

## Online Psychological Counseling: Is It Really Effective?

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### **Abstract**

With the outbreak of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19,) people have to keep social distance in order to avoid infection. Therefore, traditional in-person psychological counseling is restricted. This paper attempts to explore the application of online psychological counseling that has made remarkable progress in recent decades and has been widely used during the pandemic COVID-19. In this paper, I will analyze advantages and disadvantages of online psychological counseling. Online counseling advantages include: (1) it makes counseling more convenient and (2) it enables clients to connect with counselors from different places; while disadvantages are online psychological counseling is not clinically appropriate for: (1) personal privacy (2) emergency response and (3) severe mental illness. The major strategy for my research I use is interview. There are three short interviews with a licensed psychology counselor from China, a licensed therapist from the United States, and an international student who has done online psychological counseling several times. The data have been collected from journal articles, online newspapers and American Psychological Association websites. As a relatively new technology that has just been used on a large scale, online counseling has undeniable benefits and equally obvious problems. However, as counselors use this technology, more and more data will be collected, and online counseling will become more mature and easier to use.

## Introduction

Since the end of last year, the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has become a major issue that has attracted worldwide attention. The most direct problem caused by it is millions of infections and deaths; besides, it has triggered a series of chain reactions: ordinary people have to be isolated at home; doctors are forced to rescue patients in high-risk environments; restaurants and many shops are commanded to close the door, etc. Many streets that were once busy are now bleak. People are quarantined at home, and those who walk on the road have to wear masks to reduce the risk of getting infected. According to statistics, in the first few months of this year, over 90% of the United States people kept staying at home (Greenbaum, 2020).

In this situation that people avoid contact with others as much as possible, how to conduct psychological counseling has become a difficult problem. As we all know, traditional psychological counseling is basically conducted face-to-face. When people need psychological counselor's help, they can find a nearby counselor online, make an appointment, then go to the office and talk to the counselor at the appointed time. Unfortunately, the social distance in order to avoid infection makes traditional face-to-face consultation impossible. At this time, however, counselors discovered the possibility of online psychological counseling. Through online counseling platforms, counselors can complete a whole day's work without physical contact. As a result, an increasing number of counselors join online counseling teams. According to a survey conducted by American Psychological Association (2020), 76% of APA member clinicians only provide remote services mainly by phone, telehealth platforms or video conferencing software.

On the contrary, although more people can enjoy convenient online counseling without leaving home, an equal amount of problems also are exposed. Is online psychological counseling as effective as in-person counseling? According to my research, online psychological counseling is as effective as traditional in-person counseling; however, it also

introduces new complications related to the online counseling platform such as privacy, emergency response, and inaccessibility for severe mental illness patients.

### **Background Information**

Although many people, including myself, did not know much about online psychological counseling until recent months, research on telepsychology began as early as the 1960s. At that time, the research of remote psychological counseling mainly focused on how to conduct counseling through phone or video (Greenbam, 2020). After so many years, Internet technology has greatly improved; the definition of online psychological counseling (also known as online therapy, telepsychology, and online counseling) has also changed a little. In Manhal-Baugus' study (2001), a relatively accurate definition for online counseling is "a licensed mental health care professional providing mental health services via email, video conferencing, virtual reality technology, chat technology or any combination of these."

Through the definition, it is not hard to find that there are many ways of online psychological counseling. As Morin (2020) says in her article "I Signed Up for Online Therapy. Here's What I Discovered", different counseling websites allow clients to use different ways to contact counselors. For example, on some counseling platforms, clients can deliver short messages to their counselors at any time, although counselors may not reply to them immediately; some websites enable clients to use audio or video messages to connect with counselors; some websites can only provide live video chat with counselors, while a few others provide phone counseling for clients who cannot use the Internet. In general, online counseling shares a very similar process with traditional counseling.

Many previous pieces of research have proved that online psychological counseling is effective, which means it can indeed help people during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, as Tim Heckman, senior associate dean for research and faculty affairs at the University of Georgia's College of Public Health, who has studied telehealth for decades, worried about that "we got completely caught off guard in terms of disseminating and implementing telehealth

[online psychological counseling] on a large scale.” (Greenbaum, 2020)

### **Research Methods**

My primary research for this study includes interviewing two psychology professionals through email. One of them is a licensed social worker in the United States, and the other one is a licensed psychological counselor in China. Both of these two professionals have rich experience in traditional in-person psychological counseling. Furthermore, they are also currently doing online psychological counseling; therefore, their thoughts and opinions will be valuable for this article. I also interview a client who wants to share her online psychological counseling experience. This client is a Chinese college student who is now studying stage design and interior design in Japan. She used to receive traditional in-person counseling in China two times with a good response. After living in Japan, due to academic pressure, the COVID-19 pandemic, and a variety of reasons, her mood became unstable and thus she received online psychological counseling several times.

