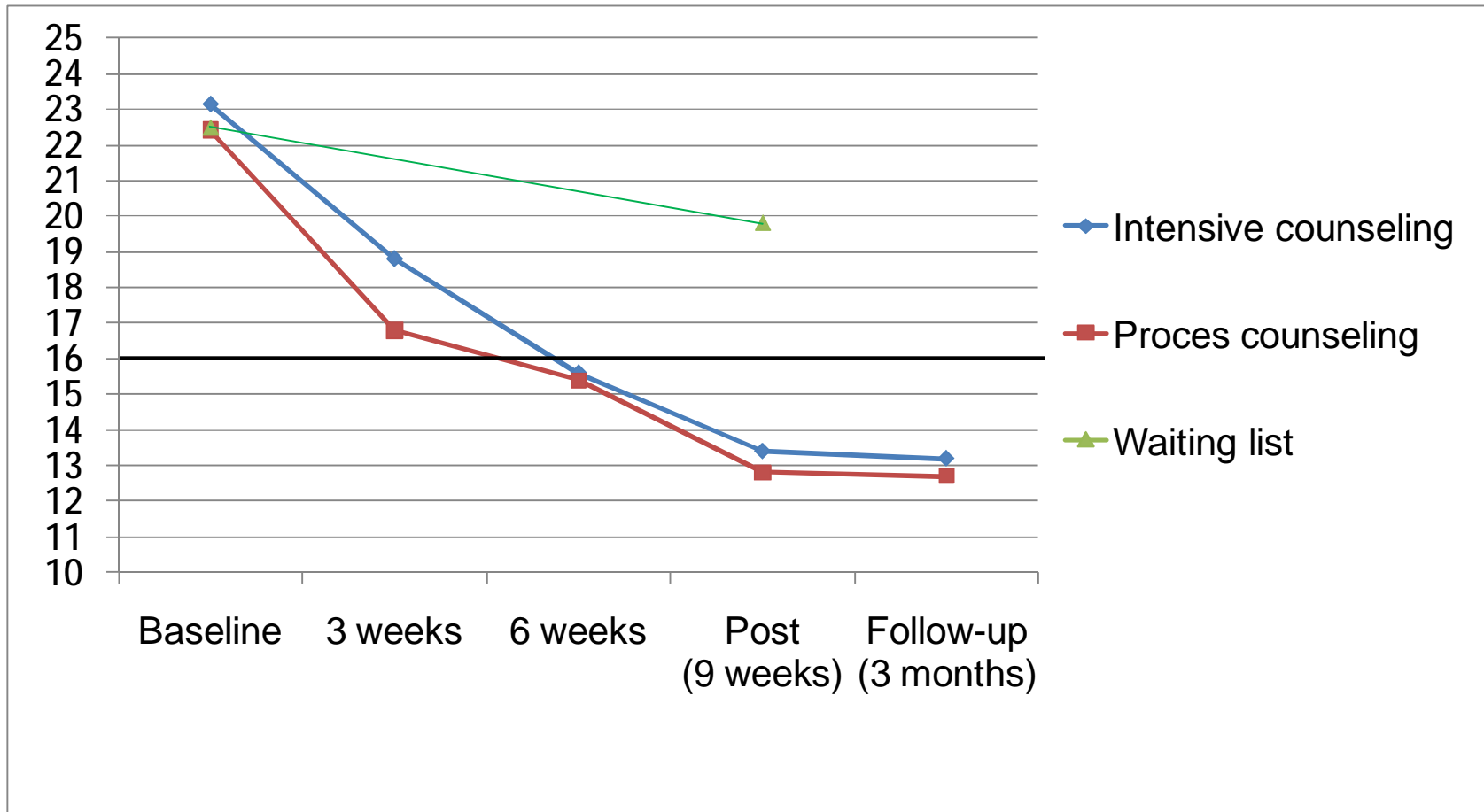
## Participants

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- § Female (69.7%)
- § Married (43.7%)
- § Highly educated (78%)
- § Mean age: 42 years (SD = 11)
- § 83% clinically relevant symptoms of depression
- § 78% clinically relevant symptoms of anxiety

