

# Mixed-methods evaluation of the Breaking Free Online (Health and Justice) treatment and recovery programme for substance misuse in prisons

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## Breaking Free Online (BFO) computer-assisted therapy for drug and alcohol addiction:

- ✓ Widens access to evidence-based treatment
- ✓ Overcomes stigma and other barriers
- ✓ Cost-effective solution
- ✓ Growing evidence base for BFO with research based on Medical Research Council framework (Craig et al., 2008)

## Breaking Free Online (BFO) approved by UK Ministry of Justice and delivered via Virtual Campus (VC)

- ✓ First healthcare intervention to be included on VC
- ✓ Provides continuity of care between all prisons in England and Wales **and** following release back to the community
- ✓ NHS England 'Through the Gate' initiative to address addiction in offenders to improve rehabilitation and reduce reoffending
- ✓ BFO outcomes now published in **Drugs: Education, Prevention and Policy (Elison et al., 2015)**

## Participants

All offenders male; mean age 35 years (range 21-50 years) range of substances including opiates (36%) and alcohol (18%)

## Quantitative pre-test / post-test outcomes from 85 offenders

Measure	P-Value	Effect Size
Quality of life	< .0001	.38
Recovery progression	.415	.01
Severity of alcohol dependence	.013	.57
Alcohol consumption	< .0001	.74
Severity of drug dependence	< .0001	.36
Drug consumption	< .0001	.74

Recovery Progression	P-Value	Effect Size
Difficult situations	.025	.24
Emotions	.004	.31
Negative thoughts	.002	.34
Physical sensations	.014	.27
Unhelpful behaviours	.646	.05
Lifestyle	.645	.06

Statistically **significant improvements** in quality of life, substance dependence and substance use **but not recovery progression**

Individual aspects of recovery progression were examined:

- **Improvements** seen in thoughts, emotions, physical sensations, difficult situations
- **But no change in unhelpful behaviours and lifestyle** - is the ability of offenders to utilise interventions constrained by prison environment and regime?

An exploratory **qualitative study** was also conducted with 16 offenders to explore views on BFO

**Benefit of digital format...**

Interviewer: "What was it that made you think you might like to have a go at it?"  
Participant: "Cause it's working on a computer instead of a group."  
Interviewer: "You're not into groups?"  
Participant: "Not really, no."

**Offenders reported it equipped them with 'tools' to sustain their recovery...**

"What I liked about it, I didn't want to just come in here, then go out there with absolutely nothing [...] So, yeah, it is a good tool, and I understand why you've done it."

**Therapeutic benefits were also identified...**

"I thought it was really helpful [...] I had no idea how many units of alcohol I was drinking, and how harmful it was [...] finding out that I was drinking over 50 units of alcohol a day."

**There were intentions to use the programme when back in the community...**

"When I get home, I'll go on it from time to time, just to re-boost myself."

## Conclusions

Even in **challenging prison environment**, offenders can make significant progress in their recovery from drug and alcohol addiction.

Despite **security and digital inclusion barriers**, it was possible to implement computer-assisted therapy in prison settings and support offenders in using it.

Data suggest **positive outcomes**

- Reduced substance dependence and substance use
- Improvements to quality of life and aspects of recovery progression

**Recovery progression findings** interesting as they reveal which aspects of functioning might be more amenable to positive change in a prison setting

- Further investigation needed to look at longer-term outcomes in the community

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