

# Online Therapy in COVID-19: What are the Influences of Online Therapy for Depression Among Adolescents?

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**Abstract:** The pandemic COVID-19 spread over the world in 2020 and pushed almost everything online, including psychological therapy. Online therapy is a way for therapists or clients who are not able to have the face-to-face sessions, use technological tools like zoom, facetime, or chat to have the treatment instead. In this literature review, the author would talk about what is online therapy and how it works. Then, he would talk about online therapy in the COVID-19 pandemic. Lastly, as online therapy depends on the internet a lot, some studies mention that adolescents tend to like this way more, the author would talk about the influence of online therapy on depression among adolescents.

**Keywords:** Online therapy; Internet therapy; Adolescents; Teenagers; Depression

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## 1. Introduction

COVID-19 spread a pandemic over the world in 2020 and pushed almost everything online, including psychological therapy. Online therapy is a way for therapists or clients who are not able to have the face-to-face sessions, instead of that, they use technological tools like zoom, facetime, or chat to have treatment. The author is interested in discussing this topic because he was familiar with various forms of online therapy in China prior to the pandemic. However, the author questions the efficacy of internet counselling. It's merely a means for the institution to generate more money, in my opinion. When the author started taking the class online during the epidemic, he discovered that most of his lecturers had to meet their clients online. As a result, the author began to question the efficacy of online counselling.

In this literature review, the author would talk about what is online therapy and how it works. then, the author would talk about online therapy in the COVID-19 pandemic. In the last, because online therapy depends on the internet a lot, some studies think adolescents more tend to like this way, the author would talk about the influence of online therapy on depression among adolescents.

## 2. Literature search strategy

The PsycINFO was the database used. The timeframe is between 2016 to 2021. The keywords are online therapy, online counseling, internet therapy, e-therapy, depression, adolescents, teenagers, young adults. In the results, 111 articles were found under inclusion and exclusion.

- (1) Inclusion criteria include peer-reviewed journal articles, written in English, empirical research.
- (2) Exclusion criteria are meta-analysis, theoretical articles, literature reviews, and book chapters.

### **3. Online therapy**

The author previously doubted online therapy because she believes that session setting, eye contact, and action are as vital in therapy for therapists and clients to develop a relationship. Terry had a similar thought as me<sup>[1]</sup>. Then he spoke with a young individual, who informed him that if it wasn't for the online treatment, he wouldn't discuss about his life. In this example, the author believes that online therapy could be beneficial to young people since they believe that those around them do not understand them, but that people on the internet provide a secure space for them to discuss about their lives.

The reason online therapy is stigmatized before the pandemic might depend on the technology. Before people moved everything online in the pandemic, the online therapy the author understand might be through chat or voice chat. The development of online therapy indeed depends on the development of technology. But through the idea changing in some therapists, more therapists start to consider online therapy more positive. Through the process, online therapy would develop more intact and better<sup>[1]</sup>. When the technology is developed enough at a point, the limitation of online therapy might be eliminated.

### **4. How therapists feel about online therapy**

Besides from therapists' attitudes regarding online treatment, we need to comprehend online therapy from the therapists' perspective to discuss its usefulness. Jonell and Ewan discovered that in internet therapy, the relationship between therapists and clients is the same as in face-to-face treatment. The partnership also places a premium on the efficacy of therapy. Another suggestion they made was to consider the real-world situation of online treatment, such as the unstable internet<sup>[2]</sup>. The state of the internet is a serious issue that must be addressed.

In the study, five therapists were interviewed with four open-ended questions to understand therapists' experience and effectiveness of online therapy. Jonell and Ewan found that environmental adaption and practice enhancement contribute to therapists' experience and the therapy's effectiveness. In the environmental adaption, the author agrees that the control by therapists decreases in online therapy. To this point, the interviewee in the study reflected that information collecting in the therapy is a good strategy to cope with loss control in online therapy. Managing the risk is another way to work with online therapy. Admitting the limitation plays an important role at this point. In the part of practice enhancement, the study found that to avoid the distance perception in online therapy, therapists needed to come up with some strategies to build up the therapeutic relationship. Besides the limitation, as the author discussed before, online therapy sometimes provides a safer place to talk to clients<sup>[2]</sup>.

Although therapists face some problems during online therapy, they found new tips to get over them. Online therapy also gives therapists certain new perspectives of the client.

