Two-Year Follow-Up after Treatment with the Cognitive Behavioral Analysis System of Psychotherapy versus Supportive Psychotherapy for Early-Onset Chronic Depression

Elisabeth Schramm\textsuperscript{a} Levente Kriston\textsuperscript{b} Moritz Elsaesser\textsuperscript{a} Thomas Fangmeier\textsuperscript{a} Ramona Meister\textsuperscript{b} Paul Bausch\textsuperscript{a} Ingo Zobel\textsuperscript{c} Josef Bailer\textsuperscript{d} Katrin Wambach\textsuperscript{e} Matthias Backenstrass\textsuperscript{f,g} Jan Philipp Klein\textsuperscript{h} Dieter Schoepf\textsuperscript{i,j} Knut Schnell\textsuperscript{k} Antje Gumz\textsuperscript{l} Bernd Löwe\textsuperscript{l} Henrik Walter\textsuperscript{m} Markus Wolf\textsuperscript{n} Katharina Domschke\textsuperscript{a} Mathias Berger\textsuperscript{a} Martin Hautzinger\textsuperscript{o} Martin Härter\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a}Department of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy, University Medical Center – University of Freiburg, Faculty of Medicine, University of Freiburg, Freiburg, Germany; \textsuperscript{b}Department of Medical Psychology, University Medical Center Hamburg-Eppendorf, Hamburg-Eppendorf, Germany; \textsuperscript{c}Psychology School, Fresenius University of Applied Sciences Berlin, Berlin, Germany; \textsuperscript{d}Department of Clinical Psychology, Central Institute of Mental Health, Medical Faculty Mannheim/University Heidelberg, Mannheim, Germany; \textsuperscript{e}Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy, Philipps-Universität Marburg, Marburg, Germany; \textsuperscript{f}Department of Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy, University of Heidelberg, Germany, Heidelberg, Germany; \textsuperscript{g}Institute of Clinical Psychology, Hospital Stuttgart, Stuttgart, Germany; \textsuperscript{h}Department of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy, University of Lübeck, Lübeck, Germany; \textsuperscript{i}Department of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy, University of Bonn, Bonn, Germany; \textsuperscript{j}Department of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy, Vitos Weil-Lahn, Hadamar, Weil-Münster, Germany; \textsuperscript{k}Department of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy, University Medical Center Göttingen, Asklepios Medical Center, Göttingen, Germany; \textsuperscript{l}Department of Psychosomatic Medicine and Psychotherapy, University Medical Center Hamburg-Eppendorf, Hamburg-Eppendorf, Germany; \textsuperscript{m}Division of Mind and Brain Research, Department of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy CCM, Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin, corporate member of Freie Universität Berlin, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, and Berlin Institute of Health, Berlin, Germany; \textsuperscript{n}Department of Psychology, Clinical Psychology, and Psychotherapy Research, University of Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland; \textsuperscript{o}Department of Psychology, Clinical Psychology, and Psychotherapy, Eberhard Karls University of Tübingen, Tübingen, Germany

Keywords
Chronic depression · Psychotherapy · Randomized controlled trial · Follow-up · Cognitive Behavioral Analysis System of Psychotherapy

Abstract

Background: Evidence on the long-term efficacy of psychotherapeutic approaches for chronic depression is scarce. Objective: To evaluate the effects of the Cognitive Behavioral Analysis System of Psychotherapy (CBASP) compared to Supportive Psychotherapy (SP) 1 year and 2 years after treatment termination. Methods: In this study, we present 1- and 2-year follow-up assessments of a prospective, multicenter,
evaluator-blinded, randomized clinical trial of outpatients with early-onset chronic major depression \((n = 268)\). The initial treatment included 32 sessions of CBASP or SP over 48 weeks. The primary outcome was the rate of "well weeks" (Longitudinal Interval Follow-Up Evaluation; no/minimal symptoms) after 1 year and 2 years. The secondary outcomes were, among others, clinician- and self-rated depressive symptoms, response/remission rates, and quality of life. Results: Of the 268 randomized patients, 207 (77%) participated in the follow-up. In the intention-to-treat analysis, there was no statistically significant difference between CBASP and SP patients in experiencing well weeks (CBASP: mean [SD] of 48.6 [36.9] weeks; SP: 39.0 [34.8]; rate ratio 1.26, 95% CI 0.99–1.59, \(p = 0.057\), \(d = 0.18\)) and in remission rates (CBASP: 1 year 40%, 2 years 40.2%; SP: 1 year 28.9%, 2 years 33%) in the 2 years after treatment. Statistically significant effects were found in favor of CBASP 1 year after treatment termination regarding the rate of well weeks, self-rated depressive symptoms, and depression-related quality of life. Conclusions: CBASP lost its superiority over SP at some point between the first and the second year. This suggests the necessity of maintenance treatment for early-onset chronically depressed patients remitted with CBASP during the acute therapy phase, as well as the sequential integration of other treatment strategies, including medication for those who did not reach remission.

