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Posted Date: 26 May 2023

doi: [10.20944/preprints202305.1904.v1](https://doi.org/10.20944/preprints202305.1904.v1)

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Article

Patient-Oriented Research to Improve Internet-Delivered Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for People of Diverse Ethnocultural Groups in Routine Practice

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Abstract: There has been limited research on improving Internet-delivered Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (ICBT) in routine online therapy clinics that serve people from diverse ethnocultural groups (PDEGs). This article describes a patient-oriented adaptation approach used to address this gap in research. A working group consisting of people with lived experience, community stakeholders, ICBT clinicians, managers, and researchers, was formed. The working group examined archival feedback on ICBT from past clients who self-identified as being from diverse ethnocultural backgrounds (N=278) and results of interviews with current patients (N=16), community stakeholders (N=6), and clinicians (N=3). The archival data and interviews revealed the majority of the patients reported being satisfied with and benefitting from ICBT. Suggestions for improvement were not related to the cognitive-behavioural model and techniques, but rather to making treatment materials more inclusive. Consequently, the ICBT adaptation focused on adding content related to cultural influences on mental health, addressing stigma, diversifying case stories, examples and imagery, adding audiovisual introductions, and replacing English idioms with more descriptive language. Moreover, further training was offered to clinicians and efforts were made to improve community outreach. This study demonstrates a process for using patient-oriented research to improve ICBT within routine care serving patients of diverse backgrounds.

Keywords: internet-delivered therapy; depression; anxiety; cultural adaptation; patient-oriented research; digital health

1. Introduction

Internet-delivered cognitive behaviour therapy (ICBT) represents a growing method of offering mental health care whereby treatment materials are shared online as lessons. This form of care is often offered with therapist support provided via secure messages or phone calls. There is a strong body of research showing that this approach is effective and can produce similar results to face-to-face therapy [e.g., 1, 2], while also reducing common barriers to receiving mental health care related to location, limited time, and stigma [3]. It represents an important development as mental health problems are prevalent, disabling and often under-treated due to barriers to care. Specifically, one in five Canadians are estimated to experience a mental illness in any given year and one in three are likely to experience a mental illness during their lifetime [4]. Major depression and anxiety disorders affect approximately 5.4% and 4.6%, respectively, of the Canadian population [5]. Since the

coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, People of Diverse Ethnocultural Groups (PDEGs)¹ have reported higher rates of mental health concerns [e.g., 6, 7, 8].

Despite the prevalence of mental illness, a large number of Canadians do not seek and/or receive adequate psychological and mental health services for their problems [9,10]. A wide variety of barriers contribute to the under-treatment of mental health conditions such as a shortage of psychological and psychiatric care practitioners and the consequent excessive wait times, lack of sufficient Federal as well as provincial funding to cover the cost of mental health services, language obstacles, and a lack of knowledge on where to access services [10,11]. Unfortunately, this leads to many Canadians enduring physical and mental disability and suffering, economic productivity losses, and an elevated risk of mortality by suicide due to unmet mental health care needs [see 9, 10, 12, 13]. Underutilization of mental health care appears to be even greater among PDEGs compared to other Canadians [e.g., 13, 14, 15] and PDEGs often struggle to overcome cultural barriers (e.g., stigma, perceived lack of cultural fit, help sought within family), which leads to poor access to, and utilization of existing formal mental health services [16–20]. Moreover, due to differences in cultural backgrounds, level of acculturation, lived experiences, place of dwelling (urban vs rural), not all PDEGs in Canada have the same understanding of, access to, or the perceived need for, the same type and quality of mental health care and services [e.g., see 19, 21, 22, 23]. Furthermore, this lack of access and utilization of mental health services by PDEGs has been attributed to limited availability of culturally informed services, and service providers [11,18,24]. In terms of ICBT, despite the benefits of ICBT as another option for mental health care, it has its own potential additional barriers. It requires access to a computer/smart phone, internet service, and a basic knowledge on the use of these devices and services [see 25, 26] and these issues may be more prominent among PDEGs.

1.1. Cultural influence and the need for cultural adaptation

It is fairly established in cross-cultural research literature that social, cultural and contextual factors influence every aspect of mental health and illness. These factors play an important role in the genesis (e.g., what gets defined as a problem), experience, expression of symptoms, meaning attributions, coping, help seeking, and treatment outcomes of mental illnesses [e.g., 27, 28, 29]. Recognising the important role that culture (e.g., shared traditions, worldviews, norms, beliefs, values, knowledge, behaviors, etc.) plays in mental health and illness, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition [DSM-5; 30] introduced “Cultural Concepts of Distress” (CCD) and acknowledges that mental health concerns are “locally shaped entities” and all forms of mental illnesses are influenced by culture [30]. Likewise, a report published by *the Lancet Commissions on Culture and Health* highlights “the systematic neglect of culture in health and health care is the single biggest barrier to the advancement of the highest standard of health worldwide” [31].

An extensive body of literature supports with nearly universal agreement that a culturally informed² approach to mental health care and research is essential to avoid potential mistakes in assessment, diagnosis, treatment, and intervention program development and implementation [e.g., 18, 21, 32, 33-39]. Though less has been reported on the cultural adaptations of internet-based psychological interventions, systematic reviews and meta-analytic evidence support that culturally adapted face-to-face and internet-based psychological interventions are superior in effectiveness when compared to non-adapted interventions for PDEGs [e.g., 40, 41-45]. Furthermore, two meta-

¹ For the lack of better terminology, we have used the phrase People of Diverse Ethnocultural Groups (PDEGs) to refer to all but self-identified Caucasian/White people in this study. In this regard, PDEGs encompass Indigenous Canadians as well as “visible minorities” or “racialized minorities” such as black, Asian, and Latin American. Other terms for this group that are used in the literature include visible minorities, racialized minorities, or Black, Indigenous People of Colour (BIPOC).

² Also referred to as: culturally competent, culturally sensitive, culturally responsive, culturally commensurate, culturally attuned, culturally congruent, culturally relevant, culture centered, etc.

analyses found that greater treatment effectiveness was associated with higher number of cultural adaptations made to various elements of the intervention [42,46].

Several theoretical guides with a range of recommended methods –e.g., ecological validity [47], surface vs. deep structure adaptation [48], heuristic framework [49], cultural accommodation model [50], formative method [51], integrated strategy [52], cultural treatment adaptation framework [53], framework with three cultural adaptation elements (cultural concepts of distress, treatment components, and treatment delivery) [54], etc.– have been published to facilitate cultural adaptation of evidence-based psychological interventions. Although this scholarship provides important guidance in cultural adaptation of the content and process of psychological interventions to a specific cultural group, none of it is readily implementable in multicultural settings [see 37, 52-55].

