

PREVENTION IN TEEN DATING VIOLENCE: AN OVERVIEW

Isaline Malherbe¹, Nadine Kacenenbogen¹ & Giovanni Briganti²

¹Department of General Medicine, Université libre de Bruxelles, Brussels, Belgium

²Department of Computational Medicine and Neuropsychiatry, Faculty of Medicine, University of Mons, Mons, Belgium

SUMMARY

Teen dating violence affects between 8.2% and 30% of adolescents, leading to significant mental and physical health consequences including depression, anxiety, substance use disorders, and increased risk of sexually transmitted infections. This narrative review synthesizes current evidence on prevention interventions for teen dating violence, examining their effectiveness and exploring applications for clinical practice. Based on findings from a comprehensive systematic review of 28 studies, this review identifies several types of effective prevention approaches. School-based universal programs such as Green Dot, Me & You, and Dating Matters have demonstrated effectiveness in reducing violence perpetration and changing attitudes toward violence. Targeted interventions for high-risk populations, particularly adolescents with previous violence exposure, often show stronger effects than universal approaches. Brief interventions using motivational interviewing and personality theory-based approaches show promise for healthcare settings, while digital prevention programs offer scalability and accessibility advantages. The evidence reveals that interventions are generally more effective at changing attitudes and norms than directly modifying violent behaviors, suggesting that cognitive shifts may precede behavioral change. Programs show differential effectiveness across gender, previous violence exposure, and socioeconomic characteristics, highlighting the importance of tailored approaches. Healthcare provider training demonstrates significant improvements in knowledge and screening practices, though implementation barriers remain. Economic evaluation suggests that prevention investments can yield substantial returns, with one program showing a benefit-cost ratio of 62.9. Sustained effects remain challenging to achieve, with some programs requiring multiple years of implementation. The predominantly U.S.-based research raises questions about generalizability across different cultural contexts. Future research priorities include long-term outcome studies, implementation research, culturally adapted interventions for diverse populations, and economic evaluations. Effective teen dating violence prevention requires comprehensive, multi-level approaches that address individual, family, school, and community factors, with sustained commitment and resources for implementation.

Key words: teen dating violence - adolescent intimate partner violence - violence prevention - school-based interventions - healthcare interventions - primary prevention - relationship education - youth violence

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INTRODUCTION

Adolescent romantic relationships play a crucial role in the emotional and social development of young people. Within this context, a couple can be defined as "continuous voluntary interactions that are mutually recognized. Compared to other peer relationships, romantic relationships generally have a distinctive intensity, usually marked by expressions of affection and current or anticipated sexual behavior. This definition applies to homosexual as well as heterosexual relationships" (Collins et al. 2009).

Teen dating violence (TDV) refers to "any form of physical, psychological, sexual violence or harassment occurring in a romantic relationship among young people between 10 and 19 years of age" (Basile, 2020). This phenomenon is not uncommon, affecting between 8.2% and 30% of adolescents according to different studies (Basile 2020; Vives-Cases et al. 2021; Valdivia-Salas et al. 2023). The consequences of this issue are significant, as several studies demonstrate that affected youth are at higher risk of developing disorders such as depression, anxiety disorders, eating disorders, substance use disorders, and increased risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or unintended pregnancies

(Shen, 2014; Momeñe et al. 2022; Bonomi et al. 2013; Decker et al. 2005).

Intervention is important both at the primary level, to prevent the occurrence of the phenomenon, and at the secondary level, to enable early intervention and thus limit the consequences on both the mental and physical health of those affected. Several strategies can be considered in this context, including through parental education, given the model that their own relationship provides. There are also specific prevention programs to implement in schools that address emotional relationships, conflict management, and consent (Niolon et al. 2019). Finally, general practitioners have a role to play at both the primary and secondary levels, by screening young people who come for consultation and referring them if necessary.

Given the prevalence and serious consequences of teen dating violence, there is an urgent need to identify and implement effective prevention strategies. Understanding what interventions work, for whom, and in what contexts is essential for developing comprehensive approaches to address this public health concern. This narrative review aims to synthesize current evidence on prevention measures for teen dating violence, examine their effectiveness, and explore their potential applications in clinical practice, particularly in primary care settings.