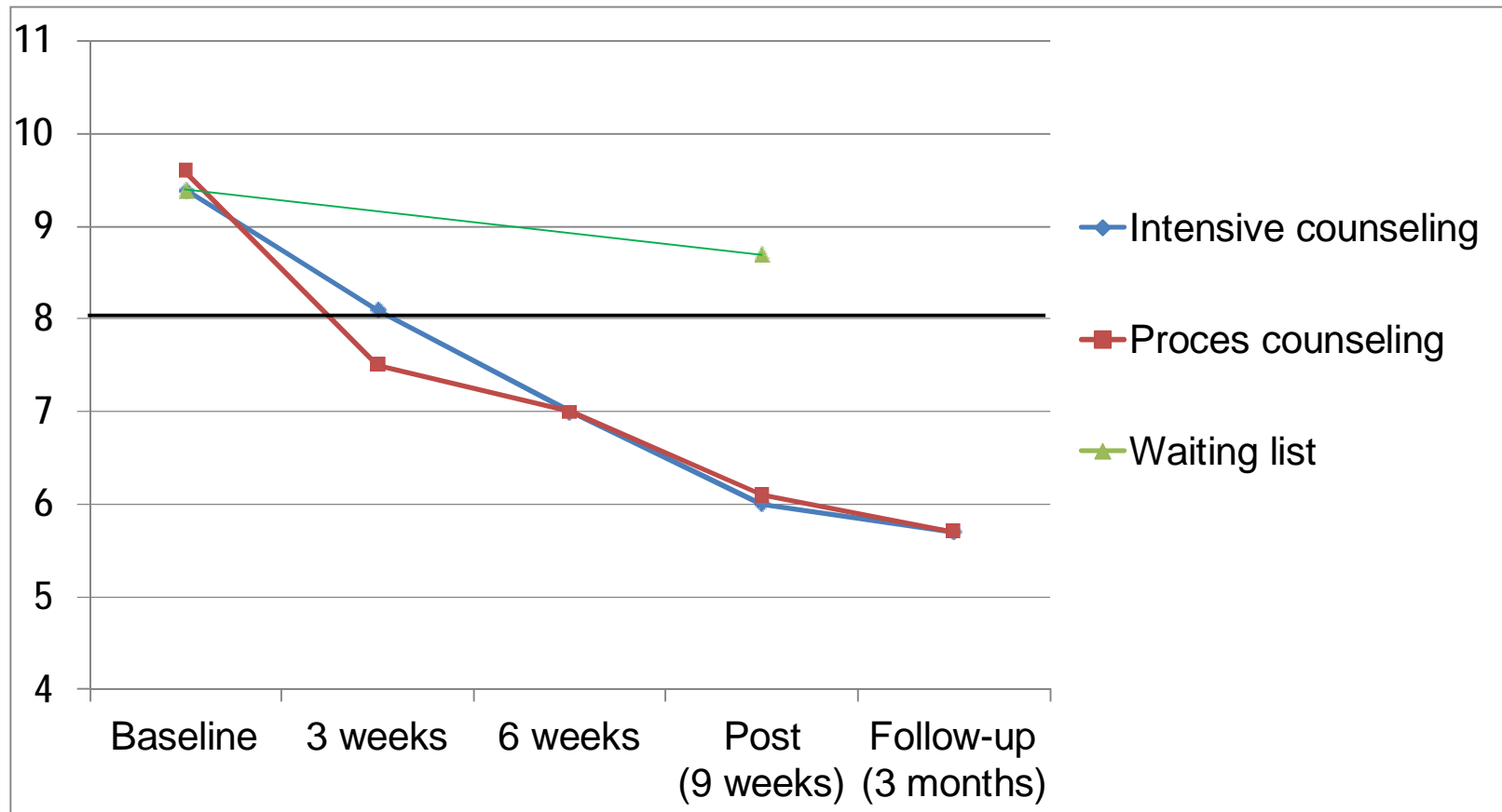
## Results: Depression (CES-D; 0-60)

