

## Triple Care Farm Research Snapshot

Findings from a 10-year comparative study of the effectiveness of dialectical behavior therapy for young people in residential treatment for substance misuse



Mission Australia's **Triple Care Farm** is a residential alcohol and other drugs (AOD) program for young people aged 16-24 years. The 12-week residential rehabilitation uses a modified dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) program, followed by 6 months of community aftercare to help young people to sustain change upon return to their community.

This snapshot presents the key findings from a collaborative research partnership between Mission Australia and the University of Wollongong. The 10-year study explored the effectiveness of DBT at Triple Care Farm, comparing outcomes for two groups of young people in 2008-2009 and 2018-2020.

In 2020, Triple Care Farm supported 114 young people through withdrawal, 61 through residential rehabilitation and 165 through aftercare support.

Sir David Martin Foundation is the major funder of Triple Care Farm.

### Key insights



**Problematic use of AOD can have devastating effects on the lives of young people.** Triple Care Farm delivers modified DBT in a group residential setting, to help young people to manage their withdrawal and recovery from AOD use.



**Across 10 years, the study found that an integrated DBT approach to care was an effective intervention for young people at Triple Care Farm.** Young people had reduced mental health symptoms, increased confidence to resist substances and increased quality of life at the end of treatment.



**Longitudinal data found a significant reduction in young people's severity of AOD dependence 6 and 12 months after treatment.**



**Young people seeking residential treatment from 2018-2020 displayed significantly higher levels of mental symptoms compared to 10 years ago.** Outcomes for these young people, although positive, were smaller and took longer to occur during treatment.

## The aim of the study

Problematic use of alcohol and illicit drugs can have devastating effects on the lives of young people. In 2018, alcohol and illicit drug use were among the top three leading causes of total burden of disease in young Australians.<sup>1</sup> In addition, an estimated 38% of people seeking treatment for substance use are aged under 30 years.<sup>2</sup>

Previous studies have found DBT to be an effective treatment across diagnostic groups and clinical settings. However, this is the first study to evaluate the effectiveness of DBT as a major component of a youth residential AOD program.

## Methodology

This study compared outcomes for two groups of young people who completed the residential program at Triple Care Farm:

- **100 young people from 2018-20.** Longitudinal data was collected at entry (baseline), 6 weeks (mid-way), 12 weeks (end of treatment), 6 months and 12 months after completing treatment.
- **102 young people from 2008-09.** Historic data was collected at entry (baseline), 6 weeks (mid-way) and 12 weeks (end of treatment).

The study measured self-reported outcomes for young people using a range of tools:



### Mental health

Global Severity Index



### Dependence on substances

Severity of Dependence Scale



### Confidence to resist substance use

Brief Situational Confidence Questionnaire



### Quality of Life

World Health Organisation Quality of Life-8

Mental health and confidence to resist substance use were the common outcomes measured for both groups. Data on the fidelity of DBT delivery and group session ratings were also collected from 2018-20.

## About Triple Care Farm

Located in the NSW Southern Highlands, Triple Care Farm specialises in treating young people aged 16–24 years with substance dependence and mental illness.

The program offers a holistic treatment model which includes:

- **2-4 week withdrawal and detox program** providing medical support to manage the physical symptoms of withdrawal
- **12-week rehabilitation program** which offers a DBT group program, education and training and living skills
- **6-month aftercare support** with a youth worker to sustain long-term positive change and reduce the chance of relapse.

## DBT at Triple Care Farm

DBT is a skills-based psychotherapy originally developed to treat borderline personality disorder. It has since been widely adapted for a range of diagnostic groups and settings, including substance use disorder.

Triple Care Farm provides a modified DBT group program tailored specifically for young people, alongside 1:1 counselling options.

The DBT program is run in small groups (maximum 10) on session topics such as mindfulness, distress tolerance, interpersonal effectiveness and emotional regulation.

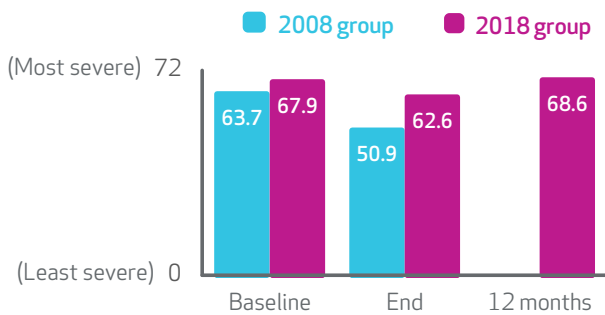
## Findings

### Did DBT have a positive impact on outcomes for young people?

The study found that an integrated DBT approach to care was an effective intervention for young people at Triple Care Farm. Young people in both groups had increased confidence to resist the urge to use substances and reduced mental health symptoms at the end of treatment. However, young people seeking treatment from 2018-2020 displayed significantly higher levels of mental health symptoms compared to 10 years ago. Outcomes for these young people, although positive, were smaller, and took longer to occur during treatment.