The [ernal,Bonilla[47] ecological validity model has been widely used and has had major influence in subsequent development of the aforementioned guides [56]. This model recommends making adaptation in eight dimensions or elements of psychological intervention. These include: (1) language (i.e., use of culturally appropriate and syntonic language, clients' native language); (2) persons (i.e., ethnocultural matching of client and therapists, therapeutic relationship); (3) metaphors (i.e., use of cultural specific idioms or symbolic expressions); (4) content (i.e., use of cultural knowledge about values, customs, and traditions shared by specific ethnocultural groups); (5) concepts (i.e., use of culturally informed concepts of illness); (6) goals (i.e., formulating culturally informed and consensual treatment goals); (7) methods (i.e., following culturally informed procedures to achieve treatment goals); and (8) context (considering client's social, economic, and political context including immigration history, level of acculturation, developmental stages, availability of social support) [also see 38]. However, considering that, for example, over 30% of people in the 2021 Canadian census identified as belonging to PDEGs, with more than 450 diverse ethnocultural (including Caucasian subcultures) and 450 linguistic origins [57], it would be extremely challenging, if not impossible, to culturally adapt each of the recommended elements of psychological intervention in a multicultural setting [see 58]. Such an undertaking would require making, stereotypical assumptions and sweeping generalisation about PDEGs which contradicts the very purpose of cultural adaptation of psychological interventions. Further, there are concerns around fit vs. fidelity in comprehensive cultural adaptation [37,53], especially around what elements of the intervention should be culturally adapted as we do not fully understand the "key ingredients" and mechanisms of change in psychological interventions [54,55,59]. Furthermore, as comprehensive cultural adaptation involves investing significant resources, and the fact that general methods of interventions work fine in most contexts [60], it could be argued that cultural adaptation should be initiated only when there is evidence that the original intervention program does not have a cultural fit to the target population or loses effectiveness due to lack of cultural fit [see 61]. Nonetheless, in light of growing ethnocultural diversity in the Canadian population and the consequent diversity in cultural concepts of distress, efforts are required to better understand and address challenges faced by PDEGs in order to reduce the current high-unmet mental health care needs of Canadians and ensure culturally informed mental health care for PDEGs.

1.2. *Patient-oriented approach*

There is a gap in research on how to make improvements to ICBT in routine care, where individuals come from diverse ethnocultural backgrounds, and comprehensive cultural adaptation to all possible groups is not realistic. One potential approach that is generally recommended in Canada to make improvements to healthcare is a patient-oriented research approach [see 62, 63]. Patient-oriented research advocates for patients³ involvement as partners in all areas (e.g., design, conduct, evaluation, and dissemination) of health research to ensure that patients receive the right treatment, in the right place at the right time [62,63]. This approach focusses on patient-identified priorities and outcomes, a multidisciplinary team approach, and aims to integrate knowledge into

³ Patients here refers to people with lived experiences as well as informal caregivers, including family and friends [63].

practice [62,63]. As such, a patient-oriented approach can be used to adapt ICBT to improve access and engagement in ICBT by PDEGs and may provide an alternative to cultural adaptation as suggestions on what and how to adapt emanates directly from the patients and other stakeholders. In this approach, the PDEG patients and other stakeholders involved can assess the content and delivery process of ICBT, and then indicate what elements of ICBT need to be tailored to make it accessible and engaging for individuals of their ethnocultural background. Given that patient-oriented research emphasizes reflecting on what matters to patients the most, use of this approach does not impose disciplinary thinking or preconceived assumptions about PDEGs and about cultural influences on mental health and illness during the adaptation process.

Although there are no clear guidelines yet on how to conduct and engage stakeholders in patient-oriented research [see 64] and by implication in adapting psychological interventions, engaging PDEG patients and relevant stakeholders in health research and clinical practice can be expected to generate diverse perspectives and knowledge to guide improvements in healthcare services [see 65, 66-69].

1.3. Objectives

The purpose of the current paper is to describe a patient-oriented research process to improve ICBT for use within a routine online mental health clinic that serves individuals from diverse ethnocultural backgrounds. In this study, we formed a multidisciplinary working group made up of diverse stakeholders and specifically sought to answer the following question: "How can ICBT be improved for PDEGs within a routine online mental health clinic?" The study was conducted in three phases: 1) archival qualitative data analysis of written feedback on ICBT from past users; 2) interviews with current patients, community members, and therapists to identify perceptions of ICBT; and 3) iterative ICBT improvements based on phase 1 and 2.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Setting

The current research was conducted within the Online Therapy Unit (OTU), which is an online mental health clinic based at the University of Regina, but funded by the Government of Saskatchewan to deliver ICBT to residents from across Saskatchewan on a routine basis. According to the 2021 Canadian census, more than 1.13 million people have made Saskatchewan their home. Saskatchewan's population is primarily Euro-Canadian Caucasian, however, 17.0% self-identify as Indigenous peoples (e.g., First Nations, Metis, and Inuit), and 14.4% of self-identify as from other diverse ethnocultural groups [57]. A recent analysis of ICBT utilization trends over six years (i.e., 2013-2019) [see 70] shows that there has been a consistently lower (~10%) participation from the PDEGs in the ICBT Course. Research ethics approval for this study was obtained from the ethics board of University of Regina and all the research participants signed an informed consent form before study participation.

2.2. Wellbeing Course

The main ICBT program offered by the Online Therapy Unit is the Wellbeing Course (the Course here forward) originally developed at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia [71] and implemented and researched broadly within Australia. The Course is transdiagnostic and designed to address both depression and anxiety symptoms. To access the course, patients begin by completing an online screening questionnaire followed by a telephone interview. During this interview, ICBT service providers determine if patients meet basic eligibility for the Course (i.e., ≥ 18 years of age, Saskatchewan resident, endorse depression and/or anxiety, have access to a computer and the Internet, are able to provide a healthcare provider emergency contact), or are experiencing concerns outside of the scope of the Course (i.e., are at a high risk for suicide, significant alcohol and/or drug usage, or experiencing unmanaged psychosis or mania). Clients who do not meet eligibility criteria, are directed to more appropriate local services. The Course includes five online psychoeducational

lessons addressing (a) an understanding of cognitive behavioural model and identifying symptom cycle; (b) thought monitoring and challenging; (c) de-arousal strategies and pleasant activity planning; (d) graded exposure and behavioural activation; and (e) relapse prevention. Each lesson consists of psychoeducational slides, additional downloadable readings and activities (i.e., do-it-yourself (DIY) guides, frequently asked questions, and case stories). Patients can also review additional resources addressing a wide range of topics to help them deal with problems not covered in the five core lessons. The Course is completed over ~ 8 weeks with once-weekly therapist support offered via secure email message, or on occasion, via telephone. Therapists review patients' progress through weekly symptom measures completed before each lesson, answer patients' questions about the course and provide guidance on how they can develop their knowledge and skills gained through course material. Weekly automated email reminders are also sent to support patients' continued use of the Course.