### **5. Clients' perspective for online therapy**

To examine the preference and perceptions of online therapy, Vanessa A, Swati, and Heather D surveyed in postsecondary students. The students choose the internet cognitive behavior therapy or face-to-face cognitive behavior therapy for treating anxiety and depression. The result showed that students more tended to choose face-to-face cognitive behavior therapy in the first time, they thought face-to-face Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) was more likely to consist, but after accepting two weeks of face-to-face CBT, they tended to choose internet cognitive behavior therapy than face-to-face. Most of them liked the advantage that there was no waitlist in Internet-based Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (ICBT). The students reflected that when they waited for the face-to-face CBT longer, their symptoms became more severe<sup>[3]</sup>. According to the study, online therapy has a significant benefit in terms of convenience and time savings. Because the client may not be interested in delving into the efficacy of online therapy, this study just inquires as to which therapy they prefer and why. When students don't have a specific therapist to meet,

online therapy may be more convenient than face-to-face treatment. Aside from that, after beginning face-to-face CBT, more students preferred ICBT. This could be because students felt more comfortable starting the ICBT after contacting the CBT. This survey makes me wonder if people will still choose online therapy when the pandemic is ended.

## **6. Online therapy in COVID-19 pandemic**

The National Domestic Violence Hotline received over 2000 calls between mid of March and early April for help. All the calls are related to COVID-19 [4]. During the COVID-19 pandemic, an increasing number of persons developed mental illnesses. People's mental health is harmed as a result of the protracted quarantine, as well as the stress of disease and social panic. More people need to consult therapists as a result of this ailment, but the quarantine and social distance make this impossible. Online treatment is desperately required right now.

Gina and Edgar performed a study to interview therapists who have an effective license in the pandemic, for which online therapy is the only means to utilize in the United States, to determine the success of online treatment in the pandemic. The outcome was predicted, considering more therapists had not previously used online therapy. More therapists remained unconcerned about whether online therapy makes clients feel safer and more open. Face-to-face counselling was thought to be more effective by more therapists. In online therapy, more professionals felt that clients would be more distracted. The most important result is most participants felt their effectiveness was affected by the online therapy [4]. As previously stated by the author, therapists may have some techniques to cope with the characteristics of online therapy while adapting it. However, when therapists are forced to meet their clients online, the consequences may be disastrous. Only in the case of COVID-19 have the outcomes occurred. As a result, while the efficacy of online therapy has been demonstrated in prior research, fewer therapists would report its efficacy during the pandemic. Another factor that could influence the outcome is that the epidemic affects not only clients but also therapists. Online therapy isn't the only thing that's changing right now. The therapists would be influenced by the stressors as well. Even though this poll does not allow us to compare online therapy to face-to-face therapy, we can understand that online therapy is very significant in this troubled time. The pandemic also gave us a new perspective to think about the traditional way of therapy.

## **7. Online therapy reduced the anxiety and negative effect of pandemic**

Aside from the effect of online treatment, which the author addressed earlier, the most important aspect of online therapy in the pandemic is that it assisted a large number of people. It assisted patients suffering from anxiety, post-trauma, depression, and other mental disorder symptoms, even though it was the only option we had at the time. In addition to reaching a larger number of people, internet therapy has the potential to reduce face-to-face activity and thus infection. It also aided people who were in situations where they couldn't meet others, such as quarantine in a country where there were a lot more people injected at the time. Due to the unique nature of this pandemic, the online therapy can help those who are feeling isolated while under quarantine. The internet is the only method for people to feel connected at this time.

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When it comes to the COVID-19 epidemic, online therapy is a useful technique for dealing with mental health issues and providing support to people. Even while it is beneficial in the epidemic, it has limitations. The majority of the participants in the study were young adults or adults, which indicates that elderly persons or people who have difficulty utilizing electronic devices are unable to participate in online treatment, which is one of the limits of online therapy.

## **8. Therapists' challenge**

Since the speed of the injection of COVID-19 virus was fast, therapists faced the challenge that they need to move the therapy to online therapy in a short time. They also have a short time to adapt to the changes. It's undoubtedly that online therapy is much different from face-to-face therapy. therapists' attitude would also influence their performance. Besides that, the different methodologies might have a different way to cope with the change. Not every methodology in therapy would adapt the online way. Therapists must arrange the change. Also, clients' symptoms might have varying degrees of impact due to the pandemic. In conclusion, the therapists faced challenges in therapy in the pandemic.

To explore the experience and attitudes towards online therapy from therapists, Vera and Katie made an online survey in North America and Europe. They found that the previous experience, lack of authenticity, and lack of connection might associate with therapists' attitudes towards online therapy. The professional experience and the previous online therapy experience had a positive association with the attitudes towards online therapy. Therapists who have previous experience of online therapy tended to have more positive attitudes towards online therapy. Because the change is forced, positive attitudes even it is little is significant. The research also found that in the difference of methodology, therapists who used the cognitive behavior method held more positive attitudes than therapists who used the psychodynamic therapy <sup>[6]</sup>. The methodology which focuses on the therapeutic relationship more might gain benefit in online therapy. The preparation of change also played an important role in coping with the change. Therapists reported that they think the treatment result of online therapy is good, they might consider using online therapy after the pandemic. On the other side, therapists claimed that they had negative emotions during the process of online therapy, like the lack of confidence, lack of connection with clients, and more tiredness. Vera and Katie thought the negative emotion might associate with the negative attitudes towards online therapy <sup>[6]</sup>.