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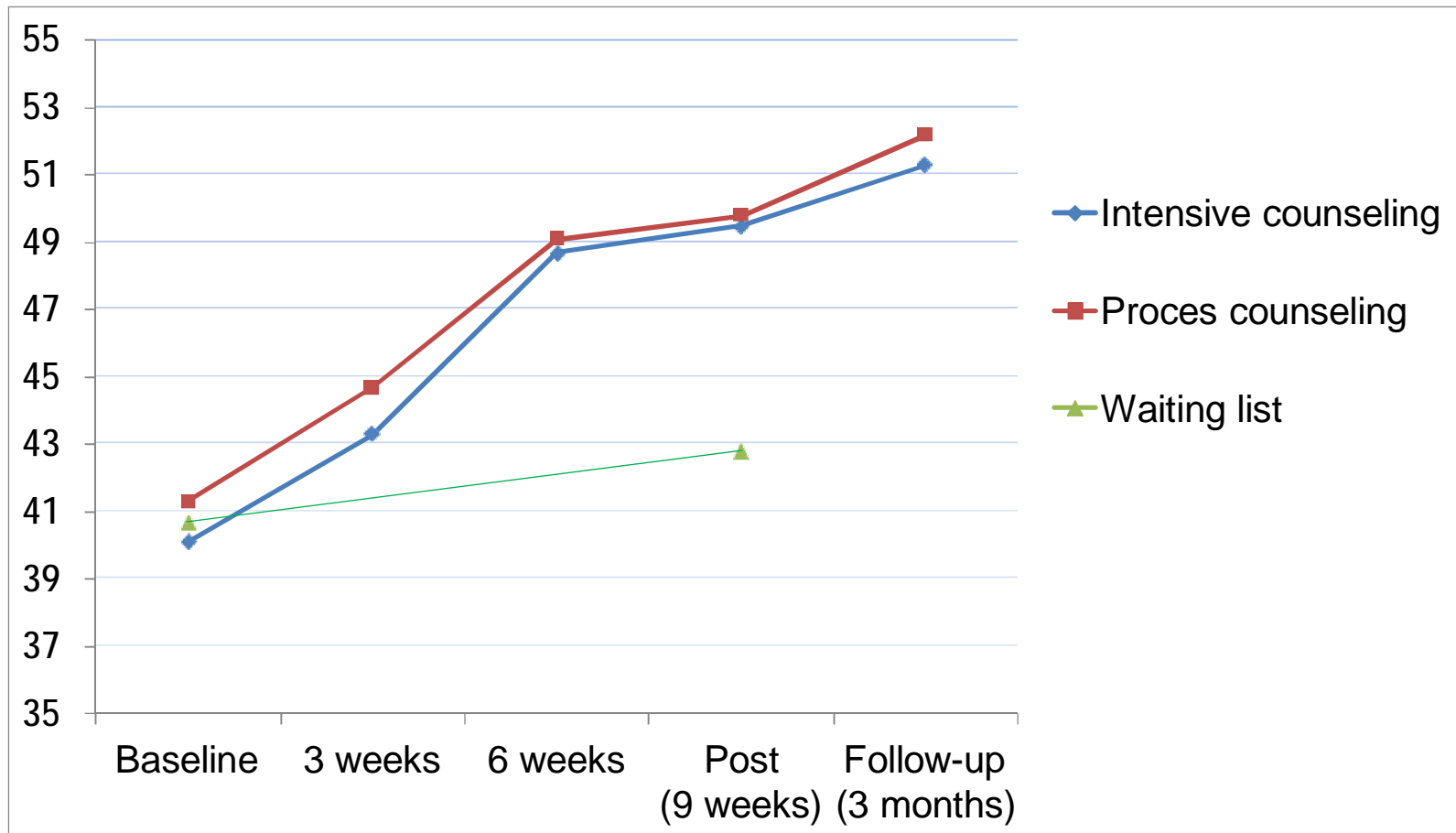
## Results: Anxiety (HADS-A; 0-21)

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## Results: Acceptance (AAQ-II; 10-70)

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## Results

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Measures	Effect sizes
Depression	.82
Anxiety	.86
Acceptance	.70
Mindfulness	1.09
Mental health	.70



## Conclusion

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- § Self-help ACT with minimal e-mail contact is effective
- § Further research: ACT online





# Training of student counselors

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Before the training

- § 9 weeks working through the book
  - § Reading the text
  - § Making all exercises
  - § Mindfulness exercises
  - § Writing an e-mail as if you are a participant



## Training session 1

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- § Discussing experiences of working through the self-help book
- § Hexaflex and inflexahex
- § Analysing own e-mail in terms of inflexahex
- § Exercising with writing feedback e-mail
  - § How do you experience the feedback e-mail as a client?