The Online Therapy Unit team has conducted several research studies exploring different aspects of the Course, including outcomes under diverse therapeutic conditions [e.g., 72, 73-77], utilization of the Course over the years [e.g., 70], and patient perspectives on strengths and challenges of the course [78,79]. However, none of these studies were specific to PDEGs.

2.3. Working group

Following the Canadian Strategy for Patient Oriented Research (SPOR) guidelines [62,63], a working group consisting of a multidisciplinary (clinical psychology, social and cultural psychiatry, public health and administration, social work, counselling psychology, community service, etc.) team of 11 members was formed (titled Patient-Oriented Research in Diversity Impact – Working Group) to conduct the current research and the adaptations of the Course. These members included a person with lived experience (PWLE; n=1), representatives from community-based organisations (CBOs; n=4), an ICBT manager (n=1), ICBT therapists (n=2), and researchers (n=4). In this working group, the PWLE, all the community-based organisation members, and two of the researchers (including a trainee) were self-identified PDEGs. The working group meetings were called through email and scheduled based on member availability. Meetings were held over Zoom with agenda packages circulated prior to the meeting and minutes circulated afterwards. The working group formally met five times throughout the project period (February 2022 to February 2023) but feedback was also provided via email or smaller Zoom meetings during the project. Community members and PWLE each received an honorarium in the amount of \$50 after each meeting.

2.4. Phase 1: Archival Data Analysis

Written feedback was extracted from 261 former patients who self-identified as PDEGs or mixed ethnicity and participated in the course between November 2013 and December 2020. Analysis was completed on patient responses to four open-ended questions asked at week 8 after enrolling in the Course on what was most helpful, their likes, dislikes, and what could be improved within the Course. Thematic analysis [80] was used to examine patients' written feedback. The archival data was coded and categorised by a research trainee (with a bachelor's degree in social work), PWLE (with a bachelor's degree in psychology), and a research associate (AW) after the coders were trained on qualitative data coding as well as on using NVivo for coding and categorizing the qualitative data.

2.5. Phase 2: Semi-structured interviews with patients, community stakeholders, and therapists

Patients. Self-identified PDEG patients were asked during the screening process if they would consider participating in an interview to share their experiences with the Course. Consenting patients were provided with more detailed information about the interview, a consent form, and were asked via email to schedule their interviews after being enrolled in the Course for 6 weeks. The patient interview included 12 open-ended questions that asked about the patient's experience with the Course including likes, dislikes, expectations, cultural relevance of different aspects of the course,

perception of therapists' support, and ways to improve accessibility and utilization of the course for PDEGs.

Community stakeholders. To recruit community stakeholders for the interview, invitations with information about the OTU, the study, a consent form, and the available compensation of a \$50 gift card for participating in the interview, were sent via email to various community-based organisations, and specific professionals in Saskatchewan. Organizations and professionals were identified through word of mouth as well as website searches. To be included in the study, stakeholders had to reside in Saskatchewan, Canada, and have personal or professional experience in providing services to PDEGs. These ~20-minute semi-structured interviews were completed by a researcher (EV) via telephone and were audio recorded digitally after obtaining informed consent. The interview contained nine open-ended questions focusing on stakeholders' experiences providing services to PDEGs including their understanding of how PDEGs manage their mental health concerns and seek help, key barriers to accessing and utilizing existing mental health care, barriers to access and use of online mental health services, and potential ways to improve accessibility and utilization of the Course for PDEGs.

Clinicians. Written feedback was collected from 3 clinicians who provide therapist support in the OTU. Interview questions were sent to the clinicians via email. Clinicians recorded their responses separately and then compiled their responses into one document capturing their insights in an anonymized written summary of their responses. Therapists' questionnaire included four open-ended questions asking for a reflection on therapist's experiences (e.g., positive experience, challenges) working with PDEG patients, as well as suggestions to improve the Course and therapists' ability to work with PDEGs.

Data Analysis. The digitally recorded interviews were transcribed naturalized verbatim [see 81, 82] and coded and organised according to pre-determined themes (e.g., likes, dislikes, most helpful skills, cultural relevance, key barriers or challenges, ways to improve, etc.) for thematic analysis. The frequency of each code was also recorded for descriptive analysis. The semi-structured interview data were coded by a researcher (EV) and research associate (AW) using NVivo (version 12 Plus) software (<https://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo-qualitative-data-analysis-software/home>).

2.6. Phase 3: Iterative course adaptation phase

The Course adaptation was completed iteratively and collaboratively by the working group in the following steps: 1) review of findings and development of recommendations based on data; 2) review of modifications to treatment materials and process of navigating and accessing material. This process began by presenting the working group with results of phase 1 and phase 2 after each dataset was analyzed followed by a discussion of conclusions and recommendations. Immediately afterwards, the OTU research team worked on the proposed adaptions. The adaptions were then sent to the working group for review and any additional feedback was considered.

3. Results

3.1. Archival Data Analysis

The patient participants in this study represented various ethnocultural backgrounds including, Indigenous (n=129; 49.4%), Asian (n=55; 21.1%), Black (14; 5.4%), Hispanic/Latino American (n=15; 5.7%), Pacific Islander (n=8; 3.1%), and others (n=40; 15.3%). The average age of the participants was 34.59 (standard deviation = 11.11, ages ranging from 18-72 years) and the majority (n 178; 68.2%) were women. The majority of participants were educated at a college level or higher (n=210; 80.45%), married or in a common-law relationship (n=149; 57.10%), and living in urban areas of more than 20,000 people (n=189; 72.41%). A majority of the patients (n=186; 71.26%) learned about the Course from health professionals, 38 (14.56%) were referred by family, friends, and community organisations, 31 (11.88%) found the Course through media (online, print and other), and 6 (2.30%) from other sources. The analysis of archival feedback from former patients revealed that PDEGs found the core techniques and skills in the Course helpful in managing their symptoms of anxiety

and depression. Out of 261 PDEGs who provided feedback, 165(63.22%) indicated Thought Challenging as the most helpful skill they learned in the Course. Patients attributed Thought Challenging to gaining a healthy mindset and managing their negative thoughts. The second most helpful skill reported was Controlled Breathing (27.20%), which patients found to have improved their daily functioning. Likewise, Graded Exposure (n=71; 17.62%), Activity Planning (n=46; 16.86%), Cycle of Symptoms (n=22; 8.43%) were among the other techniques that patients found helpful in dealing with their concerns, while only 8 patients (3.06%) reported not learning any new skills (see Table 1 for the details).