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Introduction

Looking back at more than 40 years of depression research, including over 500 randomized trials [1], evidence concerning the long-term course of major depressive disorders after acute treatment is scarce despite the known high risk of recurrence [2, 3] and a chronicity rate of approximately 30% [4, 5].

For episodic depression, the long-term effects of psychotherapy showed a significant, moderately sized advantage over medication [6, 7]. Nevertheless, after 2 or more years, relapse rates remained high (53%; 95% CI 0.37–0.68) in major depressive disorders even after response to acute-phase psychotherapy [7]. There are strikingly fewer treatment studies of chronic depression (DSM-5: persistent depressive disorder) than of episodic depression, and almost none of these studies reported long-term efficacy values.

One of the most promising approaches based on post-treatment outcome [8] is the only disorder-specific psychotherapy for chronic depression, the Cognitive Behavioral Analysis System of Psychotherapy (CBASP) [9], although not all findings investigating it have been fully supportive [10, 11]. The evidence for the long-term effectiveness of CBASP is limited. Klein et al. [12] reported the superiority of maintenance CBASP over 1 year to "assessment-only appointments," with significantly fewer patients experiencing a recurrence. Compared to medication, the CBASP did not result in more sustainable effects on depression symptoms and quality of life 4.5 years after treatment termination in a smaller, underpowered trial [13]. In a randomized controlled pilot trial [14], the differences between acute treatment with the CBASP and interpersonal psychotherapy [15] favoring the CBASP disappeared within a 1-year naturalistic follow-up. In another pilot study treating chronically depressed inpatients, the initially high remission rate of 43.1% was maintained for over 6 months after discharge, but it had dropped significantly by 1 year after discharge [16].

This is the first randomized clinical study comparing the sustained effects of the CBASP with a nonspecific psychotherapy over a longer period of time following rigorous methodological recommendations for randomized controlled trials of psychological interventions [17]. The purpose of our study was to estimate the sustainability of the CBASP compared with a nonspecific, bona fide psychological treatment (supportive psychotherapy [SP]) after 1- and 2-year follow-up periods in patients with early-onset chronic major depression [18]. Our primary hypothesis was that patients who were initially treated for 48 weeks with the CBASP would show better results 1 year and 2 years after termination than those treated with SP in terms of higher rates of "well weeks," defined as weeks with no or minimal symptoms in the Longitudinal Interval Follow-Up Evaluation (LIFE) [19]. In contrast to single-event criteria such as relapse or remission, this longitudinal criterion allows full high-resolution coverage of patients' weekly depression status during the observation period. In addition, we hypothesized that the CBASP would confer fewer residual symptoms, higher response and remission rates, better social functioning and quality of life, fewer suicide attempts, and fewer weeks of treatment utilization than SP.