## Assignment

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- § One e-mail as a client to all counselors
- § All counselors write a feedback e-mail and send it
- § Studying all standardised invitation e-mails
- § Deciding on need for supervision



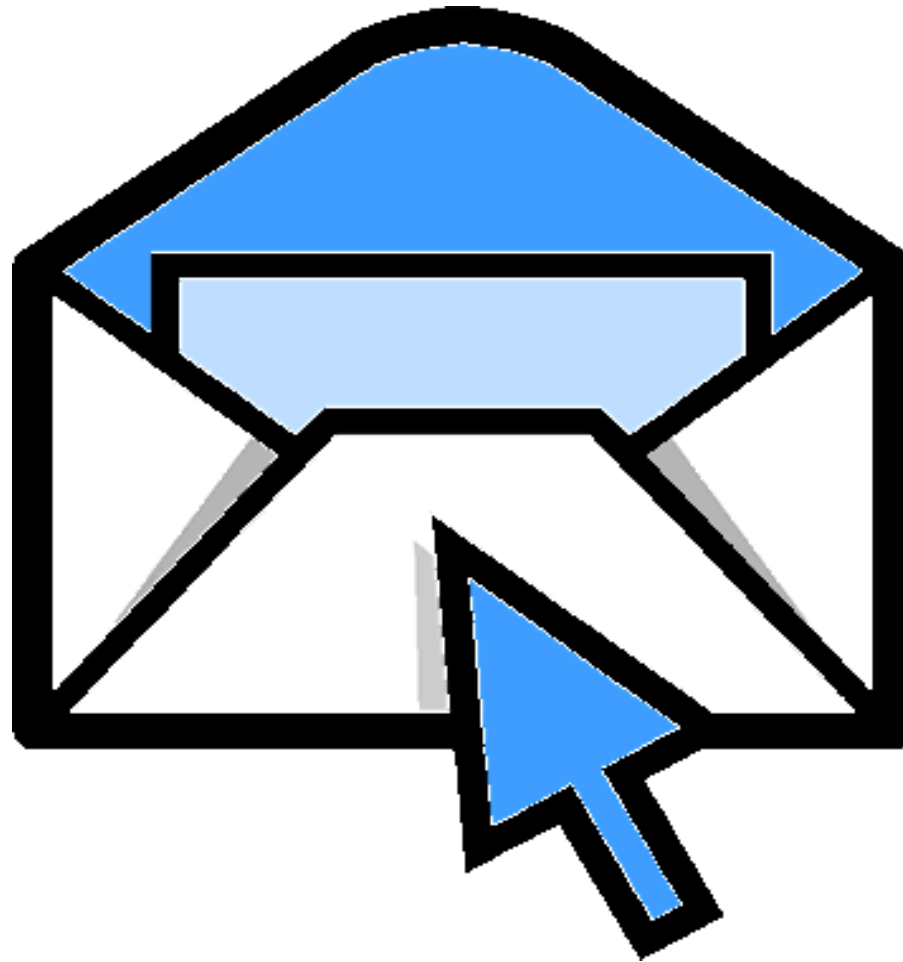
## Training session 2

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- § Mindfulness exercise
- § Discussing standardised invitation e-mails
- § Discussing experiences of writing and receiving e-mails as a participant and as a counselor
- § Developing the list of tips and rules
- § Supervisory needs:
  - § Week 1: all e-mails
  - § Week 2–4: 2-4 e-mails per counselor
  - § Weeks 5–9: “difficult” e-mails

# Practicing with writing an e-mail

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## Tips and rules: structure of e-mails

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### § Beginning

§ Always a greeting

§ Compliment

### § Middle

§ Reaction on participants e-mail

§ Answer questions

§ Offer suggestions

### § End:

§ Preview of next chapter

§ 'Sign off'

§ Looking forward to ...



