An Examination of the Effectiveness and Future of Teletherapy

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Introduction to Research

Many efforts have been made to address the mounting mental health concerns of the world population. One-on-one treatment via verbal communication with a licensed therapist has shown proven results in the psychology field. Psychotherapy, which is also called "talk-therapy" has aided many patients to begin to heal from various psychological afflictions. However, with the COVID-19 pandemic, many people could no longer travel to their therapist's office to receive treatment. Like the rest of the world, psychotherapy went online. This was not the earliest use of digital means to provide therapy, but it was the most widespread. The advent of teletherapy offered a means of treatment to everyone trapped at home due to the pandemic. This included those who had never started therapy before the pandemic. When patients can access a therapist from the comfort of their own homes, the reach of treatment is broadened. Traveling to a therapist may curb many potential patients through monetary or time constraints. Although teletherapy has been useful, studies have shown that online therapy does not yet compare to the quality of in-person therapy. For many, teletherapy is not able to fully address their mental health needs. Although it still provides aid for many in need, and neither version of therapy is sans flaws, there are still more disadvantages to teletherapy.

In-person therapy reveals nonverbal cues to the therapist, provides a change in location for the patient, and leads to higher-quality care. A patient's body language can reveal hints about their emotional state. Therapists can then take that data into account to provide improved treatment or rehabilitation. In-person therapy inherently requires a change in location. Isolating from a certain person at home, or harmful environments can push a person to open up. The privacy and confidentiality are higher in in-person therapy. Teletherapy does not allow confidentiality, security, or an accurate determination of emotions. Though teletherapy is

convenient and more accessible, it is not developed enough to get the same consistent results as in-person therapy. The convenience provided due to not having a traveling component and giving patients a broader range of therapists to choose from cannot be understated. Neither can the inherent flaws. Teletherapy is also inconvenient for family or couples counseling. This type of counseling is not an individual journey to overcome challenges, it requires individuals with strained relationships to work with each other. It may be difficult for the therapist to mediate conversations without physically being in the room. The effectiveness of therapy is dependent on the ability of the therapist to fully understand and aid their patient, and the patient's ability to be receptive to that care. While teletherapy still lacks many essential aspects of psychotherapy, it has the potential to be as effective as in-person therapy through proper training, social awareness, and availability.

Section 1: Why People Need Therapy and Is it Effective?

Americans see therapists for various reasons. Seeking aid in dealing with mental health has become more normalized as time has passed. As therapy becomes less stigmatized, more patients are attracted. COVID-19 saw a skyrocket in psychotherapy patients with the popularity of teletherapy. Since 2021 it has been estimated that about 38% of 1,000 adults (people over 18) in America have gotten online therapy, and 82% of them have started using online therapy due to the pandemic (American Psychiatric Association, 2021). Psychotherapy has become increasingly commonplace, allowing those who were afraid to have an in-person consultation to get the help needed. Psychotherapy also has proven neurobiological effects. "The ingredients of psychotherapy governing such changes in the brain of an individual are therapeutic not only during the psychotherapy but also for long-term thereafter leading to a lasting impact" (Malhotra & Sahoo, 2017, para 31). Neurological changes can occur when there is a change in the gene

expression, in which the synaptic connection and structural changes differ. This change allows anatomical patterns on the nerve cells of the brain, allowing long-lasting behavioral changes. Therapy is a constantly evolving field. Methods have increased enough that therapy can be adjusted based on the individual. "Because the decision to treat or to investigate the need for treatment further is increasingly influenced by the results of diagnostic imaging, lead-time, and length biases increasingly pervade medical practice" (Black, Welch, 1993, para. 22). The improvement made for therapy has been seen to be more successful in comparison to previous, older therapies. Therapy has become more effective for individuals and chances have increased for diagnosing mental disorders.

Psychotherapy challenges the mental and physical discipline that creates barriers in people's everyday duties. The accurate thoughts and functional behavior in the brain can be affected by depression, stress, and post-traumatic stress disorder, creating unhealthy habits or life-threatening situations. "Psychotherapy has been shown to improve emotional and psychological well-being and is linked with positive changes in the brain and body. The benefits also include fewer sick days, less disability, fewer medical problems, and increased work satisfaction" (American Psychiatric Association, 2021, para. 7). Altering the moods in the brain allows individuals to have more control over their emotions, creating space for healing and growth. An increase in productivity has been connected to mental and physical capability, decreasing the number of pricey doctors. "The choice of therapy type depends on the patient's particular illness and circumstances and his/her preference. Psychiatrists and other clinicians may combine elements from different approaches to best meet the needs of the person receiving treatment" (American Psychiatric Association, 2021, para. 10). Trust between the client and therapist promotes continuous growth of an individual mental state, strengthening coping

mechanisms. With the variety of health issues, psychotherapy addresses modern-day issues, crucial to the effectiveness of psychotherapy.