Subjects and Methods

Study Design and Participants

Here, we briefly summarize the key design issues. We report further details in the study protocols of the follow-up (online sup-
after 1 year and 2 years), the IDS-SR (a score of 13 or less), pa-
behavior (LIFE), weeks in inpatient and outpatient treatment
we only analyzed for the follow-up period included suicidal be-
global and depression-specific quality of life (12-Item Short-
tomatology [IDS-SR] [26]), clinician-rated level of functioning
for retrospective longitudinal assessments over intervals of
The LIFE is a reliable and valid semi-structured interview
as 2 consecutive weeks of fulfilling the criteria for depression in the
increase of 5 or more points in HDRS score from the end of treat-
As post hoc analyses, we investigated (a) the number of patients
and trial site as independent fixed effects. We treated the mea-
sures, we used a binomial distribution with a logit link, and for
in the study protocol (all minor) are listed in online supplemen-
ters [20], as well as in the publication on the results of the main study [18]. Chang-
es in the study protocol (all minor) are listed in online supplement-
years). The CBASP and SP were comparable in terms of the number of
sessions, training of therapists, supervision, manual-based pro-
for measures also administered in the main study. We analyzed
covariance structure. We tested the hypothesis contrasting the
effect of the CBASP and SP by investigating the statistical signifi-
cient) based on data from 20 raters who rated up to 12 follow-up
The secondary outcomes we measured both in the main study
and at follow-up included clinician- and self-rated depres-
sions (Hamilton Rating Scale for Depression [HRSD-
Quick Inventory of Depressive Symptomatology [QIDS-C] [25], and Self-Rated Inventory of Depressive Symptomatology [IDS-SR] [26]), clinician-rated level of functioning (Global Assessment of Functioning [GAF] [27]), and self-rated
global and depression-specific quality of life (12-Item Short-
and trial site as independent fixed effects. We treated the mea-
score of 8 or less) after 48 weeks of treatment in the main study.
We compared the deterioration rates and relapse rates between
reason for data missingness (see online suppl. Clinical Trial Protocol). They instruct-
eviews each. The interrater reliability of the pri-
primary outcome measure was 0.74 (intraclass correlation coeffi-
calculating or approximating standardized effect sizes (Cohen's
whether they were treated per protocol or not without imputation.
we imputed values for patients who did not provide any follow-
determined the patients not to mention the kind of therapy they had re-
Statistical Analysis
We performed the primary analyses on the intention-to-treat
(ITT) sample, which included all of the randomized patients (i.e.,
missing outcomes using multiple imputation with an iterative
Markov chain Monte Carlo method (fully conditional specifi-
cation) based on demographic and clinical baseline data, group
values for all outcomes throughout the main and the follow-up study [33]. We created 20 imputed data sets,
analyzed them separately, and combined the results using Ru-
bin's rules.
We used the same analytical strategy for all outcomes by fit-
ting a (generalized) linear mixed model with a treatment group
(CBASP, SP), measurement point (as available; at randomiza-
tion; at treatment onset; at 12, 20, and 48 weeks after treatment
onset; and at the 1- and 2-year follow-up), their interaction term,
pression severity at inclusion in the main study (HRSD), de-
iation from the scheduled time point of measurement in days,
we imputed values for patients who did not provide any follow-
ment procedures used for randomization and allocation were performed using the con-
randomized groups). We imputed
for patients who did not provide any follow-
We invited all the patients included in the main study to partici-
pate in the follow-up investigation.
Both interventions followed standardized treatment manuals
The CBASP is a highly structured psychotherapy integrating
behavioral, cognitive, psychodynamic, and interpersonal treat-
ment strategies [9]. SP is an active, nonspecific intervention [21]
that includes psychoeducational elements and other common psy-
chotherapy factors such as reflective listening and facilitation of
A meta-analysis showed that SP was effective in depression
and no difference between it and other psychotherapies
was found after controlling for allegiance [22]. We conducted 24
sessions of CBASP or SP over 16 weeks in the acute phase, followed
by 8 continuation sessions over the next 28 weeks (32 sessions in
total). The CBASP and SP were comparable in terms of the number of
sessions, training of therapists, supervision, manual-based pro-
cedure, and adherence [18].