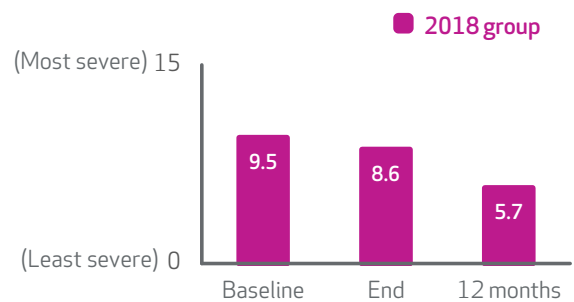
#### Mental health

Young people had significant reductions in mental health symptoms at the end of treatment. However, for a small number of young people mental health continued to be a concern 12 months after treatment (n=24).



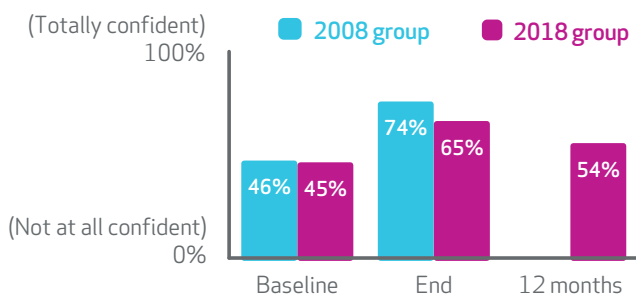
#### Severity of substance use

Young people reported a significant reduction of their severity of AOD dependence at the end of treatment. Improvements were maintained at 6 (n=27) and 12 months after treatment (n=24).



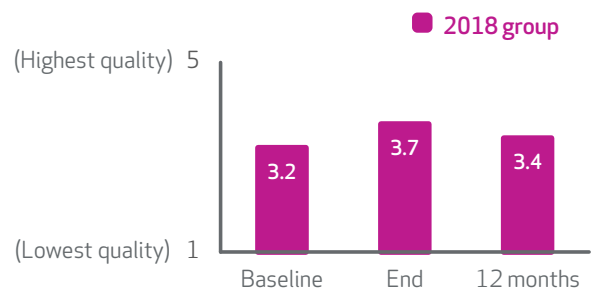
#### Confidence to resist substance use

Young people were significantly more confident they could resist the urge to use substances at the end of treatment. Follow-up data varied at 6 (n=27) and 12 months after treatment (n=24).



#### Quality of Life

Young people's quality of life significantly improved at the end of treatment. Follow-up data varied at 6 (n=27) and 12 months after treatment (n=24).



### Was DBT delivered as intended?

Program facilitators reported strong fidelity to the DBT manual from 2018-20. All areas of the DBT manual were delivered for:

**72%** of introductory sessions

**84%** of group sessions

### Were young people satisfied with DBT?

Yes, most young people had a positive experience with DBT and rated the sessions highly.

**8.9 out of 10**

Average overall satisfaction score with DBT treatment

## Why are these insights important?

**DBT is an effective therapeutic intervention in a youth AOD residential program.** This study was the first to demonstrate the continued positive impact of DBT in a residential care setting for young people over a 10-year period. At the end of treatment young people had positive outcomes across all measures. Given the strong need for integrated, evidence-based approaches to improve outcomes for this vulnerable group DBT should be considered in the design of youth AOD residential programs.

**The mental health support needs of young people at Triple Care Farm have become more complex.** Young people seeking treatment from 2018-20 had significantly higher levels of mental health symptoms. This could be explained by factors such as increased availability of community programs for young people with mild to moderate symptoms, or changes in drug use profile over time. It could also reflect a true increase in the number of young people experiencing and seeking help for substance misuse and comorbid mental health symptoms.

**Regular review and improvement of treatment methods is crucial as support needs become more complex.** The findings reinforce the need to continually improve psychological treatments to ensure they are effectively accommodating for the changing support needs of young people seeking residential treatment support in the future.

### Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the staff and young people at Triple Care Farm for their support of this study, as well as the NSW Ministry of Health for funding the University of Wollongong's Project Air Strategy and this research.

**Aftercare is critical to support young people to sustain change upon return to their community.** Although there were significant improvements across all outcomes at the end of treatment, the longitudinal findings varied. Whilst positive impacts were sustained for reduction in severity of substance use, improvements in mental health, confidence to resist substance use and quality of life were mixed for the small number of young people who provided data.

These findings highlight the importance of long term holistic aftercare to help young people sustain outcomes after completing residential AOD treatment. An evaluation of youth AOD residential aftercare at multiple sites could provide further insights into the enabling conditions and barriers faced by young people in their longer term recovery journey.

### Limitations and future research directions

This study did not include a comparison group. This means conclusions cannot be made about specific elements of DBT that resulted in improved outcomes. Future multi-site randomised controlled trials would allow the effects of DBT to be separated from wider whole-of-program effects.

Future studies should also include formal assessment of psychiatric diagnoses to allow more sensitive reporting of clinical characteristics and comorbidities, and their effect on treatment outcomes.



### Research Citation

Marceau, E. M., Holmes, G., Cutts, J., Mullaney, L., Meuldijk, D., Townsend, M. L., & Grenyer, B. (2021). Now and then: a ten-year comparison of young people in residential substance use disorder treatment receiving group dialectical behaviour therapy. *BMC psychiatry*, 21(1), 362. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-021-03372-2>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2021. Australian Burden of Disease Study: Impact and causes of illness and death in Australia 2018, AIHW, Australian Government. <https://doi.org/10.25816/5ps1-j259>

<sup>2</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare: Alcohol, tobacco and other drugs in Australia. Web report. 2020