When asked what the patients liked the most about the Course, the majority said they liked the DIY Guides (n=112; 42.91%), which are worksheets with activities to help clients practice the skills they have learned in the corresponding lessons. Patients report that the DIY Guides were difficult to practice, but beneficial when utilized, and served as a helpful summary of the corresponding lessons. Following the DIY Guides, 88 (33.72%) clients appreciated the Stories and their ability to make clients feel less alone. Moreover, many clients reported liking the Additional Resources (n=55; 21.07%), accessibility (n=44; 16.86%), therapist support (n=39; 14.94%), the overall Lessons (n=25; 9.58%), and the educational approach to symptom explanation (n=9; 3.45%) (see Table 2 for the details).

Almost all patients indicated that they liked the Course overall and recognized its contribution to their symptom management; however, areas for improvement emerged when asked what they disliked about the course. While 84 (32.18%) clients provided only positive responses, stating that they did not have any dislikes about the Course, 113 (39.46%) and 53 (20.31%) reported some issues with the content and the process, respectively. Most notably, an area for content improvement was the Stories, with 34 (13.03%) indicating that some narratives were difficult to relate to in terms of demographics, the issues faced and experiences described by patients in the Stories, while others reported the Stories were too lengthy. The second area of content improvement came from patient's dislike of the website interface or utilities (n = 33; 12.64%). Some responses included a dislike for the amount of reading per Lesson and other responses indicated a desire for audiovisual elements to accompany the readings. Thirty (11.49%) patients did not provide a response (indicated by N/A as their response) to the dislike question (see Table 3 for the details).

Table 1. Patient responses to “For you, what was the most helpful skill taught in this course?” (N= 261).

Most helpful skills	Examples	n	%
Thought challenging	<p>“Thought challenging because examining your negative thoughts helps to put them in perspective and to create a healthier view of them.”</p> <p>“Thought challenging was the most helpful skill in this course because without it I would not have been able to overcome my negative mindset. Through it I was able to change my ways of thinking into a more positive one. It was a steppingstone for me to be confident in learning new skills for the other lessons. I was able to be hopeful that I can overcome my symptoms.”</p>	165	63.22
Controlled breathing	<p>“Controlled breathing was my most helpful skill specifically from this course, given how simple the technique is, I think I found it extremely beneficial to complement other strategies I was starting to work on as well.”</p> <p>“controlled breathing has greatly improved my functioning throughout daily tasks”</p>	71	27.20
Graded exposure	<p>“Graded exposure will probably be the most helpful skill in short and long term. It is very helpful for me and will benefit me for years; I am sure of it.”</p> <p>“I feel graded exposure is the most helpful skill in this course, because I used to play games and watch videos to escape from the real world, but now I can plan to do something every day.”</p>	46	17.62

	“...graded exposure was helpful in getting out and about. I also noticed that I started playing chess again and reading more often. In other words, I am enjoying past activities rather than doing nothing.”		
	“Becoming more active struck me as the most important skill - I actually noticed a direct impact in my life once I started to apply activity scheduling in my life (as much as I could).”		
Activity planning	“Becoming more active has been what gets me to the point of happiness, when I sit too much the symptoms increase drastically and I become so overwhelmed to the point of being numb and I can't feel anything even love for my loved ones.”	44	16.86
Cycle of symptoms	“I really liked learning about the cycle of symptoms and realizing what healthy versus un-healthy anxiety/stress is. I really thought I was more educated on this topic but had a real eye opening experience when I started to learn about it.”	22	8.43
	“Increased awareness of symptoms and what can be done before it escalates.”		
Overall positive reflection	“All of the lessons were very helpful.” “I can't choose just one this course was challenging but beneficial in learning that I can help myself”	13	4.98
No new skills learned	“There wasn't a most helpful skill. I found that I was already doing the things that had been suggested”	8	3.06
No response provided	N/A;	3	1.15
Relapse prevention	“The relapse plan. Even reading the three reasons we relapse are all items I certainly relate to and know that by recognizing any of those I will set myself up for make changes that will be positive going forward.”	3	1.15

Table 2. Patient responses to “What did you like about the course?” (N= 261).

Most liked elements	Examples	n	%
DIY Guides	“...even though I knew about most lessons beforehand, the DIY guides helped me remember the lessons and pushed/motivated me to act on what I learned.” “I really liked the DIY guides as they provided great activities as well as they summarized many of the main points of a given weeks lesson. These lesson summaries in the DIY guides were helpful to me as I didn't always have consistent access to my computer throughout the course, so being able to print off and have the DIY guides available to take places with me provided a good alternative for when I wanted to review some of the most important points of a given weeks lesson.”	112	42.91
Stories	“The stories, I felt a connection to the stories and I could relate to them. Reading how the different skills helped them feel better gave me hope that this actually does work.” “Including examples from other people who are dealing with anxiety and depression helps me realize that I am not the only one who deals with these feelings. It really puts it into perspective that I'm not perfect, but I am a good person and its about time I realized that.”	88	33.72
Additional Resources	“The stories were nice to read as they made me feel like I wasn't alone in my symptoms and feelings” “I think the resources are helpful that I learn a lot from them.” “...I liked being able to access the supplements at my own pace, I think that allowed me to read the resources for the problems I was facing earlier on which allowed me to start on some strategies sooner rather than later as well, although I eventually went through all the supplements (apart from motherhood I suppose, since being a parent is not part of my life at this time).”	55	21.07