Outcome Measures
The a priori primary outcome was “well weeks,” defined as
weeks with no or minimal symptoms based on the 6-point Psychi-
atrict Status Rating (PSR) scale for major depressive episodes of the
LIFE. The LIFE is a reliable and valid semi-structured interview
for retrospective longitudinal assessments over intervals of
6 months and longer [19, 23]. In the present study, trained inter-
viewers conducted the LIFE interviews 1 year and 2 years after
the end of the study treatment. The interrater reliability of the
primary outcome measure was 0.74 (intraclass correlation coeffi-
cient) based on data from 20 raters who rated up to 12 follow-up
interviews each.
The secondary outcomes we measured both in the main study
[18] and at follow-up included clinician- and self-rated depres-
sive symptoms (Hamilton Rating Scale for Depression [HRSD-
24] [24], Quick Inventory of Depressive Symptomatology
[QIDS-C] [25], and Self-Rated Inventory of Depressive Symptomatology [IDS-SR] [26]), clinician-rated level of functioning (Global Assessment of Functioning [GAF] [27]), and self-rated
global and depression-specific quality of life (12-Item Short-
Form Health Survey [SF-12] [28, 29] and Quality of Life in De-
in the sample treated per protocol in the main study [18]
sensitivity analyses: (1) as planned a priori, we repeated all the
analyses in the sample treated per protocol in the main study [18]
and trial site as independent fixed effects. We treated the mea-
surements as repeated measures with an autoregressive resid-
ual covariance structure. We tested the hypothesis contrasting the
effects of the CBASP and SP by investigating the statistical signifi-
cance of the main effect of the treatment group for follow-
up-only measurements and of the group × time interaction term
for measures also administered in the main study. We analyzed
count measures (including the primary outcome) using a nega-
tive binomial distribution and a log link [34, 35]. For binary mea-
sures, we used a binomial distribution with a logit link, and for
continuous measures, we used a normal distribution with an
identity link.
As post hoc analyses, we investigated (a) the number of patients
who deteriorated since the end of the treatment (defined as an
crease of 5 or more points in HDRS score from the end of treat-
ment to the 2-year follow-up) and (b) the time to relapse (defined
as 2 consecutive weeks of fulfilling the criteria for depression in the
LIFE interview) in patients who remitted (i.e., had an HRSD-24
score of 8 or less) after 48 weeks of treatment in the main study.
We compared the deterioration rates and relapse rates between
the groups using Pearson's χ² test, and cumulative survival between
treatment groups with the Mantel-Cox log-rank test.
To test the robustness of the findings, we performed two sets of
sensitivity analyses: (1) as planned a priori, we repeated all the
analyses in the sample treated per protocol in the main study [18]
using all available data without imputation, and (2) post hoc, we
repeated all the analyses using available cases irrespective of
whether they were treated per protocol or not without imputation.
We calculated or approximated standardized effect sizes (Cohen’s
d) for all group comparisons. For continuous outcomes, we di-
vided the adjusted mean difference by the pooled observed stan-
dard deviations [36]. We used approximating formulas for count
[37] and binary [38] endpoints. For all the analyses, we used a two-
sided alpha level of 0.05. Consequently, except for the results of the
ITT analysis of the rate of well weeks, all our findings should be
considered as exploratory. We performed analyses with IBM SPSS
25 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA).
Results

Sample
Of the 268 randomized patients, 207 (77.2%) participated in the 1-year follow-up investigation and 188 (70.1%) participated in the 2-year follow-up measurement (Fig. 1). The characteristics of the follow-up sample do not suggest differential attrition between the treatments from randomization (Table 1).