TYPES OF PREVENTION INTERVENTIONS

The field of teen dating violence prevention has evolved to encompass a diverse array of intervention approaches, each reflecting different theoretical frameworks, target populations, and implementation contexts. Understanding these various types of interventions provides insight into the multifaceted nature of prevention efforts and the range of strategies available to address this complex public health issue.

The most widely implemented and studied approaches to teen dating violence prevention occur within school settings, where programs can reach large numbers of adolescents regardless of their individual risk profiles. These universal prevention programs operate on the principle that all young people can benefit from education about healthy relationships and violence prevention, creating a foundation of knowledge and skills that may prevent problems before they emerge. School-based programs typically integrate prevention content into existing curricula or deliver standalone interventions during regular school hours. Programs like Green Dot focus on engaging students as active bystanders who can intervene to prevent violence among their peers (Mennicke et al. 2021). This approach recognizes that violence prevention is not solely an individual responsibility but rather a collective effort that requires community engagement and social norm change. The Me & You program represents another prominent example of universal school-based prevention, demonstrating that comprehensive relationship education can significantly reduce various forms of dating violence (Peskin et al. 2019). The program's success has been attributed to its developmentally appropriate content, interactive delivery methods, and integration of multiple prevention components. Dating Matters exemplifies the comprehensive approach to school-based prevention, combining student curricula with parent programs, educator training, and policy changes to create a multi-level intervention strategy (Vivolo-Kantor et al. 2021). This model recognizes that effective prevention requires addressing multiple influences on adolescent behavior, including individual knowledge and skills, family dynamics, school climate, and community norms.

The implementation of universal school-based programs faces several challenges, including competing curricular demands, varying levels of institutional support, and the need for sustained implementation to achieve meaningful effects. However, schools remain an attractive setting for prevention efforts due to their ability to reach diverse populations of adolescents during critical developmental periods.

While universal prevention programs aim to reach all adolescents, targeted interventions focus specifically on young people who face elevated risks for dating

violence involvement. These programs recognize that certain populations may require more intensive, specialized approaches to address their particular vulnerabilities and circumstances.

Targeted interventions often serve adolescents who have already been exposed to violence, whether in their families, communities, or previous relationships. The Date SMART program, designed for girls with prior dating violence exposure, provides intensive support and skill-building to help participants develop healthier relationship patterns (Rizzo et al. 2018). This approach acknowledges that young people who have experienced violence may need additional support to break cycles of victimization and develop new relationship skills.

Family-based targeted interventions, such as Moms and Teens for Safe Dates, address the reality that adolescents exposed to domestic violence in their homes face particular risks for dating violence involvement (Foshee et al. 2015). These programs work with both parents and adolescents to address the intergenerational transmission of violence and help families develop healthier relationship models.

The Expect Respect Support Groups represent another model of targeted intervention, providing ongoing support and education to students who have been identified as experiencing relationship difficulties (Ball et al. 2015). These groups offer a safe space for adolescents to discuss their experiences and develop skills for healthy relationships.

Targeted interventions face unique challenges, including the need to identify appropriate participants without stigmatizing them, ensuring adequate intensity and duration of services, and addressing the complex trauma and risk factors that characterize high-risk populations. However, these programs often demonstrate stronger effects than universal interventions, reflecting their ability to address specific needs and provide intensive support.

The development of brief intervention approaches represents an important innovation in prevention science, offering hope for settings with limited time and resources. These interventions, typically delivered in one to three sessions, focus on specific psychological mechanisms or motivational factors that may influence relationship behaviors.

Brief interventions often draw on established therapeutic approaches, such as motivational interviewing, to engage adolescents in conversations about their relationships and motivate behavior change. A hospital-based motivational interviewing intervention demonstrated the feasibility of addressing dating violence during medical visits, showing that even brief clinical encounters can influence adolescents' readiness to change problematic relationship behaviors (Rothman & Wang 2016). Other brief interventions target specific psychological mechanisms believed to influence relationship behaviors. Interventions based on incremental theory of personality

focus on changing adolescents' beliefs about whether personality traits can be changed, with the goal of increasing their sense of agency in developing healthier relationship patterns (Fernández-González et al. 2020). The appeal of brief interventions lies in their potential for integration into existing service systems, such as healthcare settings, where adolescents may be seen for routine care. However, the effectiveness of brief interventions depends on their theoretical foundation, the skill of the providers delivering them, and the extent to which they can be integrated with other support systems.