Accessibility	<p>“Easier access and flexible to accommodate with busy life style.”</p> <p>“How it explains in a simple and logical way the material.”</p> <p>“I liked that I was able to do/complete the course at my own pace and with what worked for me -- online.”</p>	44	16.86
Therapist support	<p>“I really liked having someone contact me every Tuesday to let me know they care about my progress. It has helped me make it through this course and not give up.”</p> <p>“I think the setup is excellent, I also believe having someone to check in every week helps to keep the client accountable. I'm pretty sure I would have withdrawn weeks ago if it weren't for the accountability I felt towards Kerry as she was working so hard to keep me engaged and supporting me in every way she could through email.”</p> <p>“I also really liked emailing with my therapist. It added accountability in addition to giving me feedback, suggestions, etc. It was a bit tricky that she would check in on Fridays because that was the end of the week for most lessons, but it ended up reinforcing the inter-connectedness between the different lessons and I think it helped me integrate everything better.”</p>	39	14.94
Lessons	<p>“Each lesson provided valuable insight. I enjoyed making appointments with friends so I would keep doing it.”</p> <p>“The lessons are pretty easy to understand and read.”</p>	25	9.58
Overall positive response	“I liked all aspects of the course and think it is well laid out.”	18	6.90
Educational approach	<p>“I liked how everything was explained, the symptoms and terminologies.”</p> <p>“I liked the way that the course was approached. It wasn't a looking down upon approach but a down to earth, 'this is how things are, how can we fix them?'”</p>	9	3.45
No response provided	“N/A”	3	1.15

Table 3. Patient responses to “What did you not like about the course? What should we do to improve it?”(N= 261).

Most Disliked	Example	n	%
Issue with content		103	39.46
Stories	<p>“The stories I didn't find to be super engaging, mainly just glossed over them”</p> <p>“The stories were a bit hard to relate to since I felt like Glenn and Jo were so much more successful than I was and were so normal / well adjusted.”</p> <p>“It would be helpful if you could include some scenarios where people are trying to deal with difficult relationships, or people around them who are very negative and toxic. This was the cause of much of my depression and it would be very helpful to read some examples or stories of people dealing with this type of problem”</p>	34	13.03
Website interface or utilities	<p>“I don't enjoy reading the font selected to write out the information and surveys. It's difficult for me to read, the words are squished together and it takes extra effort just to make sure I'm seeing the words properly.”</p> <p>“One thing I would suggest is for the questionnaire layout, every time when I finish the questions I have to remember to click the "Press to submit" button (which by the way it's not easy to spot and easily to miss it on the left hand side) before going to the next section, if I forgot then I have to restart all over again. This is not user friendly layout and it can be done in a much better way for end-users.”</p>	33	12.64

"I guess improve upon the interface for the surveys; you have any idea how infuriating it is to fill out the survey and hit "next" instead of "submit" and all your answers get reset because you didn't hit "submit" first?"

Content not personal relevant	"Lack of personalization"	10	3.83
Additional Resources	"the resources while informative about the issue didn't always offer many Tips for dealing with it	9	3.45
DIY Guide	"DIY I thought it was full of activities and not just a summary of the lesson. I thought it was going to be like a booklet of stuff that will help me feel better and not a bunch of the same information that I read."	7	2.68
Generic information	"Somewhat generic"	6	2.30
Repetitive material	"Lots of repetitiveness. I understand why though. At times, it was a little much."	4	1.53
Issues with process		53	20.31
Limited time	"I would like to have more time to do the lessons. Maybe shorter lessons and a longest period (e. g. 3 months)."	27	10.34
Therapist support	"I would like to have more contact with my therapist. Possibly even twice a week instead of just once a week."	19	7.28
Lack of structure	"Being on my own pace with no forced communication. Allowed me to not keep up with the work and I wouldn't reach out to the therapist on my own."	7	2.68
Overall positive reflection	"There wasn't anything I didn't like about the course."	84	32.18
No response provided	"N/A"	30	11.49

3.2. Interviews

Patients. The patient interviews (n=16) conducted with active participants in the Course confirmed the findings in the archival data analysis. Whilst one of the interviewed patients had no expectations and two patients felt that the Course did not meet their expectations, the majority (n=13, 81.25%) reported a positive experience working on the Course, explaining that the course met or exceeded their expectations. They shared that the core content of the Course, such as the skills and exercises, was beneficial for managing symptoms of anxiety and/or depression. Additionally, 9 (56%) patients also reported that the Stories were relatable and helped them to feel "less alone" as well as to recognize similar behavioural patterns in their own lives. For example, one 22-year-old Indigenous patient shared her experience as stated; "I liked all, like the Stories and stuff- that it's very relatable, and like having different perspectives on it too."

The therapist support was an appreciated aspect of the course for those who utilized it, with 13 (81.25%) patients reporting having a positive experience. The following is an excerpt from an interview with a patient:

"...She [therapist] was very dedicated and she was very capable. Even a little hint, she catches it and she starts guiding me. Also, she gave me a brief idea about the course and how it applies to me in particular... she was very helpful." [42, Male, Southeast Asian]

When asked about relevance of the Course materials in relation to their ethnocultural background, half of the patients (n=8) reported that the course fit with their cultural beliefs and values. Some mentioned that because the Course is generic and does not adhere to one particular culture; it is appropriate and accessible to a variety of cultures, which is evident in the following two representative interview excerpts:

- i. "It was all good for me. I think it fit with me perfectly. I think that it doesn't really matter if I'm like Asian...I think it was accessible for everyone." [34, Female, Asian]
- ii. "Yes. There wasn't really anything cultural about it, right? I don't think anyway." [22, Female, Indigenous]

One patient reported that the course did not align with their cultural beliefs and this is because their culture does not support seeking treatment for mental health problems. This patient's culture believes that mental health help should be sought within the family. The remaining patients reported that nothing stood out for them in terms of cultural alignment (n=5, 31%) or did not provide a response (n=2, 12%). Nevertheless, these interviews also revealed elements of the Course that patients did not like; 6 (37.5%) patients did not find the Stories relatable or helpful. One patient noted, however, that this is not necessarily because of ethnicity, but because of the type of mental health issues described in the Stories. Another patient remarked that although they were happy to see diverse ethnicities represented through imagery, the two consistent character vignettes (included in the Course as an example to demonstrate how the skills and techniques can be applied) were Caucasian/white. This may have contributed to the 2 (12.5%) patients reporting that there is a lack of diversity in the Stories characters or examples, as one patient discusses in the following interview excerpt:

"There is nothing about being a newcomer... it was one of the factors that gave me a lot of anxiety, I think. Having this shock that I'm in a new country with no connections with other people. I think that's one [reason for anxiety]. I think it [the Course] was not made with a newcomer in mind... it's more of a general." [40, Male, Black]

When asked for suggestions for specific improvements to make the Course better for people from their ethnocultural background, some patients (n=8, 50%) indicated the need for diversifying case stories with examples describing challenges unique to PDEGs. The remaining patients suggested accommodations for the hearing impaired (n=1, 6.25%), improving website interface functions (n=2, 12.5%), more time with the course (n=1, 6.25%) or provided no suggestions (n=2, 12.5%). Patients also had the opportunity to share any recommendations that would have improved their experience with the Course that hadn't been shared yet which included larger font (n=1, 6.25%), increasing therapist support (n=2, 12.5%), providing more time with the lessons (n=2, 12.5%), summarizing and shortening the reading in the lessons (n=1, 6.25%) and audio elements (n=2, 12.5%) while the remaining patients did not suggest improvements (n=8, 50%). Evidently, the patients' suggestions for improvement focused on the general accessibility of materials with diverse suggestions provided and no particular suggestions to improve the key elements (e.g., cognitive-behavioural techniques) of the Course.