Fig. 1. Patient selection flowchart. CBASP, Cognitive Behavioral Analysis System of Psychotherapy; SP, supportive psychotherapy; FUP, follow-up.
Table 1. Sample characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Randomized sample</th>
<th></th>
<th>Sample participating in follow-up</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CRASP (n = 137)</td>
<td>SP (n = 131)</td>
<td>total (n = 268)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>CRASP (n = 106)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SP (n = 101)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>total (n = 207)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean age (SD), years</td>
<td>44.65 (12.06)</td>
<td>45.18 (11.60)</td>
<td>44.91 (11.82)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean age at onset (SD), years</td>
<td>12.96 (4.46)</td>
<td>13.05 (4.39)</td>
<td>13.00 (4.41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>96 (70.1%)</td>
<td>81 (61.8%)</td>
<td>177 (66.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married, cohabiting</td>
<td>52 (38.0%)</td>
<td>54 (41.2%)</td>
<td>106 (39.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>61 (44.5%)</td>
<td>56 (42.7%)</td>
<td>117 (43.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separated, divorced or widowed</td>
<td>24 (17.5%)</td>
<td>21 (16.0%)</td>
<td>45 (16.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal educational levela</td>
<td>Low or medium</td>
<td>46 (33.6%)</td>
<td>50 (38.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High or very high</td>
<td>91 (66.4%)</td>
<td>81 (61.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>54 (39.4%)</td>
<td>35 (26.7%)</td>
<td>89 (33.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time or in training</td>
<td>54 (39.4%)</td>
<td>47 (35.9%)</td>
<td>101 (37.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not employedb</td>
<td>29 (21.2%)</td>
<td>49 (37.4%)</td>
<td>78 (29.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtype of chronic depressionc</td>
<td>Double depression</td>
<td>59 (43.7%)</td>
<td>60 (48.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chronic major depression</td>
<td>42 (31.1%)</td>
<td>40 (32.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recurrent major depression without complete remission between episodes</td>
<td>34 (25.2%)</td>
<td>25 (20.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean age onset (SD), years</td>
<td>12.89 (4.37)</td>
<td>12.82 (4.42)</td>
<td>12.86 (4.38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any comorbid axis I disorder</td>
<td>56 (40.9%)</td>
<td>61 (46.6%)</td>
<td>117 (43.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any comorbid axis II disorder</td>
<td>44 (32.1%)</td>
<td>59 (45.0%)</td>
<td>103 (38.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any comorbid axis I or II disorder</td>
<td>82 (59.9%)</td>
<td>100 (76.3%)</td>
<td>182 (67.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous antidepressive treatments</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medication</td>
<td>71 (51.8%)</td>
<td>77 (58.8%)</td>
<td>148 (55.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychotherapy</td>
<td>78 (56.9%)</td>
<td>75 (57.3%)</td>
<td>153 (57.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combination</td>
<td>26 (19.0%)</td>
<td>27 (20.6%)</td>
<td>53 (19.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous inpatient treatmentd</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment resistance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medication</td>
<td>10 (7.3%)</td>
<td>18 (13.7%)</td>
<td>28 (10.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychotherapy</td>
<td>7 (5.1%)</td>
<td>19 (14.9%)</td>
<td>26 (9.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medication washout necessary</td>
<td>34 (24.8%)</td>
<td>39 (29.8%)</td>
<td>73 (27.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous suicide attemptse</td>
<td>31 (24.0%)</td>
<td>45 (36.0%)</td>
<td>76 (29.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family history of depression</td>
<td>85 (62.0%)</td>
<td>79 (60.3%)</td>
<td>164 (61.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early trauma f, i</td>
<td>93 (71.5%)</td>
<td>97 (77.0%)</td>
<td>190 (74.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional abuseg, j</td>
<td>72 (55.4%)</td>
<td>79 (62.7%)</td>
<td>151 (59.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical abuseg, j</td>
<td>27 (20.8%)</td>
<td>28 (22.2%)</td>
<td>55 (21.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual abuseg, j</td>
<td>28 (21.5%)</td>
<td>29 (23.4%)</td>
<td>57 (22.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional neglectg, j</td>
<td>82 (63.6%)</td>
<td>85 (67.5%)</td>
<td>167 (65.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical neglectg, j</td>
<td>41 (31.5%)</td>
<td>71 (53.2%)</td>
<td>82 (32.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment preferenceh</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medication alone</td>
<td>1 (0.7%)</td>
<td>2 (1.6%)</td>
<td>3 (1.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychotherapy alone</td>
<td>104 (77.0%)</td>
<td>94 (74.0%)</td>
<td>198 (75.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combined treatment</td>
<td>13 (9.6%)</td>
<td>18 (14.2%)</td>
<td>31 (11.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No preference</td>
<td>17 (12.6%)</td>
<td>13 (10.2%)</td>
<td>30 (11.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HRSD screening score</td>
<td>27.15 (5.49)</td>
<td>26.99 (5.76)</td>
<td>27.07 (5.61)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HRSD score at start of follow-up (end of study treatment)</td>
<td>14.00 (9.72)</td>
<td>16.49 (9.96)</td>
<td>15.19 (9.90)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unless otherwise indicated, data are presented as n (%). SD, standard deviation; CRASP, Cognitive Behavioral Analysis System of Psychotherapy; SP, supportive psychotherapy; a "Low" corresponds to at least 9 years of education (no formal education or Hauptschule), "medium" corresponds to at least 10 years of education (Realschule or Polytechnische Oberschule), "high" corresponds to at least 12 or 13 years of education (Gymnasium or Fachoberschule), and "very high" corresponds to at least 15 years of education (university degree). b Includes retired, housemaker, unemployed, and other. c n = 201 with data available for long-term follow-up. d Defined as at least 2 self-reported failures/nonresponses to a medication (more than 4 weeks) or to a psychotherapy (more than 8 sessions). e n = 199 with data available for long-term follow-up. f n = 200 with data available for long-term follow-up. g n = 198 with data available for long-term follow-up. h n = 201 with data available for long-term follow-up. i At least moderate to severe in 1 of 5 dimensions assessed with the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire. j At least moderate to severe in the respective dimension of the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire. k At least moderate to severe in 1 of 5 dimensions assessed with the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire.
The baseline (pre-randomization) characteristics of the available sample did not differ substantially between CBASP and SP patients regarding age (mean [SD] age = 45.52 [11.70] years), family status (married/cohabiting: \( n = 82, 39.6\% \)), formal educational level (high/very high: \( n = 130, 62.8\% \)), age at depression onset (mean [SD] age = 12.86 [4.38] years), previous psychological treatment (\( n = 120, 58.0\% \)), previous combined psycho- and pharmacological treatment (\( n = 40, 19.3\% \)), and family history of depression (\( n = 133, 64.3\% \)). However, SP patients reported slightly fewer females (CBASP: 72.6%; SP: 62.4%), double the unemployment rate (CBASP: 17.9%; SP: 38.6%), more comorbid axis I or II disorders (CBASP: 60.4%; SP: 77.2%), more previous inpatient treatments (CBASP: 46.2%; SP: 57.4%), higher treatment resistance to medication (CBASP: 7.9%; SP: 13.9%) and psychotherapy (CBASP: 4.7%; SP: 15.8%), more previous suicide attempts (CBASP: 22.8%; SP: 35.7%), and more early trauma (CBASP: 70.3%; SP: 79.8%).