In the pandemic condition in which therapists are forced to change to online therapy, not every therapist would find it's effective than before. The difference might depend on the methodology. How therapists adapt online therapy might also depend on individual differences in how they adapt to technology. The group of clients also played an important role here. As the previous finding suggested, older people who are not able to use the electronic device or people with disabilities might have trouble meeting their therapist online at this time.

## **9. Online therapy for depression among adolescents**

The term "internet-based cognitive behavioral therapy" refers to cognitive behavioral therapy delivered over the internet. Chat-based cognitive behavioral therapy is a type of online therapy for cognitive behavioral therapy that is similar to chatting face to face online. People believe that internet-based cognitive behavioral therapy is more beneficial for adolescents since they are more accustomed with using technology online. Several research looked on internet-based cognitive behavioral therapy for adolescent depression.

Some professionals believe that ICBT is more accepted and beneficial in adolescents due to their characteristics. At the same time, they believed that ICBT may provide a safe environment in which teenagers would be less likely to be stigmatized. Topooco and her colleagues <sup>[7]</sup> compared 29 students with depressive symptoms who were given the ICBT condition and the attention control condition. Before the

intervention, after the intervention, and six months later, the severity of depression symptoms was assessed. When compared to the attention control group, the ICBT group demonstrated a substantial reduction in depression symptoms after the intervention and for six months after the intervention. ICBT's perniciousness was likewise substantially lower than in earlier studies. Adolescents in the ICBT group also had a higher rate of self-disclosure, according to the researchers. The findings supported the premise that ICBT could reduce the fear of being stigmatized. As the study was largely voluntary, the majority of the participants were women. The gender disparity could skew the results. Females are more inclined than males to ask for assistance directly. So, despite the fact that the research indicated a significant reduction in depressed symptoms in the ICBT group, we cannot conclude that the ICBT is beneficial. In comparison to ICBT, attention control provided less interaction between clients and therapists, aside from gender differences.

## **10. To improve the ICBT**

The research emphasizes the importance of interaction in ICBT to improve the effectiveness of treating depression among adolescents. To eliminate the confound and find more about the ICBT, Topooco and her colleagues<sup>[8]</sup> did another research. This time they added more interaction with therapists in ICBT. The intervention is likely to combine with ICBT and more time spent with therapists. The way the clients and therapists meet were via online. The whole timeframe was eight weeks. The intervention had eight modules, one important module was the feedback and response in actual time. Therapists were required to text back to the clients when they had questions or need in weekday. The results found that the interaction in actual time was important for reducing the depressive symptoms. Meeting with therapists also played an important role here.

The research pointed the importance of interaction in therapeutic relationship. Compared to self-guided program, the one with interaction is more effective. Moreover, responding in actual time has significant effect to reduce the depressive symptoms. Compared to the traditional way of cognitive behavioral therapy, ICBT provides the actual responding. On the other hand, just like the previous research by Topooco, because the participants were voluntary online, most of them were female. The initiative also could contribute to the reducing depressive symptoms. The results showed significant decreasing on depressive symptoms, but it's still doubtful if the reduction is enough to describe as "treating".

## **11. Knowledge gain in ICBT**

Besides the symptoms' reduction, other consequences also deserve to be discussed. To discover the difference between ICBT and CBT, Matilda and her colleagues<sup>[8]</sup> came up with research towards adolescents who took the ICBT before. They investigated 70 participants after ICBT for six months. Even if the participants didn't remember everything from the ICBT, the findings showed that they remembered enough of the theory to use in real life. The emphasis is on how much they recall in relation to their lives, rather than how much they remember in general. The concepts they remembered are sufficient to achieve the therapy goal of standard CBT. They came to the conclusion that the treatment was effective. In comparison to the positive participants, the negative participants reflected less content relevant to CBT. They maintained, however, that the treatment was beneficial to their mental health. Matilda reasoned that it was because they had noticed a difference during the treatment. The study discovered that participants had different perspectives on how the idea was taught and utilized in actual life. Between CBT and ICBT, there was a difference in information development and memory. However, the participants' application of the ICBT principles to their daily lives had already achieved the standard CBT goal. This research also had limitations because they used four open-ended questions to test the participants, the answer might be biased. Another thing is how the memory was measured. The way of how memory is measured in research might influence how participants triggered their memory in different ways. But overall, in this research, the consequence for short

term of ICBT is effective. People would still use the principles they learned in ICBT in next six months.