Psychotherapy is a useful tool for addressing mental health concerns alongside or in place of psychopharmacological treatments. It is often considered the optimal treatment tool for those afflicted with mental issues and trauma. "The average effects of psychotherapy are larger than the effects produced by many medical treatments" (American Psychological Association, 2012, para. 5). Psychotherapy is hyper-tailored towards the individual. The opportunity for one-on-one evaluation by a professional is vital for patients to move forward in dealing with their mental afflictions. The set-up of psychotherapy is what makes it so effective. Discussing and working out one's problems in a safe, judgment-free environment works wonders. The brain's neuroplasticity is a well-documented feature. The brain will rearrange neurological connections in response to new information. Sustaining injury, or facing a stressful situation, may leave the brain in a disrupted state. Therapy also works with the brain's plasticity, however, the results are much more positive (Mental Health America, 2024). Psychotherapy is a hyper-effective form of treatment that has had time to develop over decades of innovations in psychology. It is known to improve cognitive function, induce behavioral changes, and help patients with their emotional regulation.

It can be difficult to parse the negative effects of psychotherapy. There have been patients who reported feeling more stressed or suicidal thoughts are a result of therapy (Strauss et al., 2021). Though these feelings should not be discounted, they do not prove any long-term negative effect of therapy. Psychotherapy requires a lot of introspection on the part of the patient. This can mean digging up feelings that were once buried. Reigniting the negative feelings that the patient has not yet worked through is bound to make many patients uncomfortable. Psychotherapists

need to build trust with patients through their interpersonal skills (American Psychological Association, 2011). If the psychotherapist is unable to do this, it may be a sign of malpractice. Therapy may also coincide with stressful situations at home for the patients. Overall there is a lack of data indicating that psychotherapy itself has negative effects on patients. Psychotherapy may not be able to address every concern, active suicidal intent, for example, which would require a form of emergency intervention, but it has no proven inherent problems. The biggest issue with psychotherapy is the lack of accessibility. The price of travel combined with the price of therapy are costs some simply cannot afford. The primary challenge with psychotherapy is ensuring that those who need it are able to benefit from its proven effectiveness.

Section 2 - The Problem

Psychotherapy starts with the interaction and then branches out to the quality and quantity of it. Limited interaction between therapist and client proposes the risk of inconsistency and dropouts. Referring to the number of clients who start sessions but fail to carry out the treatments (follow-up) is defined as dropouts. "Internet-based therapies typically have higher rates than face-to-face interventions (mean dropout rates of 34.2% vs. 25.1%)" (Vöhringer et al., 2020, para. 3). Underlying illnesses that rely on therapy are at threat of worsening and adapting serious issues are less prone with psychotherapy than in-person therapy. Through the screen, the chemistry between the client and therapist is not met to tailor to the client's needs. "All psychologists and other professional health providers must be licensed by the state in which they practice. Licensure laws protect you by ensuring only those who are trained and qualified to practice receive a license" (American Psychological Association, 2015, para. 15). Faulty resources are gullible online, with uncredited websites, making it hard to assess the right therapy.

Inconsistency and dropouts are the result of an unsuitable therapeutic environment, diminishing the effectiveness of psychotherapy.

During any type of psychotherapy, conversation is presented to discuss and provide mental and emotional treatment. Nevertheless, psychotherapy treatment differs depending on the environment and the way the therapist and patient communicate. Online therapy has its disadvantages and limitations. Online therapy is essential when short on time, busy, convenient, comfortable, and safe. Online therapy does not meet certain criteria and benefits that in-person therapy brings. The limits of online therapy increase the difficulty of receiving therapy. The limits of teletherapy compared to in-person therapy include issues with technology, privacy, safety, focus, multidimensional conversation, and insurance coverage, and is not appropriate for anyone (Wilson College, 2023). The restrictions of teletherapy pose a risk to patients getting the mental and emotional help needed. The limitations of online therapy decrease the effectiveness of therapy when compared to in-person therapy. Teletherapy could be as effective as in-person therapy for simple individual therapy, but for certain therapeutic needs, online therapy may not be as effective. Research and test results revealed that teletherapy had an increase in effectiveness by 30% from 2020 to 2021, certain people prefer online therapy and are satisfied with the results depending on the type of help needed. However, it was concluded that online therapy does not have the same effectiveness as in-person therapy for certain individuals, for instance, marriage counseling, and individuals in toxic environments (The National Library of Medicine, 2022). Throughout the years teletherapy has been greatly improving and gotten positive results for clients. Nevertheless, online therapy does not compare to the results brought from in-person therapy for certain individuals. Not only does online therapy have limitations, but in some occasions teletherapy can be a danger for certain individuals.

