Empower your mind to embrace your life: ACT intervention for early-onset Parkinson's disease and acceptability data

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Introduction

Early diagnosis of Parkinson's disease (onset of motor symptoms between 21-50 years) is becoming **increasingly common** and carries **unique challenges** for patients in several areas of their lives (e.g., family, career, relationships, finances).

Despite the centrality of motor manifestations, Parkinson's disease is also characterised by **non-motor symptoms** (e.g., fatigue, pain, depression, anxiety), which are **associated** with significant **psychological distress**, **functional impairment**, and **reduced quality of life**. While pharmacological therapy is considered the gold standard treatment, emerging evidence suggests that **Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)** may offer additional **benefits** for Parkinson's disease patients. However, current evidence remains limited.

To address this gap and advance clinical care of early-onset Parkinson's disease (EOPD), we developed the **Empower your mind to embrace your life** – a **novel group-based**, **online psychological intervention** integrating **ACT components** specifically **tailored to** individuals with **EOPD**.

Aims: 1) To present an overview of the Empower your mind to embrace your life intervention; 2) To access the acceptability of the intervention

Method

Design: Feasibility trial with a two-arm, parallel, randomised design
Recruitment: Routine medical appointment at Neurology Departments of ULS-Coimbra and Hospital da Luz Coimbra – identification of potential participants by neurologists

Online interview for **eligibility assessment** conducted by a psychologist of the research team

Inclusion criteria:
- Diagnosis of early-onset Parkinson's disease
- H&Y stage 1-2.5
- < 65 years
- Fluent Portuguese speaker
- Regular internet access
- Willingness to use Zoom

Exclusion criteria:
- Cognitive impairment
- Severe mental disorder
- Suicidal ideation
- Pregnancy
- Currently receiving any form of psychological intervention

Assessments:

Allocation (ratio 1:1): Experimental group (*Empower your mind to embrace your life intervention*) vs. Control group (*waitlist*)

Intervention

Empower your mind to embrace your life
- Manualised 8-week intervention (90-minute sessions)
- Videoconference-delivered
- Group format (5-6 participants per group)
- Led by two psychologists with training in ACT
- Therapeutic techniques derived from ACT psychological flexibility model

Themes and contents of each session	
1. Welcome to "Empower your mind to embrace your life"	Living with EOPD; Mindfulness
2. A first step towards change	Creative hopelessness; Mindfulness
3. Discovering the power of human mind	Cognitive defusion; Self-as-context
4. What moves you?	Values; Committed action
5. You have a choice!	Committed action; Cognitive defusion
6. Embracing Parkinson's disease with acceptance	Acceptance; Gratitude for the body
7. Take care of yourself	Acceptance; Committed action
8. Towards a more meaningful life	Self-as-context; Acceptance

Measures: **Acceptability questionnaire** (collected online at T1)
- Overall level of satisfaction with the program
- Utility of intervention components
- Perceived usefulness of the intervention
- Intention to recommend the program to others
- Qualitative insights: feedback and suggestions

Results

Participants: Eleven patients (5 males and 6 females)
Age: *M* = 53,09; *SD* = 4,16
Disease stage (H&Y): *M* = 1,32; *SD* = 0,51
Age at diagnosis: *M* = 44,45; *SD* = 5,57
Disease duration (years): *M* = 8,45; *SD* = 4,48

Dropout: 2 participants (18,18%)
- One after the first session (personal reasons)
- One after the fifth session (personal reasons)

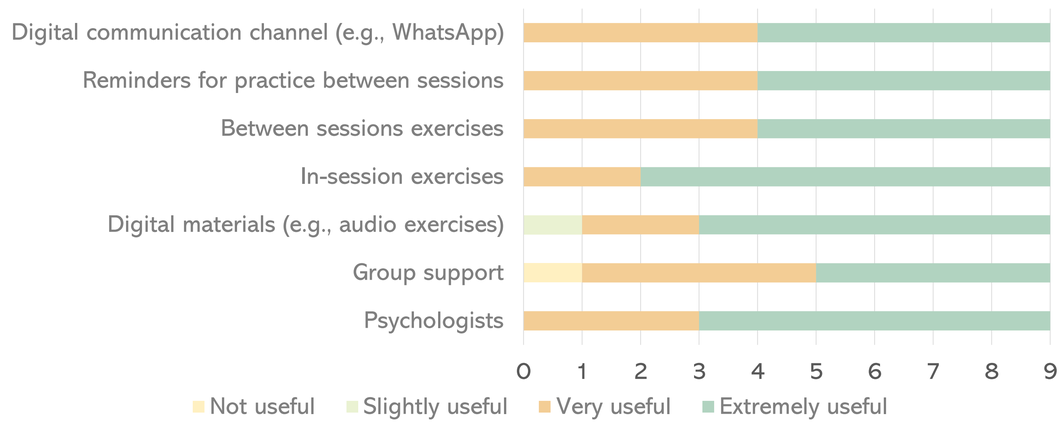
Attendance: Ranged from 1 to 8 sessions (*M* = 6,09; *SD* = 1,92)
- Of the total sample, 81,82% reached treatment completer status (i.e., attended at least 70% of the sessions)
- Main reasons to not attend: problems with internet (*n* = 1), holidays (*n* = 2), surgery (*n* = 1), work commitments (*n* = 5), family commitments (*n* = 1), forgetting the session (*n* = 1)

Satisfaction and perceived utility of the intervention

Table 1. Participants assessment of the acceptability of the intervention (*N* = 9)

	M	*SD*	*Minimum*	*Maximum*
Satisfaction with the intervention	9.11	1.54	6	10
Utility of the intervention	9.44	0.73	8	10
	No (*n*; %)	Yes (*n*; %)		
Content tailored to the specificities of EOPD	0 (0%)	9 (100%)		
Recommend this program to other patients	0 (0%)	9 (100%)		

Figure 1. Utility of intervention components (*N* = 9)



Participants feedback about the intervention

"*It was a different experience, but one that helped us a lot.*" (53-year-old participant)

"*I really enjoyed this initiative. I think this program should be implemented for all Parkinson's patients in the early stages of the disease.*" (50-year-old participant)

"*Self-care and acceptance are fundamental to our daily lives. I was neglecting myself and, despite being very optimistic, I had some issues to resolve. Here, I took the first steps. Thank you.*" (49-year-old participant)

Discussion

These results were encouraging, as most participants reported a **high level of satisfaction** with the **Empower your mind to embrace your life** intervention and considered it **useful**.
Overall, findings suggest the **acceptability** of this **innovative ACT-based intervention** and underscore its **relevance** for the context of **EOPD**.

References

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Trial Registration: ClinicalTrials.gov NCT07310147