The emergence of digital prevention programs represents a significant advancement in addressing barriers to prevention implementation. Online interventions offer unique advantages, including scalability, accessibility, and the ability to reach adolescents who might not otherwise access prevention services. Digital programs can provide interactive, engaging content that adapts to individual learning styles and paces. The Teen Choices program, delivered entirely online, has demonstrated effectiveness comparable to traditional in-person interventions while offering the advantages of greater accessibility and reduced implementation barriers (Levesque et al. 2016). Family-based digital interventions, such as e-MTSD, provide platforms for parents and adolescents to engage in prevention activities together, potentially overcoming barriers to family participation in traditional programs (McNaughton Reyes et al. 2023). These programs can provide structured guidance for family conversations about relationships and violence prevention. The development of effective digital interventions requires careful attention to user engagement, content design, and integration with other support systems. Programs that combine digital delivery with some form of human support or follow-up tend to show better outcomes than purely automated interventions. Additionally, digital interventions must address issues of digital equity and ensure that technology-based programs do not inadvertently exclude vulnerable populations.

An often-overlooked but critical component of comprehensive prevention involves training the professionals who work with adolescents to recognize, respond to, and prevent dating violence. These interventions focus on building the capacity of adults in various systems to address dating violence effectively.

Healthcare provider training programs recognize that medical professionals are uniquely positioned to identify and respond to dating violence but often lack the knowledge and skills to do so effectively. Training programs for healthcare providers have demonstrated significant improvements in knowledge about dating violence, recognition of warning signs, and appropriate responses to victims (Debnam et al. 2017). School-based professional training focuses on building the capacity of educators, counselors, and other school personnel to address dating violence. Research has

revealed significant gaps in professional preparation, with many school professionals reporting inadequate training to address dating violence effectively (Johnson et al. 2015). The effectiveness of professional training programs depends on their integration with organizational policies and practices, ongoing supervision and support, and the broader institutional commitment to addressing dating violence. Training alone is insufficient; it must be accompanied by system-level changes that support and reinforce the application of new knowledge and skills.

CULTURALLY ADAPTED AND COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACHES

Recognition of the importance of cultural factors in dating violence prevention has led to the development of culturally adapted interventions that address the specific needs and contexts of different communities. These programs acknowledge that effective prevention must be responsive to cultural values, communication styles, and community structures.

Community-based interventions often involve partnerships between researchers, service providers, and community organizations to develop and implement prevention programs that are culturally appropriate and contextually relevant. The development of prevention programs for specific populations, such as refugee youth, demonstrates the importance of adapting intervention content and delivery methods to address unique cultural and contextual factors (Ravi et al. 2019).

Youth participatory action research approaches represent another model of community-based prevention, engaging young people as active partners in identifying problems, developing solutions, and implementing interventions (Beatriz et al. 2018). These approaches recognize that adolescents are experts in their own experiences and can contribute valuable insights to prevention efforts.

The development of culturally adapted interventions requires significant investment in community engagement, cultural competency development, and ongoing partnership maintenance. However, these approaches may be more effective than generic interventions because they address the specific contexts and needs of particular communities.

EFFECTIVENESS OF PREVENTION INTERVENTIONS

The landscape of teen dating violence prevention reveals a complex picture of intervention effectiveness, with programs showing varying degrees of success across different outcomes and populations. Understanding these patterns provides valuable insights for practitioners and policymakers seeking to implement evidence-based prevention strategies.

One of the most striking patterns in the prevention literature is the consistent finding that interventions are more successful at changing attitudes and beliefs than at directly modifying violent behaviors. This phenomenon reflects the complex nature of behavioral change, where cognitive shifts often precede actual behavior modification. Programs frequently demonstrate immediate effects on participants' attitudes toward violence, acceptance of gender stereotypes, and understanding of healthy relationships (Galdo-Castiñeiras et al. 2023; Sanz-Barbero et al. 2022), while behavioral changes may take longer to manifest or may require more intensive interventions. The Lights4Violence program exemplifies this pattern, showing significant reductions in sexist attitudes among girls, with effects being most pronounced among girls whose mothers had low educational levels (Sanz-Barbero et al. 2022). Similarly, educational interventions have demonstrated meaningful improvements in boys' attitudes toward violence justification, with intervention participants showing notable decreases compared to increases in control groups (Galdo-Castiñeiras et al. 2023).