## **12. Online therapy in relapse of depression**

The greater risk of patients relapsing into depression following a depressive episode in teens drew the attention of the World Health Organization's Mental Health Action Plan. After experiencing depression as an adolescent, the World Health Organization's Mental Health Action Plan emphasized the importance of keeping individuals away from depression. The intervention must be accepted and have no time limit. Due to the high demand, online social therapy has become a viable option. The ability to interact with others who are dealing with similar issues is also beneficial. As mental illness is stigmatized in general, more people are likely to seek aid online rather than see a therapist.

To test the usefulness of online social therapy in depression among adolescents, Simon and his colleagues <sup>[10]</sup> conducted research with 42 adolescents. The online social therapy included three parts, online social networking with peers, interaction of psychological intervention, and a professional mental health expert with peer. The results showed the relapse's intervention was acceptable for participants, it was safe and effective. The wild social networking created a platform for participants, with the professional mental health expertise, the psychological intervention was working too. The combination of internet and intervention was like one plus one more than two. Adolescents who used the intervention were more likely to recommend to others who had same problem. Participants also reported the higher social function and more connection with society. The research also mentioned because the emotion could be spread on internet quick, when using the intervention, people had to be careful about how the anxiety spread in the group.

In the authors' opinion, all three parts in this intervention is indispensable. The social networking creates the carrier to connect the peers. Mental health experts guide people in the intervention in the right way. The supporting from peers also helps people and give them power. The online social therapy could also provide a safe area for people who had depression before since mental health problems still faces the stigma. To make the intervention more complete, I think the number of people needs to be limited.

## **13. Discussion**

In the beginning days of online therapy, students of psychology and even mental health experts had negative feelings about it. People still have reservations about internet treatment since it differs significantly from traditional therapy. Aside from that, how people accept the internet has an impact on how they regard online therapy. At the same time, therapists will confront significant challenges in transitioning from traditional treatment to online therapy. On the other hand, some customers choose to get counselling via the internet. Chatting with therapists or meeting with them online provides a safe environment for them to express themselves and expose their vulnerability. Furthermore, online therapy has evolved into a tool for assisting people in coping with the stigmatized mental health issue.

With the like and dislike, in 2020, everyone was pushed to work and study online. Therapists had to continue their work online. The pandemic lead to the short reaction time. Therapists had to face the challenge of change to online therapy. In this unique condition, when online therapy is the only choice, talking about the effectiveness is not that important. Even some mental health experts hold the negative attitudes towards online therapy, it's undoubted that online therapy played an important role in pandemic. With the higher anxiety and depression level in pandemic, therapists not only have to face the challenge from changes, but also the anxiety from the disease. In this specific condition when people are forced to stay at home and feel isolated, talking online gives them power to fight against the isolation and let them feel connected with others again. At the same time, with touching the online therapy, more therapists started to learn about online therapy. one thing we could not ignore is online therapy helped a lot of people to solve their problems during the pandemic.

Indeed, for those who are more likely to conduct things online, online therapy may be more beneficial. According to the author's previous research, there is a demographic for internet therapy, however adolescents may not be that population. Individual and gender differences continue to persist. Another issue is that the sample size is too small to test, but a bigger sample size would necessitate a significant increase in the expense of statistical analysis and data collection. In certain studies, the measurement of effectiveness is also unclear. Because of the novelty of internet counselling and the stigma associated with it, it is becoming a more popular topic. However, it is currently unclear how to assess effectiveness. The perplexity still persists. However, based on the data, the author believes that combining online therapy with anything else is a better approach to use it. Online therapy is a general idea, merging its advantage with others could played the best role.

In the last section the author talked about the online social therapy, where he thinks it's useful not only to prevent people of relapse of depression, but also for other disorders. The combination therapy helped more people worldwide, it would provide the opportunity to communicate and support each other. Indeed, the online social therapy still need to be challenged and completed, but the idea is novel and has good promise.

#### **14. Conclusion**

Before, there were a lot of misconceptions about online therapy. Academics in the field of psychology began to re-examine the epidemic after it occurred. Therapists also made a significant contribution to the pandemic through online therapy. People began to consider the effectiveness of online therapy, the methodology to apply, and the population to target as they reconsidered the usage of online therapy. Since internet therapy provides advantages such as low cost and high instantaneity, the ideal way to approach the topic is to combine it with other types of treatment. As a new concept, online therapy is still in its infancy. People must still determine their specialty or combine it with a specific intervention in order to employ it in the future. On the other hand, while the epidemic is a calamity for the entire planet, it has prompted many to choose online therapy. Online therapy evolves in tandem with technological advancements. More possibility and choices will appear in the future.

#### **Disclosure statement**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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