Marriage counseling, individuals facing abuse, any individual in a toxic environment, and addiction are instances that run a danger of not receiving the proper help therapy has. Before receiving any type of psychotherapy it is essential to know which psychotherapy treatment is better for each individual based on their circumstances and preferences. Online therapy may bring danger to individuals as well as others, specifically anyone who is in a dangerous environment and situation, in which in-person therapy enhances safety and comfort. In addition, different therapists have different tactics in providing help for the client which can be difficult to complete in online therapy. Online therapy does have its benefits "But whenever possible, people with more severe conditions should opt for face-to-face sessions with a therapist" (UCLA Health, 2021, para.9). Depending on the circumstances it is better to choose for a certain type of psychotherapy. In addition, when receiving therapy for more than one person, it is not suggested to revise online therapy due to the struggles it brings. For instance, in marriage counseling it is suggested to conduct in-person therapy for a different environment and distance from home issues. Interruptions and arguments within the couple may arise and cause difficulties for the therapy session to occur. Despite the downside of therapy, people still prefer teletherapy for its benefits. Teletherapy has a higher percentage of guaranteeing a session with a therapist, and its expenses are lower in comparison to in-person sessions. "As many teletherapy apps provide cheaper rates compared with in-person therapy settings, therapists tend to receive lower financial incentives on those apps (Jo E, Kouaho WJ, Schueller SM, Epstein DA, 2023, para. 52). Not only has teletherapy have its downside for the clients but it has its downside to the therapist away. Therapists who provide online help make less in comparison to in-person therapists. Therapists who provide online therapy are able to provide therapy to clients who have a difficult time getting access to therapy like lower socioeconomic status groups. Benefits and challenges

brought from online therapy can bring either satisfactory help or difficulties in session, despite all situations it is up to the patient to determine what type of help they want to receive.

       Teletherapy has helped many patients receive the mental health care they need. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for therapy that was accessible from home was made clear. "Remote care has been shown to improve access to mental health treatment in some cases, especially for individuals experiencing linguistic or financial obstacles" (Bulkes et al., 2021, para. 4). Individuals seeking therapy are not always able to receive it. It is not just the appointments that are expensive, but travel as well. Not everyone who needs psychotherapeutic treatment has a therapist near their home, or a car to reach the nearest one. With teletherapy, the location of the therapist in relation to the patient has no bearing on their ability to receive treatment. This also eliminates scheduling constraints by giving patients 24-hour access to mental health services. Teletherapy has a lot of potential as a viable alternative to in-person therapy. However, it is not perfect. "Vulnerable groups such as those in lower socioeconomic conditions, Medicaid beneficiaries, and those who seek couple and family therapy may be less likely to be served by it" (Gangamma et al., 2022, para. 5). Access to technology, or even a strong internet connection is a struggle for many that would benefit from mental health treatment. Other limitations such as digital literacy or crowded homes can make having a private therapy session difficult. For couples therapy, it is essential to have a neutral meeting place, like a therapist's office. Teletherapy fails to provide a space like this, which makes it harder for the therapist to facilitate the conversation. Teletherapy is here to stay, but it will need to improve. Without improvement, teletherapy risks wasting its potential as a more accessible version of psychotherapy.

Section 3 - What Exists

There are many established websites and apps today that allow clients to connect with their therapist through the format of online therapy. Better help is available internationally, and with many types of ways to connect with your therapist, you can decide which type of session you feel up to doing. "If you're video chatting, you still get to see some body language and facial expressions. But if you're doing a voice call without video, you miss out on that. And if you're texting, you also miss out on each other's tone of voice" (Mental Health America, 2024, para. 6). Any type of online session is better than no session at all. Studies on the consistency of clients show that those who attend voice call or texting sessions benefit more than those who do not attend the online session as their only availability. "The app will ask you for some information about yourself, and use it to find a therapist who will (hopefully) be a good fit for you" (Mental Health America, 2024, para. 11). Better help offers family therapy, narrative therapy, emotionally focused therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy and more, with the variety of help allows clients to place themselves in the right category for help. Finding the right therapist to treat a client's stress, depression, and anxiety helps to fast forward the process of matching with a therapist.