This pattern suggests that attitude change may serve as a necessary foundation for behavioral change, even when immediate behavioral effects are not observed. The modification of social norms and personal beliefs about violence creates conditions that may facilitate future behavioral changes, particularly as adolescents mature and gain more relationship experience.

School-based prevention programs have emerged as a cornerstone of teen dating violence prevention efforts, offering several advantages including broad reach, structured implementation, and integration with existing educational curricula. These programs have demonstrated particular success in universal prevention approaches, where entire student populations receive intervention regardless of their individual risk levels.

Programs like Me & You have shown remarkable success in reducing multiple forms of violence perpetration, including physical violence, psychological violence, and threatening behaviors (Peskin et al. 2019). The Dating Matters program has also demonstrated meaningful reductions in physical violence for both girls and boys compared to comparison schools (Vivolo-Kantor et al. 2021). The most effective school-based programs typically combine multiple components, including educational sessions about healthy relationships, skill-building activities, and efforts to change school climate and peer norms. Programs that engage students as active participants in violence prevention, such as bystander intervention approaches, have shown particular promise. The Green Dot program, for example, has demonstrated notable reductions in both psychological and physical violence perpetration, particularly among adolescents who had witnessed parental partner violence (Mennicke et al. 2021). However, the effectiveness of school-based

programs depends heavily on implementation quality, institutional support, and the broader school climate. Research has identified key success factors including a supportive school environment with good knowledge of violence, establishment of a cohesive group process, and approaches adapted to students' "lived reality" (Ball et al. 2015).

While universal prevention programs aim to prevent violence before it occurs, targeted interventions for high-risk populations often demonstrate more robust effects. This pattern reflects the reality that adolescents who have already been exposed to violence - whether as victims, perpetrators, or witnesses - may be more motivated to change their relationship patterns and may benefit from more intensive, specialized interventions.

The Date SMART program, designed specifically for adolescent girls with prior dating violence exposure, has demonstrated significant effects across multiple violence types (Rizzo et al. 2018). Similarly, the Teen Choices online program showed considerably greater effectiveness for participants with previous violence exposure compared to those without such history (Levesque et al. 2016). The Moms and Teens for Safe Dates program further illustrates this pattern, showing effectiveness primarily among adolescents with high exposure to interparental violence, with meaningful reductions in both psychological victimization and violence perpetration (Foshee et al. 2015). The success of targeted interventions also highlights the importance of early identification and intervention. Adolescents who have experienced violence in their families or previous relationships represent a critical population for prevention efforts, as they are at heightened risk for both perpetrating and experiencing violence in future relationships.

The effectiveness of prevention interventions varies significantly across different demographic groups, with gender representing one of the most important moderating factors. Many programs show differential effects for boys and girls, reflecting both different risk patterns and different responsiveness to various intervention approaches.

The Lights4Violence program demonstrated gender-specific effects, with reductions in violence acceptance primarily among girls with high initial empathy, while boys with low empathy showed increases in problematic attitudes (Pérez-Martínez et al. 2022). This pattern suggests that gender-specific or gender-sensitive approaches may be more effective than generic interventions.

Individual psychological characteristics also influence intervention effectiveness. The differential outcomes based on empathy levels (Pérez-Martínez et al. 2022) and social support (Sanz-Barbero et al. 2022) underscore the importance of considering individual differences when designing and implementing prevention strategies.

The emergence of brief intervention approaches represents an important development in prevention science, offering hope for settings with limited time and resources. These interventions, often delivered in one to three sessions, focus on specific psychological mechanisms or motivational factors that may influence relationship behaviors.

Brief motivational interviewing interventions have demonstrated feasibility in hospital settings, showing meaningful reductions in adolescents' readiness to change regarding dating violence and increased communication with medical providers (Rothman & Wang, 2016). Similarly, interventions based on incremental theory of personality have shown sustained effects that persist for extended periods after intervention (Fernández-González et al. 2020).