### Outcomes

Patients in the CBASP group had a 26% higher chance of experiencing a well week in the 2 years after treatment than patients in the SP group (mean [SD] of 48.6 [36.9] weeks in the CBASP group vs. 39.0 [34.8] weeks in the SP group; estimated rate ratio = 1.26, 95% CI 0.99–1.59, \( p = 0.057, d = 0.18 \)), a difference not reaching statistical significance (Table 2). In the first year, however, patients were statistically significantly more likely to experience a well week in the CBASP group (CBASP: \( n = 23.5 [20.24] \); SP: \( n = 17.82 [18.67] \); estimated rate ratio = 1.36, 95% CI 1.05–1.76, \( p = 0.021, d = 0.24 \)). The detailed descriptive results for well weeks throughout the follow-up period are depicted in Figure 2, showing a fairly stable proportion of patients reporting a well week throughout the follow-up phase (ranging from 40 to 50% in the CBASP group and from 30 to 45% in the SP group). There were no significant differences between the groups regarding treatment utiliza-

### Table 2. Observed data and results of the intention-to-treat analysis for the count outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Observed data</th>
<th>Intention-to-treat effect estimate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CBASP</td>
<td>SP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Well weeks (primary outcome)</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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<td>92</td>
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<tr>
<td>Year 1</td>
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<td>101</td>
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<tr>
<td>Year 2</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>92</td>
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<tr>
<td>Weeks in treatment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>92</td>
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<tr>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>101</td>
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<td>Year 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Weeks in outpatient treatment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>Year 1</td>
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<td>Year 2</td>
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<td>Weeks in inpatient treatment</td>
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<td>Year 2</td>
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CBASP, Cognitive Behavioral Analysis System of Psychotherapy; CI, confidence interval; \( d \), Cohen’s \( d \); SD, standard deviation; SP, supportive psychotherapy. \( a \) Estimates calculated in available data due to convergence problems in some imputed data sets.
tion (including inpatient and outpatient or pharmacological and psychotherapeutic).