In-person therapy and online therapy differ in strategies, forms of communication, ways therapists observe, and forms of helping patients. Both in-person and online personal therapy have helped patients in their mental health. Nevertheless, certain types of mental health help are recommended to be done in person. For instance, being in a different environment is essential for the brain to isolate itself from everything so that the session can be performed up to standard. "Reallocation of treatment resources could substantially decrease the problem of unmet need for treatment of mental disorders among serious cases" (Demyttenaere et al., 2004,

para.6). In-person therapy requires the patient to arrive at the therapist's office, resulting in a greater and quicker mental health improvement. It's recommended that individuals with a greater need for mental health help relocate while receiving therapy to isolate themselves from issues that occur in that environment or so that the therapist can give the individual the sufficient attention and help required. Not only is in-person therapy helpful for the patient, but it is also helpful for the therapist. An in-person session, allows the therapist to have a profound understanding of body language and gives the opportunity to accurately read the patient. "A more thorough assessment is possible, which leads to a more accurate interpretation of presenting concerns and provides guidance of treatment" (University of Colorado, 2021, p.2). Communicating through body language is sufficient to determine lies, true feelings, and reactions. Nonverbal signs and signals allow therapists to conclude the patient's situation and give them the proper help they need. When in need of therapy, it is recommended to choose the form in which you wanna take therapy by preference. It is up to the patient to determine what is more comfortable for them even though for certain patients it is recommended to go in-person and also allows the therapist to easily give help.

Therapy offers the availability of treating individuals with a variety of mental health conditions. The features of in-person and online therapy promote the benefits of teletherapy. "For many untreated individuals, getting to a mental health professional is inconvenient or too costly. For others, the idea of sitting in a strange room, talking face-to-face with someone about their mental health concerns, might feel unbearable" (UCLA Health, 2021, para. 1). The flexibility of being able to get the help you need while fitting it into your current life situations, is one of the methods of in person and online therapy sessions. Switching the therapy format allows clients to actively progress in their sessions, meeting their changing needs. "In between sessions, you may

have limited contact with your therapist through text messages and email. But often, you may need to wait until your next session unless you are in crisis" (Mental Health America, 2024, para. 8). Online and in-person sessions allow clients to have contact with their therapist more often than those who only participate in one form of therapy. Depending on the type of care you need, the online and in-person approach enhances the communication between clients and their therapists through each session.

Online therapy has many of the benefits of in-person therapy served on a different platter. "With virtual therapy, clients can meet with their therapist from the comfort of their own homes" (Reach Behavioral Health, 2022, para. 9). For many, the home is the most comfortable place to be. The familiarity of the house can provide comfort for patients that an unfamiliar environment may not. With in-person therapy, the unfamiliarity of a therapist's office can create a different comfort. It may become a safe place for those who aren't feeling safe in their own homes. Both teletherapy and in-person therapy are capable of providing comfort to mental health care patients in the environment. Teletherapy helps normalize mental health care for those who would otherwise not be interested (American Psychological Association, 2017). The process of setting up an appointment and sitting down with a therapist can be daunting for many potential patients. The familiar process of taking a phone or video call helps break down that barrier for those patients. The COVID-19 pandemic also left the global population more tech-savvy than ever. Worldwide, people learned to communicate important information virtually; and they became more comfortable with it than ever. This makes the transition to online therapy easier than in-person. Choosing teletherapy or in-person therapy often comes down to the specific needs of the patient.

Section 4 - The Product

To address the limitations within the field of teletherapy, therapists should be trained to handle these issues as they crop up. Therefore a new training program should be created and implemented within public and private practices. The program would be completely comprehensive. It would go over multiple possible scenarios and how a teletherapist should handle them. Additionally, it would cover general practices as well, such as how to make a patient feel comfortable online, clinical decision-making with limited data, and how to operate video conference software. Currently, many of the teletherapy training programs in existence are webinars. Rather than disseminating all the needed information in one long call, the training program would be assignment-based. The assignments would cover all the fundamentals and how to handle all the issues. Teletherapy is a developing field that not every therapist completely understands. The training program would not only increase understanding but also the competency of online therapists. Research indicates that a lack of connection between therapist and patient is one of the worst cons of teletherapy. The training program would not just address the problem but encourage therapists to share their feedback on the results of the training. The training program would teletherapists an opportunity to experience the process on the patient's side. They would get matched with a more experienced teletherapist who would simulate teletherapy appointments with them. This would help increase comfort and effectiveness between therapist and patient as the therapist would be able to use the experience as a point of reference. The training program would help therapists bring as many aspects over from in-person therapy as possible while taking advantage of the unique setup of teletherapy. Therapists would be taught to encourage their patients to show off parts of their home, pictures, books, and other things that might make them feel more comfortable. Potential lessons could also include keeping

patients from dissociating during sessions, dealing with children and families, completing worksheets together, incorporating media, and adding visual aspects to therapy.

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