Healthcare settings represent a particularly promising context for brief interventions, as they provide opportunities to reach adolescents during routine care visits. Clinical training programs for healthcare providers have demonstrated significant improvements in knowledge of dating violence, recognition of warning signs, and appropriate responses to victims, with effects maintained over time (Debnam et al. 2017). School nurse-delivered interventions have also shown promise, with the majority of students engaging in discussions about healthy relationships and finding the interventions useful (Raible et al. 2017).

The development of digital prevention programs represents an important advancement in addressing barriers to prevention implementation. Online interventions offer advantages in terms of scalability, accessibility, and anonymity, potentially reaching adolescents who might not otherwise access prevention services.

The Teen Choices online program has demonstrated effectiveness comparable to traditional in-person interventions, showing significant reductions in multiple types of dating violence at extended follow-up periods (Levesque et al. 2016). The e-MTSD program has shown high feasibility with strong completion rates for both mothers and adolescents, with the vast majority reporting that the program helped them discuss healthy relationships (McNaughton Reyes et al. 2023).

However, the effectiveness of digital interventions depends on thoughtful design, user engagement strategies, and integration with other support systems. Programs that combine digital delivery with some form of human support or follow-up tend to show better outcomes than purely automated interventions.

One of the most significant challenges in teen dating violence prevention is achieving sustained effects over time. Many programs show immediate or short-term benefits that fade as time passes, particularly for attitude-based outcomes. However, some interventions have demonstrated more encouraging long-term patterns.

The Me & You program has maintained significant effects at extended follow-up periods, with participants showing meaningfully lower probabilities of perpetrating dating violence (Peskin et al. 2019). The Green Dot program required several years of implementation before demonstrating significant reductions in violence, suggesting that some interventions may require sustained implementation to achieve behavioral effects (Mennicke et al. 2021).

The programs that demonstrate more sustained effects tend to be those that address multiple levels of influence, including individual, family, school, and community factors. This pattern highlights the importance of viewing prevention as an ongoing process rather than a one-time intervention, with the need for booster sessions, environmental reinforcement, and continued support over time.

DISCUSSION

The evidence presented in this narrative review reveals both the promise and complexity of teen dating violence prevention efforts. While numerous interventions have demonstrated effectiveness in reducing violence and changing attitudes, the field faces significant challenges in translating research findings into widespread, sustainable prevention practice.

The most encouraging finding from the prevention literature is that interventions can work, but their effectiveness depends heavily on factors such as target population, implementation quality, and outcome measurement. The consistent finding that programs are more effective at changing attitudes than behaviors reflects the complex pathway from knowledge and belief change to actual behavior modification. This pattern suggests that prevention may require longer-term, multi-component approaches rather than single interventions, as attitude change may be a necessary precursor to behavioral change that manifests over time.

The effectiveness of interventions among adolescents with previous violence exposure raises important questions about prevention strategy. While universal prevention remains important for reaching all young people, these findings suggest that a tiered approach combining universal prevention with intensive interventions for high-risk populations may be more effective than universal approaches alone. This has implications for resource allocation and program design, suggesting that prevention systems should include mechanisms for identifying and providing enhanced services to adolescents who have experienced violence.

The translation of effective prevention programs into real-world practice faces numerous challenges that are often underrepresented in research literature. Schools, while representing an ideal setting for reaching large numbers of adolescents, face competing curricular demands, resource constraints, and varying levels of

institutional support for prevention programming. The finding that some programs require multiple years of implementation before demonstrating effects (Mennicke et al. 2021) highlights the need for sustained commitment and resources, which may be difficult to maintain in practice.

Healthcare settings offer unique opportunities for prevention, given their potential to reach adolescents during routine care visits, but face their own implementation challenges. The research on healthcare provider training reveals significant gaps in preparation and comfort with addressing dating violence (Debnam et al. 2017; Johnson et al. 2015). Even when providers receive training, the brief nature of many clinical encounters and competing health priorities may limit the depth of prevention conversations possible.

The success of brief interventions in healthcare settings (Rothman & Wang 2016) offers hope for integration into routine care, but questions remain about how to systematically implement such approaches and ensure quality delivery across diverse healthcare settings. The integration of dating violence screening and brief intervention into routine adolescent care would require significant system-level changes, including protocol development, provider training, and organizational support.

