

# Usability of an Online Group Therapy Intervention for the Treatment of Depression in Australian Adults

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## Background

Depression is a serious mental health condition affecting approximately 4.1% of Australian adults (ABS, 2007). Group cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) delivered in an online setting provides accessible, affordable and efficacious treatment to people living with depression. Group-based online mental health interventions are however an emerging treatment modality and as such there exists a need to broaden the literature regarding their feasibility and utility. Formal usability testing provides unique insights into the way in which participants accept, understand and use an intervention (Ritterband, Gonder-Frederick et al., 2003). Furthermore, usability tests provide valuable information about how interventions can be better adapted to meet the needs of different users (Gustafson & Wyatt, 2004).

**Objective:** To evaluate the usability of MoodGroup: An online group therapy intervention that uses CBT to reduce depressive symptoms in Australian adults.

## Method

The non-clinical sample comprised seven Australian adults experienced in the provision of group-based online peer support for people affected by depression. Meeting weekly for six consecutive weeks, the participants worked through the 12 MoodGroup modules in an online discussion group hosted by Elluminate virtual classroom software. The group was facilitated by the principal investigator. Participants provided feedback on the modules' structure, content, appearance and technology. A mixed-method approach that included quantitative evaluation and thematic content analysis assessed the usability of the intervention. Quantitative ratings of the modules were collected at the end of the 12-week period and qualitative comments were collected at the completion of each module.

## Results

Participant ratings of usability were consistently positive, with more than 70% agreement on all items (Figure 1). In particular, the content was perceived to be relevant and presented with a good mix of text & graphics.