Considering the investigated continuous outcomes (Table 3), the CBASP showed advantages over SP regarding self-rated depression severity after the first year (IDS-SR estimated mean difference = −5.57 points, 95% CI −10.04 to −1.10, \( p = 0.015 \), \( d = −0.39 \)) and depression-specific quality of life after the first year (QLDS estimated mean difference = −2.46 points, 95% CI −4.90 to −0.03, \( p = 0.048 \), \( d = −0.25 \)). No differences were detected after the second year. The course of the HRSD-24 scores throughout the main and the follow-up study showed that the average symptom levels achieved in the main study were largely maintained in the follow-up phase (online suppl. Fig. 1). Suicidal behavior was rarely observed during the follow-up phase (2 times in the SP group in the first year after treatment: 1 attempt, no suicide). The results regarding remission rates (CBASP: 1 year 40%, 2 years 40.2%; SP: 1 year 28.9%, 2 years 33%; online suppl. eTable 2) and life events (online suppl. eTable 3) showed no significant difference between the treatment groups.

In total, 180 patients provided HRSD data at the end of the treatment and at the 2-year follow-up and were included in the post hoc analysis of deterioration rates. A total of 22 of the 95 patients (23.2%) in the CBASP group and 15 of the 85 patients (17.6%) in the SP group deteriorated until the end of the 2-year follow-up (group difference \( p = 0.361 \)). Of 72 patients remitted in the main study, 55 patients provided their follow-up data for a post hoc analysis of time to relapse. Here, 19 of the 35 remitted patients (54.2%) in the CBASP group and 6 of the 20 remitted patients (30.0%) in the SP group relapsed during the 2-year follow-up (group difference \( p = 0.082 \)). With a mean of 68.0 (95% CI 55.9–80.1) weeks to relapse in the CBASP group and 79.6 (95% CI 62.4–96.7) weeks to relapse in the SP group, we did not identify a statistically significant difference between treatments (log-rank test \( p = 0.14 \)).

Sensitivity analyses per protocol suggested similar results to the ITT findings, but most of them did not reach significance (online suppl. eTables 4–7). In general, the sensitivity analyses in the available cases without imputation showed effects similar to or mildly larger than those in the ITT approach, which for well weeks, clinician-rated depressive symptoms (both HRSD and QIDS), self-rated depressive symptoms, mental health-related quality of life, depression-specific quality of life, and remission and response regarding self-rated depressive symptoms reached statistical significance for one or both years of the follow-up phase (results not shown).

Fig. 2. Course of well weeks. CBASP, Cognitive Behavioral Analysis System of Psychotherapy; SP, supportive psychotherapy.
The observed data suggest that, on average, both the CBASP and SP resulted in sustainably reduced levels of depressive symptoms, a higher level of social functioning, and an increased quality of life over the 2-year follow-up period. The clinician-rated response and remission rates slightly increased over time in both groups. Nevertheless, more than half of the patients had not achieved remission 2 years after intensive psychological therapy, and patients...
in both conditions on average spent about half of the time in psycho- or pharmacotherapy, indicating a need for further treatment. For early-onset chronically depressed patients, 48 weeks or 32 sessions of acute therapy may not be sufficient for acute [18] and long-term results.

The superiority of CBASP over SP with regard to the rate of well weeks, self-rated depressive symptoms, and depression-related quality of life had diminished at some point between the first and the second year after treatment. This finding suggests that the skills the chronic patients acquired through CBASP treatment [39] may have faded over time. A similar but much more steeply declining long-term course has been reported in other CBASP studies [14, 16] after the initial acute treatment had ended. A possible explanation might be that the therapists in our study were not allowed to continue therapy after 48 weeks, and that the CBASP is not yet well disseminated in outpatient care. A maintenance regimen that includes booster sessions may help to reinforce the strategies learned with the CBASP, particularly in the face of life events. In one study utilizing monthly maintenance sessions with the CBASP over the course of 1 year after acute treatment, the CBASP proved superior over “assessment-only sessions” [12]. Persistent benefits were also demonstrated if a sequential model integrating pharmacotherapy was endorsed [40, 41]. Another reason for the unexpectedly small differences between the therapies after 2 years may be that SP is a strong comparator including powerful common efficacy factors for psychotherapy [22], in comparison to a wait list control or assessment-only sessions.

