

# Attachment-Based Compassion Therapy (ABCT) to reduce psychological distress in university students

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**Introduction:** Recent studies show that university students commonly suffer from mental health problems (Auerbach et al., 2018; Karyotaki et al., 2020). There is a growing interest in evaluating the effectiveness of mindfulness and compassion interventions for treating psychological disorders. This present study assessing the effectiveness of an adapted six-week ABCT programme in the treatment of psychological distress in university students, compared with relaxation therapy. It will also evaluate the potential mediating role of attachment style, experiential avoidance, compassion (for others/oneself) and mindfulness skills, in the intervention group, compared to the active control group.

**Objectives:** The main aim will be to assess the effectiveness of a six-week ABCT programme, compared with an active control group based on relaxation therapy (including progressive muscular relaxation and guided imagery), for the reduction of psychological distress symptoms in university students.

#### Secondary objectives will be:

- to examine the effects of ABCT on anxiety, depression, stress, burnout symptoms, positive and negative affect, and emotional regulation;
- to analyse the possible mediating role of attachment style, experiential avoidance, compassion (for others/oneself) and mindfulness skills on improvements in the ABCT group, compared to the control group.

**Expected results:** The main expected result is that ABCT will be more effective than relaxation therapy to reduce psychological distress in university students at post-treatment. Also, (A) ABCT will be more effective than relaxation therapy for the improvement of anxiety, depression, stress and burnout symptoms, as well as positive and negative affect, and emotional regulation at post-treatment; (B) improvements in psychological distress, anxiety, depression, stress, burnout, positive and negative affect, and emotional regulation will be maintained at six-month follow-up; (C) attachment style, experiential avoidance, compassion (for others/oneself) and mindfulness skills will have a mediating role on the improvements obtained in the ABCT group vs the control group based on relaxation therapy.

**Method:** A total 140 university undergraduate and postgraduate students from the University of Zaragoza and the National University of Distance Education (UNED) who reside in the autonomous community of Aragon, Spain; will be randomly assigned to ABCT or relaxation (active control group). Both interventions will consist of one weekly group sessions during six weeks. Data will be collected before and after the intervention, and there will be a follow-up at six months. **Figure 1** shows the timeline that the 140 participants in the study will follow.

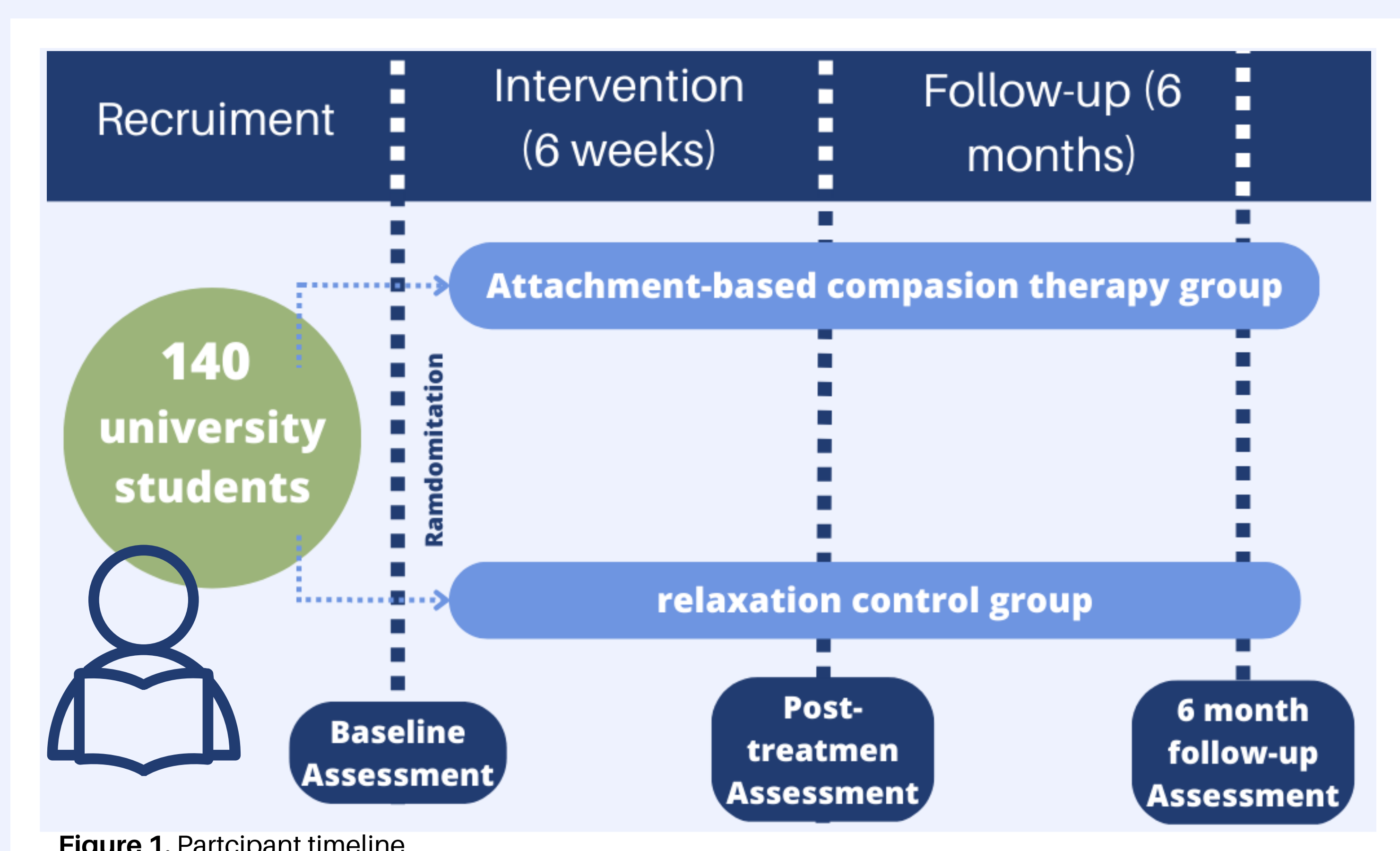


Figure 1. Participant timeline

**Conclusions:** This study will be one of the first RCTs to assess the efficacy and benefits of an ABCT program for this population. In addition, the study will use a randomized controlled design with a relatively large sample of students and a 6-month follow-up, as recommended by previous research (Dawson et al., 2020). This will make it possible to observe changes in the medium term and it will also be possible to carry out mediation analysis. It is also important to note that an active control group will be used, which allows possible changes in the variables to be attributed to the intervention and not to other factors.

#### References:

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