The predominantly U.S.-based research base raises important questions about the generalizability of findings to other cultural contexts. Dating violence occurs within specific cultural, social, and economic contexts that may influence both risk factors and intervention effectiveness. The limited research on culturally adapted interventions (Ravi et al. 2019; Coulter & Gartner 2023) suggests that adaptation is both necessary and beneficial, but more work is needed to understand how to effectively adapt evidence-based interventions for diverse populations.

The research on interventions for LGBTQ+ youth (Coulter & Gartner 2023) highlights the importance of addressing the unique risks and needs of sexual and gender minority adolescents, who may face additional challenges including discrimination, family rejection, and limited access to affirming services. The development of inclusive prevention approaches that address diverse sexual orientations and gender identities represents an important area for future development.

The economic evaluation of the Me & You program provides compelling evidence for the cost-effectiveness of prevention, with a benefit-cost ratio of 62.9 suggesting that prevention investments can yield substantial returns (Weber et al. 2023). However, this single economic evaluation highlights the need for more comprehensive cost-effectiveness research across different intervention types and settings. Understanding the economic case for prevention is crucial for securing sustainable funding and support from policymakers and institutional leaders. The challenge of sustaining preven-

tion effects over time represents both a research and practice priority. The finding that some interventions require ongoing implementation to maintain effects suggests that prevention may be better conceptualized as an ongoing process rather than a discrete intervention. This has implications for program design, resource allocation, and evaluation approaches.

The emergence of effective digital prevention programs represents a significant advancement in addressing access barriers and scalability challenges. Digital interventions offer the potential to reach adolescents who might not otherwise access prevention services, including those in rural areas, those who prefer anonymous participation, and those whose schedules conflict with traditional program delivery times.

However, the effectiveness of digital interventions depends on thoughtful design, user engagement strategies, and integration with other support systems. The risk of digital divides excluding vulnerable populations must be carefully considered, and programs must ensure that technology-enhanced prevention does not inadvertently increase disparities in access to prevention services.

The evidence base suggests several key implications for prevention policy and practice. First, prevention systems should include both universal and targeted components, recognizing that different populations may require different intervention approaches. Second, prevention requires sustained commitment and resources, as effects may take time to manifest and may require ongoing reinforcement.

Third, professional training and system-level changes are essential components of effective prevention. The research on healthcare provider training (Debnam et al. 2017) and school personnel preparation (Johnson et al. 2015) reveals significant gaps that must be addressed to create systems capable of effective prevention and response.

Fourth, prevention approaches must be culturally responsive and inclusive, addressing the diverse needs and contexts of different populations. The development of prevention programs that are both evidence-based and culturally adapted represents an important challenge for the field.

Several critical research gaps emerge from this review. First, more research is needed on the long-term effects of prevention interventions, as most studies provide only short-term follow-up data. Understanding whether prevention effects persist over time and under what conditions is crucial for informing program design and implementation.

Second, research on implementation and dissemination is needed to understand how to effectively translate evidence-based interventions into diverse real-world settings. This includes research on adaptation processes, implementation barriers and facilitators, and strategies for maintaining program fidelity while allowing for necessary adaptations.

Third, more research is needed on prevention approaches for diverse populations, including racial and ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ youth, and adolescents in different cultural contexts. The development of inclusive prevention approaches that address diverse needs and contexts represents an important priority.

Finally, economic evaluation research is needed to build the business case for prevention investments and inform resource allocation decisions. Understanding the costs and benefits of different prevention approaches can help policymakers and practitioners make informed decisions about prevention investments.

CONCLUSION

The field of teen dating violence prevention has made significant progress in developing and evaluating interventions that can reduce violence and change attitudes. However, translating these research findings into widespread, sustainable prevention practice remains a significant challenge. Addressing this challenge will require continued innovation in intervention development, sustained commitment to implementation and evaluation, and recognition that effective prevention requires comprehensive, multi-level approaches that address the complex factors contributing to dating violence among adolescents.

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Isaline Malherbe & Giovanni Briganti: conception, data collection, drafting and revision.

Nadine Kacenenbogen: conception, revision.

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Correspondence:

Giovanni Briganti, MD, PhD
Department of Computational Medicine and Neuropsychiatry,
Faculty of Medicine, University of Mons
Avenue du Champ de Mars 6, 7000 Mons, Belgium
E-mail: giovanni.briganti@hotmail.com