Community stakeholders. Six out of seven (85.71%) community stakeholders reported language and stigma as the most common barriers in seeking and receiving mental health services by PDEGs. They explained that due to the fear of experiencing stigma (e.g., being labelled as "crazy"), which is rooted in patients' cultural knowledge, beliefs, and practices related to mental health and illness in their countries of origin, PDEGs are reluctant to seek and to share their [mental health] problems.

Further, the community stakeholders highlighted that PDEGs regard and deal with mental health concerns differently to the mainstream health care system in Canada. Stakeholders noted that in some cultures, discussing mental and emotional wellness is considered taboo, so people may be averse to talk and identify themselves as experiencing mental illness symptoms and thus may not seek help at all. They regard their problems as emanating from precarious life (e.g., attribute low mood and irritability to not being able to find a proper job), or as inflicted by external forces (e.g., "Satan is making me tired"), so they prioritize finding a job over dealing with low mood and irritability. In addition, they may believe that they can manage their problems themselves or that "time will heal things". Consequently, PDEGs often seek help from informal health care sectors such as community support systems (e.g., traditional healing, religious organizations) and find solace in gatherings with community such as "drumming circle" [see 83], spiritual ways such as prayer, and natural ways such as crafts, music, art and in speaking to their friends, religious leaders and people they feel safe with. Relatedly, some stakeholders opined that due to cultural differences, PDEGs may not have the adequate language to express their mental health concerns that is comprehensible to

service providers and may not be knowledgeable about mainstream Canadian ways of understanding mental health problems and finding resources that can help.

Community stakeholders also reiterated some putative aspects of the Course that could act as barriers to PDEG patients' utilization, such as having access to the internet and devices, English language and computer literacy, and a distrust that confidentiality can be maintained in services provided online.

When asked what might help PDEGs in accessing and using the Course, a majority (n = 5; 71.43%) of the community stakeholders suggested offering services in the patient's language. Additionally, increasing awareness of ICBT, providing help with and access to the required technology, including motivational counselling sessions, educating on mental health by including psychoeducation materials on the website and through presentations in community organisations, simplifying and using destigmatizing language, offering therapists from different cultural backgrounds, and advertising patient testimonies from diverse backgrounds, were among other suggestions offered by the stakeholders.

Therapist feedback. The therapists shared that the patients who had participated in the course, and had received their support, voiced their gratitude for the availability of services for people in rural communities. The patients acknowledged that the Course had provided them with an opportunity to share their emotional and mental health problems, which they otherwise would not have felt comfortable addressing within their cultural group. Concurrently, the course content validated patients experience with mental health problems as it helped normalize their mental health concerns. Further, patients reported the skills learned were new to them and something they wished they had learned earlier. Therapists noted that the learning was mutual in that both the patients and the therapists, learned more about cultural traditions from each other.

The therapists' indicated their ICBT training materials lacked attention to some cultural issues. As an example, therapists noted that they have found it difficult to help navigate unfamiliar stresses such as those experienced by individuals and families who have lived-in war-torn countries. Examples of this would be intergenerational family dynamics and expectations of success from relocating to Canada. Therapists shared that some clients commented on a lack in cultural aspects within the course, for example, a list of helpful activities appears in a lesson but lacked cultural examples such as 'beading'. The therapists also reported that sometimes they struggle to understand patients' communication especially when the patient is a newcomer with limited English language competency, which prevents patients from writing detailed messages and results in difficulty conversing by phone.

To improve therapists' own abilities to better support PDEGs, therapists suggested including examples of culturally diverse situations, skills, and techniques in their training materials. Furthermore, they suggested that the Course incorporate more culturally relevant Stories and an additional resource to help individuals and families understand mental health issues. They advised that broadening representation in the Course images, advertisements and social media would improve course awareness and collaborating with PDEGs to review the Course materials would ensure inclusivity.

3.3. Improvements

The Course modifications were done iteratively by the working group as follows:

- i) First, the 5 lessons in the Course were thoroughly reviewed for opportunities to simplify language by the OTU researchers and clinicians. This step involved identifying English language and Euro-American culture specific idioms, metaphors, examples of activities, and academic vocabulary. These phrases were replaced with more general and commonly used language to ensure the Course was accessible to everyone regardless of education level or cultural understanding.
- ii) Second, the course content was reviewed by PWLE, trainee, and CBO members to identify any issues with case stories, DIY activities, language, cultural relevance, and techniques described in the materials. At this stage, the aesthetics and user-friendliness of the course materials were also reviewed. The group provided suggestions for improvement.

iii) Third, the final adaption of the course was informed by the recommendations from the working group and findings from phase 1 and 2.

Drawing on findings above, the working group did not identify the need to make major changes to the course but suggested some changes to the course materials to improve inclusivity. Furthermore, they made suggestions for improving training of therapists and some therapist practices as well as outreach practices, which are elaborated on below.

3.3.1. Course Materials

Language. In all lessons, English idioms were removed to prevent PDEG's alienation in understanding. For example, in a Lesson 1 vignette, a character referred to their physical symptoms of anxiety as being "wound up". This was changed to "feeling nervous" to eliminate misunderstanding. Another example was found in Lesson 2; a statement was changed from "don't just put up with it" to "don't just accept it". While these are common phrases used in some cultures, these expressions can exclude some individuals which impacts their ability to gain all the benefits the Course offers. Along with removing idioms, more specific and descriptive wording was implemented to improve understanding. Removing idioms and minor wording changes were made to the DIY Guides as well to improve clarity. One DIY Guide was altered to include examples of activities to help manage mental health problems such as attending cultural celebrations, beading, going to a place of worship and Tai Chi.

Imagery. Stock imagery is used throughout the course and was reviewed to ensure representation of diverse ethnicities. Many images were changed to include more PDEGs with visible differing abilities, and gender and cultural expressions. This included changing the image depicting a reoccurring character that appears in the Course. The character formerly was a young Caucasian female, which accompanied a young Caucasian male, and was changed to an image of a middle-aged Asian female.