### Usability

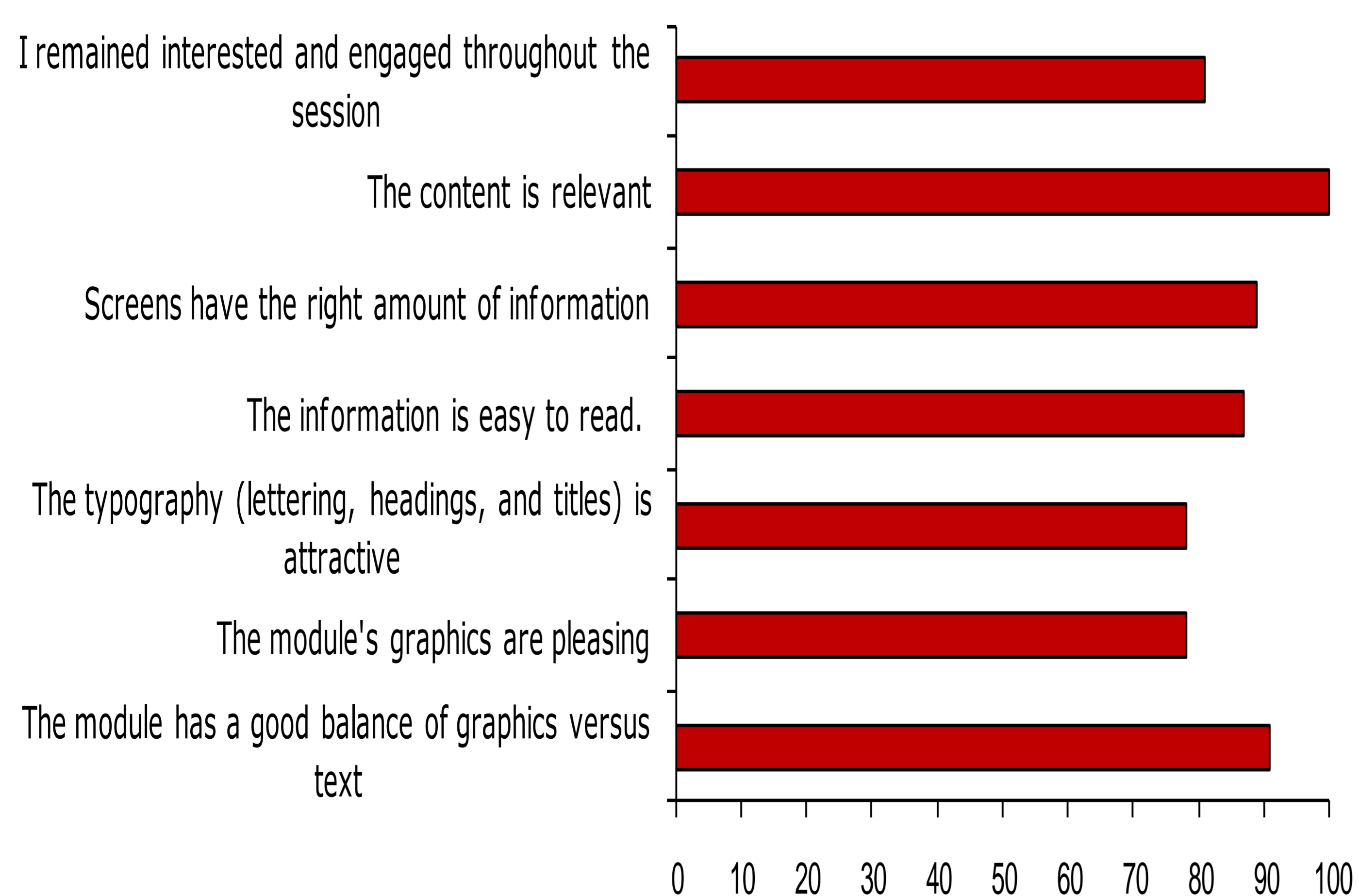


Figure 1. Percentage agreement of usability-related statements for each of the MoodGroup modules

## Group Membership

### Strengths

- ❖ Feelings of group membership & cohesion increased over time.
- ❖ Strong appreciation for the input, support and suggestions from fellow group members

### Limitations

- ❖ Breaking into small groups was reported to be confusing at times

*"Without Elluminate the group dynamic would be lost & it wouldn't be as personal & interactive."*

*"The level of interaction means you are not just sitting there getting bored letting your mind go blank. Hopefully it will keep clients active too."*

## Session Structure

### Liked Best

- ❖ Activities and group discussion
- ❖ Learning and applying new skills
- ❖ Group interaction
- ❖ Graphical representation of concepts
- ❖ Useful and relevant content
- ❖ Interesting and informative homework and readings
- ❖ Interactive technology

### Liked Least

- ❖ Insufficient breaks
- ❖ Content-dense sessions with too few activities
- ❖ Acclimating to the technology
- ❖ Insufficient time to rehearse and discuss skills learnt
- ❖ Being unprepared for the preparation time that homework and readings required

*"Maybe too much reading for depressed people with lack of motivation and concentration."*

## Technology

### Strengths

- ❖ An 83% approval rate was reported for Elluminate's ease-of-use, simplicity & functionality
- ❖ High approval ratings for Elluminate's interactive features
- ❖ Consensus that the intervention would be less effective with a chat-based program lacking these interactive features

### Limitations

- ❖ Concerns about people with depression learning to use and navigate Elluminate
- ❖ Infrequent difficulties logging-in and internet drop-outs

*"I think in this environment you can just be yourself & there are no judgments about anything or anyone."*

## Conclusions

The MoodGroup intervention demonstrated strong usability & high approval ratings for its structure, content, appearance & technology. The participants felt that MoodGroup would be favourably received by people with depression and that the program would be of benefit to them. It was anticipated that the interactive nature of the program would create strong group cohesion which would further benefit clients with depression. The study revealed some important areas for improvement and/or change.

## Suggested Improvements

- ❖ Create activities in every session & factor in time for breaks.
- ❖ Allow time for clients to get used to Elluminate.
- ❖ Reduce content to allow more time for rehearsal of skills & discussion of concepts.
- ❖ Prepare clients for the amount of time needed to complete the readings & homework activities.

## References

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