## Tips and rules: content

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- § Empathy (showing that counselor read with attention)
  - § I can see that ...
  - § I have a sense that ...
  - § I think I can hear you saying .... (if you're not sure)
- § Experiential avoidance (careful probing, stimulate exploration)
  - § I wonder how you experience .....
- § Encourage to go on
  - § Remember why you started this course ...
  - § Use ACT processes at the appropriate moment
- § Scrutinise counselors' cognitive defusion



Questions?

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Thank you for your attention!

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## Results – proces evaluation

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- § To what extent did you find XXX useful?
- § not usefull at all (1) – very usefull (5)

Very usefull (above 4.2)

- § Acceptance
- § Mindfulness exercises
- § Cognitive defusion
- § Value-based actions

Less usefull:

- § Methaphors (3.8)

Dear Sarah,

I have read the first chapter twice and I'm now working on the second chapter. The exercises of chapter one took me more time. I try to be very accurate, with the consequence that activities and the exercises take longer. That's one of the things that bothers me ....;-)

I am thinking about the things that bother me and how long this bothers me. This results in that I unintentional start to search for the reasons and before I know I have analysed my whole history. That's probably not the aim.

I will finish the second chapter this week and, if possible, I will also carry out the exercises of the second chapter.

I didn't succeed in performing the body scan every day. But, starting with next week, I will take more time for that.

Untill now, I have no questions.

Goodbye for now,

K.

Dear K.,

Thank you for your response. It is good to hear that you started with the course.

Try not to spend too much time on each exercise. Bear in mind that you can't perform them wrongly. The answers you give at this moment will probably change during the course. So, it doesn't help very much to try to answer them perfectly. Anyway, you've already realized that this bothers you.

It is not unusual that you analyse your history when you're thinking about the things that bother you and for how long this bothers you. The aim of this first chapter is to become aware. What's burdening you? What keeps you from 'living to the fullest'? And what are the important values in your life?

It is nice that you started the mindfulness exercise. It's important to perform the mindfulness exercises regularly if you want them to be helpful. So it would be helpful if you could find some more time for them.

Best wishes,

Sarah

Dear Sarah,

I like it that I pay attention to myself by starting the course. This is already a plus. You're going to start to think more specifically about yourself. I also noticed that I restrict working on the course to the weekends. This is insufficient. I will try for the next week to do the course on more days of the week.....

Hello Sarah,

After reading the third chapter and making a start with answering the questions, it is already Wednesday. Your mail with questions arrives.

The last days, I told myself that I was busy, that it was too much for me, that I was still busy dealing with the message of the second chapter (not only experiencing, but also accepting). But now, I tell myself: “L. you have been avoiding”. Every time I browsed through the chapter and then I felt “beuh”, all those past messages, the confrontation with painful moments, and the length of the chapter.

So, ....I did not succeed in keeping the diary this week. This is unpleasant for me, and for nobody else.

But apart from my avoidance, I found the chapter very comprehensive. Could I work on this chapter one more week; because I want to master mediation, or do I have to go on?

With kind regards

L.

Dear L.,

To start with your question, I would advise you to go on with the next chapter. You can extend the course with one week, so you could go on with the previous chapter. However, don't you think you surrender to your avoidance by postponing?

The whole course contains mindfulness exercises. You could alternate those of this week with the ones of the previous week. Also, the diary assignment is a nice exercise that comes back during the course. You can keep the diary this week.

Going on is a permanent learning process. Maybe you will have the feeling that you're not ready more often, but you can be assured that things come back during the course.

I am curious about your choice. Anyway, I wish you success for the next week.

Best wishes

Sarah

Repons of participant in week 4

Thank you Sarah, your answer is clear. I will still do the diary exercise this week. I look forward to the fourth chapter. The content fits exactly with the things I find problematic. I know Mister Criticism and Misses Deliberation all my life. And the wrestle button, can go out as far as I am concerned.....