Audiovisual content. To address patient's aversion to the amount of reading throughout the Lessons and request for audiovisual elements, videos were embedded to the website at the beginning of each of the 5 Lessons. Each video is approximately 3 minutes and serves as an introduction to the Lesson patients are about to begin.

Acknowledgement of culture. Lesson content was updated to incorporate diverse situations and thoughts, and cultural difference acknowledgments. During the course introduction, presentation slides were created and dedicated to recognizing culture and emotional wellbeing. Elements of culture are explained and it is acknowledged that culture impacts how we interact and understand the world. It is also explained that culture shapes our understanding and communication of emotional wellbeing. The slides ask patients to reflect on their culture and its influence on their beliefs around distress, perceptions of abilities to alter challenging situations and ways of seeking treatment. The idea that people in Canada from all social and cultural backgrounds experience anxiety and depression was included as well as examples of social challenges that people in Canada may encounter, such as discrimination or financial insecurity. The second Lesson included another mention of the complex social, cultural, political and economic differences that influence perceptions. Social stigma and cultural differences in knowledge about mental health problems were named as reasons that prevent fully understanding symptoms. Stigma is mentioned again as an explanation for why some may like confidential ICBT.

Stories adaptation and creation. All Stories and examples were examined to incorporate feedback from phase 1 and 2. Minor wording changes were made to allow for the Stories to be more specific and concise. In an attempt to shorten the Stories, ideas and explanations were reworded to be more succinct. One of the Stories was formerly about a Caucasian male and the image was changed to depict an Indigenous male. Indigenous cultural elements were added to the narrative as well such as struggling with transitioning from living on a reserve to an urban center. The names of two characters were changed to reflect someone of East Asian descent and someone of Hispanic descent. In one of the Stories, a character's main issues were changed in an effort to present differing circumstances. In this instance, the character was a victim of domestic violence and struggling in their

relationships. To address the need of better representation, 3 new Stories were created and added to the Course. The first is a narrative about a 74-year-old Caribbean woman who immigrated to Canada when she was younger and is now struggling with the loss of her husband and aging. The second explores the challenges of immigrating to Canada due to war, while experiencing loss, culture shock and financial hardships as a 40-year-old mother from Lebanon. Lastly, an international student's experience of coming to Canada from China and dealing with the social implications, finances, family pressures and language proficiency poses as an example.

3.3.2. Training

ICBT service providers at the OTU (n=9, 8 Social Workers, 1 Certified Counsellor) attended training conducted by a researcher (RS). This training included explaining cultural concepts of distress (CCD) and the importance of understanding CCD in assessments and providing culturally informed care. This was achieved by reviewing the DSM-5 entry on CCD and providing examples of ways in which different cultures understand and express mental health problems through cultural idioms of distress, cultural explanations, and cultural syndromes [30]. Teachings were also completed on becoming culturally informed and how to apply this to routine practice in ICBT therapist support. To do this, culturally informed assessment guides were reviewed such as the Cultural Formulation Interview [30], The Explanatory Model Interview Catalogue [84] and the McGill Illness Narrative Interview [85]. This didactic teaching involved audiovisuals, group discussions, and role-play techniques to facilitate learning. A second training session was conducted to provide ICBT service providers with a summary of findings at mid-point of the research study. This session included presenting the research findings and themes from phase 1 and 2. Clinicians at the OTU were also able to attend a Cultural Awareness Presentation hosted by a non-profit organization which provides integration and settlement services for newcomers to Canada. Lastly, the ICBT service providers were educated on the iterative course adaptations which lead to updating therapist protocol guides. The protocol guides summarized the Course changes and provided email templates which included prompts to elicit cultural informed conversation and reflection by patients.

3.3.3. Outreach

One important issue that surfaced in discussions with community stakeholders as well as working group members is the lack of awareness the general public experiences about the OTU and its mental health services. Thus, plans were made to improve outreach, which are now underway and seen as an ongoing process to improve knowledge of the OTU among PDEGs. In order to increase recruitment and diversify intake of the Course, outreach techniques have been refined. A video was created by researchers which summarizes OTU services and highlights the updates of the Course through this study. This video has been shared online and with community organizations. A presentation was developed and is currently being offered to community organizations who are interested in learning more about OTU services, the process and findings of this study and the incorporated changes to improve experiences of PDEGs. These are new additions to our regular recruitment practices which includes mailing promotional material to medical clinics and community organizations as well as offering presentations to service providers.

4. Discussion

We applied patient-oriented research approach in an effort to improve ICBT for PDEGs in a multicultural routine mental health care setting. Archival data analysis and interviews were conducted to build our knowledge on what aspects of the Course and practices are valuable and what elements need modification to improve the Course for PDEGs. The results showed that almost all PDEG patients liked the Course overall and recognized its contribution to their mental health. They also suggested improvements, such as offering services in the patient's language, including therapists from diverse ethnocultural backgrounds, incorporating audiovisual materials to reduce the amount of required reading, adding materials on social stigma, diversifying the imagery, case stories, and

examples of activities practiced in different cultures in the Course to make the Course more relatable to PDEGs. We were able to implement most of the recommended modifications with the exception of changing the English language of the Course and adding therapists from PDEGs. Although we have simplified the language, have educated our therapists on understanding cultural diversity and delivering culturally informed care, and are exploring the possibility of adding an online translation option in the Course, providing our PDEG patients services in their own language, with an ethnoculturally matched therapist is not feasible as we may potentially receive patients from over 450 ethnocultural backgrounds and languages [57].

Importantly, most of the suggested modifications to the Course were primarily on peripheral elements [see 48, 53] such as the aesthetics of web-based interface, stories and examples, and the process, with no major suggestions on the cognitive-behaviour model and techniques. In fact, the cognitive-behavioural techniques such as thought challenging, controlled breathing, and graded exposure were among the most liked and utilized elements of the Course (see Table 1). This implies that the core cognitive-behavioural constructs and techniques used in the Course were relevant and acceptable to PDEGs. As quoted in the results, some stakeholders explicitly noted that skills and techniques presented in the Course were general and not specific to any one culture. Further, as the core cognitive-behavioural elements of the Course remained largely unchanged, we have no concerns about fidelity to original model of the treatment and we can expect similar effectiveness from the adapted treatment. Similar findings were obtained in our previous studies eliciting patient and stakeholder perspectives on strengths and challenges of the Course [79,86]. These findings provide support for our use of patient-oriented approach instead of a cultural adaptation model in that the adaptation of psychological interventions should be tailored to the current context-based perceived needs of patients. Having said this, we are aware and do not intend to purport that cognitive-behavioural techniques are acultural [see 87] nor to devalue the importance of understanding cultural influence on all aspects of mental health and illness. The need to culturally adapt psychological interventions when used outside of the cultural context where they were originally developed is still of great value to patients. However, comprehensive cultural adaptation may not always be possible, especially in routine care settings where clients of diverse ethnocultural backgrounds are provided services. Therefore, with this study we explored an alternative avenue to identify and improve ICBT by PDEGs when comprehensive cultural adaptation is not feasible.