The strengths of this study include the use of a large, multicenter sample with patient recruitment from different departments and the high rate of patient participation in the follow-up measurements. This is the first published study comparing the long-term effects of the CBASP with those of a nonspecific psychotherapy. Further unique features and strengths of this investigation – besides including core factors for chronic depression, such as moderate substance abuse, chronic suicidality, and early trauma – include the relatively long duration of follow-up of 2 years. In addition, the primary outcome measure LIFE enabled us to retrospectively gather information about the long-term course on a weekly basis rather than just cross-sectionally.

The results of this study should be interpreted with caution because of the limitation that patients were recruited from academic centers only; thus, our findings may not generalize to routine settings in public health care. In addition, we observed a moderate baseline imbalance between the groups, with somewhat more impaired patients in the SP group. However, since we used depression severity before treatment as a covariate in all the analyses, it is very unlikely that the variables indicating group differences had substantial influences on the outcomes that had not been captured by baseline symptom severity. Furthermore, the relatively complex statistical models, imputing values for over 20% of the participants for the ITT analyses, as well as the difficult-to-justify assumptions behind imputation and analysis, may evoke some uncertainty regarding the validity of the findings. However, the negative binomial model has been shown to be a good choice for count variables [34, 35], multiple imputation may work with up to 50% of missing data [42], and we confirmed the general pattern of findings across a large number of outcomes and in two sets of sensitivity analyses. Another limitation is that we did not assess the specific kind and dosage of antidepressant medication as well as possible withdrawal syndromes during follow-up. The medication status, however, is known to affect relapse rates [43]. Yet, the medication status in the follow-up period of the present trial was similar in both treatment groups; thus, it could not confound the main objective of the study, which was to estimate the comparative long-term effectiveness of the CBASP versus SP.

The CBASP is a disorder-specific psychological treatment with evidence for persistent effectiveness in outcomes in chronic depression. Notwithstanding the positive results, this trial also reminds us that even an intensive/specific approach applied over 1 year does not provide a satisfying solution for long-term stabilization in early-onset patients with a history of early trauma [18]. A substantial number of patients did not achieve remission 2 years after having received CBASP treatment, and the average participant still scored in the mildly depressed range. Additional research should clarify whether further treatment, including augmentation with pharmacotherapy or modular interventions based on individual patient characteristics [44] in the acute phase, might result in a higher rate of remission and consequently a lower rate of relapse. In addition, considering management options that proved helpful in treating other chronic diseases may be promising. These comprise integrative care approaches organized in disease management programs and long-term support with low-threshold therapeutic contacts. For example, a fully automated internet-delivered augmentation strategy (SUMMIT) was superior to treatment as usual in patients with recurrent depression over 24 months after discharge [45].
In summary, we found disorder-specific psychotherapy to confer stronger long-term effects than nonspecific psychotherapy in terms of the number of well weeks, self-rated depressive symptoms, and quality of life in early-onset chronically depressed patients 1 year, but not 2 years, after therapy termination. An extended and flexible treatment regimen with booster sessions or sequential strategies may improve long-term outcomes in chronically depressed patients.

Acknowledgments

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Statement of Ethics

The study is being conducted in compliance with the protocols, good clinical practice, and the applicable regulatory requirements. The Institutional Review Board/Institutional Ethics Committee (IRB/IEC) of the University of Freiburg approved this research, and the ongoing trial is under continued review by the IRB/IEC. We asked the local IRB/IECs of each participating site for confirmation prior to study initiation. All participants had provided written informed consent prior to undergoing clinical interview, randomization, and intervention.

Disclosure Statement

E. Schramm received modest book royalties and honoraria for workshops and presentations related to the CBASP. D. Schoepf received honoraria for CBASP workshops and presentations. J.P. Klein received payments for workshops and books (Beltz, Elsevier, and Hogrefe) on the topic of psychotherapy for chronic depression. H. Walter and K. Schnell received funding from the German Research Foundation for an add-on study of the reported randomized controlled trial. K. Schnell received advisory fees from Servier Pharmaceuticals and payments for workshops and books (Schatzauer, Elsevier, and Kohlhammer) on psychotherapy for chronic depression. M. Backenstrass received honoraria for workshops and presentations related to the CBASP. M. Hautzinger received advisory fees from Servier Pharmaceuticals, Springer publishers, Hogrefe publishers, and Beltz publishers. No other disclosures were reported.

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Author Contributions


References