Overall, our research revealed that a patient-oriented approach to adapting psychological interventions is practical. Since those involved in treatment identify and decide which elements of the intervention are adapted and how adaptation should take place, it does not rely on stereotypical assumptions about individual culture and its influence on mental health and wellbeing. A patient-oriented approach is informed by patients and relevant stakeholder needs and preferences without major concerns about compromising the fidelity of the evidence-based intervention.

4.1. Strengths, limitations and future directions

Our working group was composed of a diverse range of ethnocultural backgrounds, disciplines, and lifestyles. Through archival data analysis and interviews, we sought to gain insight into the issues that mattered most to our patients and stakeholders. Despite approximately 43 to 50% of Indigenous peoples participating in our knowledge building studies, we had no representation of Indigenous peoples in our community stakeholder interviews or our working group. As such, this may have prevented us from properly recognizing and responding to the issues specific to Indigenous cultures in the Course. Further, most (4 out of 7) of the interviewed community stakeholders were involved in providing services primarily to newcomers. Therefore, the experiences they shared of working with PDEGs may not reflect a comprehensive understanding of the PDEGs who have lived in Canada for longer periods, as the level of acculturation as well as social and contextual factors play an important role in this regard. To rectify these limitations, future work should involve collaborating with Indigenous peoples and involve more community stakeholders who have worked with PDEGs in various social context and experiences.

Furthermore, although it has not been discussed in this article previously, it is important to mention that the requirement for a Saskatchewan-based medical doctor to be listed as an emergency contact may act as a barrier to accessing our services, particularly for newcomers and PDEGs. Indeed, approximately 20% of Canadians lack both a family doctor and a regular healthcare provider [88,89]. Perhaps, due to this requirement we are unintentionally channelling our patients via health professionals where they get psychotropic prescriptions before coming to us. This is something that we need to reconsider to improve the accessibility of our services to newcomers and PDEGs.

The interviews with stakeholders and patients revealed one clear barrier to the Course is English language proficiency. A recommendation from the working group and stakeholders that was not able to be addressed with the resources available was to offer translations of the Course. Not only could this improve utilization and experience of material for PDEGs but it could also improve therapist support and relationships as patients could adequately describe their symptoms and experience and prevent misinterpretations. Further improvements of the Course plan to include implementing the use of translation software to website utilities and studying the usage and impact on service outcomes.

Increasing intake of PDEGs in the Course will require further change in recruitment methods. As we continue to offer presentations on OTU services, we will extend our outreach and build relationships with organizations who specialize in newcomer and settlement services. In addition, we plan to improve our promotional material to include more diverse imagery. Stigma has been identified as a significant barrier which enforces the importance of representation in advertising as a means to normalize PDEGs seeking treatment. This could also be done by explicitly including demographic information and service outcomes in advertisements. The promotional material could be further improved through translations in different languages and visibility in those corresponding communities.

Another identified barrier that could not be addressed due to limitation in resources was accessibility to the internet and required devices necessary to access the Course. Our objective is to further develop relationships with community-based organizations and locate organizations which offer internet access to work in partnership to refer patients to our services and vice versa.

Future research is now required to assess the outcomes and feedback on the newly improved Course to verify iterative changes have benefitted engagement, satisfaction and outcomes. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to interview clients shortly after beginning the course in order to capture feedback from clients who may not remain in the course for 6 weeks. Longer term, it would also be valuable to study the impact of improved outreach on use of the Course by PDEGs.

5. Conclusions

This paper elucidates how patient-oriented research can be used to identify and make improvements to ICBT. Suggestions provided may prove beneficial to other groups in a similar situation. Although clinical studies are required to determine if the patient-oriented adaptations have improved the clinical effectiveness of the Course, this study shows that patient-oriented adaptation is practical and useful in multicultural routine care settings where comprehensive cultural adaptation of internet-delivered psychological intervention may not be feasible.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, R.P.S. and H.D.H.; methodology R.P.S. and H.D.H.; software, A.W., M.N., E.V.; formal analysis, A.W., E.V., R.P.S.; investigation, R.P.S., E.V., and H.D.H.; resources, H.D.H., M.N., K.A., L.B., V.H., K.D.; data curation, A.W., E.V.; writing—original draft preparation, R.P.S., E.V., and H.D.H.; writing—review and editing, all authors; supervision, H.D.H.; project administration, E.V., M.N., K.A., L.B., V.H., K.D.; funding acquisition, R.P.S. and H.D.H. All authors contributed to investigation, data management, and interpretation of results. All authors have read and agreed to the the submitted version of the manuscript and agree to be personally accountable for the author's own contributions and for ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work.

Funding: The Saskatchewan Health Research Foundation and Mental Health Research Canada provided funding for this research project. The Saskatchewan Ministry of Health provides the Online Therapy Unit funding to deliver Internet-delivered cognitive behaviour therapy to the residents of Saskatchewan. One of our

working group member, trainee, received Saskatchewan Centre for Patient Oriented Research (SCPOR) Matched Trainee Funding during the course of the project.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, as revised in 2008 and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Regina (Archival study: REB# 2019-197, 10/06/2022; Formative study: REB# 2022-012, and 17/03/2022).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all research participants involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: All the data used in the current study are available from the Online Therapy Unit (www.onlinetherapyuser.ca) upon reasonable request.

Acknowledgments: We would like to thank the patients and community stakeholders associated with the project. We would specifically like to acknowledge our working group members Basmah Almosalem, Vibya Natana, Micha Kasongo, Yi-Chen (Becky) Chen, Belinda Owusu Nyamike, and Arjun Adhikari for their inputs and guidance in research and the Course modification, and our therapists from Saskatchewan Health Authority Katherine Owens, Janet Tzupa, Mackenzie Martin-Proskie, and Aaron Ingrouille who also provide ICBT within the Online Therapy Unit.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

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