### **Results**

Online psychological counseling, as a new-developed technology, has the same obvious benefits and problems for both counselors and clients. The benefits include:

1. Convenience
2. Easy access to a variety of counselors

While the problems include online counseling is not clinically appropriate for:

1. personal privacy
2. emergency response
3. severe mental illness

Through detailed analysis in the discussion and the opinions from related research articles, clients can judge whether they are suitable for online psychological counseling based on those characteristics analyzed in this article.

### Discussion

Online psychological counseling, as an emerging technology, obviously has a lot of benefits. As many clients reported, the greatest one is undoubtedly convenience. A 43-year-old female veteran who suffered from depression and PTSD highly praised online counseling and shared her experience: "Receiving treatment is far less cumbersome, which significantly decreases your stress level, which is a huge part of why you're in there" (Wilser, 2020.) Similarly, online counseling allows consultants to save a lot of commute time. When asked to list the top one benefit of online counseling, Counselor 1, a licensed psychological counselor from China, answered this question rapidly without any hesitation: "It must be convenience." He explains, "Sometimes I conduct counseling in other locations rather than in my office because of clients' requests. I have to spend at least an hour going to the appointed place since my office is relatively remote. And things would be worse if the road condition is not good." (D. Chen, personal interview, August 16, 2020) Although it is a seemingly insignificant shortcoming to spend a lot of time on the journey back and forth, it does discourage many clients, especially workers and students, from periodical psychological counseling; while online psychological counseling requires no more than five minutes to connect to the platform in advance to test the network.

Furthermore, online psychological counseling enables clients to connect with counselors from different countries. This is a huge benefit for those who are currently not in their home country, such as international students, emigrants, or visiting scholars. For international students, living alone is painful and troublesome, especially when leaving home alone for the first time and having no local friends. In the interview, as an example, Client 1, a Chinese college student who is now studying abroad in Japan, explained why she chose to find a Chinese counselor from an online platform. She suffered from anxiety and stress in the first semester in Japan. Every little thing would become a fuse of anxiety, even when in a class she just accidentally said the wrong word during an unscored presentation. She knew that she had

to talk to a counselor, but Japanese counselors did not seem to be a good choice. “It takes me too much energy to tell about my feelings and thoughts, let alone in the second language.” She said, “That’s why I chose the online platform. It makes me feel a little relieved to hear the language of my country in a foreign country.” (X. Jin, personal interview, August 16, 2020)

Concurrently, online psychological counseling benefits clients who live in a remote area or from an area with little number of counselors. According to the study, about 56% of adults with mental health illness in the United States failed to get sufficient treatment, and 76% of young adults with severe mental health illness have no or not sufficient treatment (Wiederhold, 2018). Although we don’t know what the reasons are for people who fail to receive effective treatment, it is no doubt that the promotion of online counseling can balance the shortage of counselors and help people in remote regions.

Contrary to the waves that support online counseling, many opposing voices also point out the problems of online psychological counseling. The problem which many clients and counselors are most concerned about, which is also the problem that most needs to be solved at present, is the personal privacy of clients. Although many online platforms have introduced privacy protection policies for online psychological counseling, clients are still worried about whether their private information will be leaked. Moreover, because online counseling hasn’t been popularized until the beginning of 2020, government and related organizations have insufficient time to formulate regulations and provisions. As Wiederhold (2018) says in the article “Are We Ready for Online Virtual Reality Therapy?”, the code of ethics of the American Psychological Association (APA) “does not specifically address the delivery of services by telephone, teleconferencing, and the Internet...”

Another issue that is closely related to client’s privacy is emergency response. When conducting online counseling, counselors are almost powerless when clients are in mental health emergency, like suicide or child abuse, because many counseling platforms’ security policies won’t provide any clients’ personal information to counselors. Counselor 2, a licensed

online psychological counselor, also a licensed social worker, acknowledged that how to deal with mental health emergencies is her biggest concern during online counseling. The online platform that she is working on collects contact information for clients as well as emergency contact, but the information is generally not available to therapists. Unless a therapist asks for these before beginning work with the client, there is a risk of not having information readily available if needed in an emergency (C. Charlesworth, personal interview, August 25, 2020). The magazine *The Verge* published an investigative article about Talkspace, an online counseling platform, in 2016. That article accused that Talkspace's policy of patient anonymity made a therapist lose the opportunity to report a potential child endangerment case because Talkspace's strict privacy policy prohibits therapists to have their patients' contact information, even their full name (Wiederhold, 2018).

Besides, online psychological counseling almost cannot cover patients with severe mental health illness, because they need not only psychological counseling, but also drugs from psychiatrists. For those people, regular follow-up visits are inevitable, because they have to report their recent mood, the situation of taking medicines and whether there are side effects; these factors help psychiatrists determine whether patients' conditions become more serious. Therefore, patients are forced to maintain closer contact with psychiatrists than ordinary clients. Nevertheless, the problem is: the more serious the patient, the more difficult to maintain regular online counseling. In the article "Telepsychiatry Is Leaving Behind the Most Seriously Mentally Ill", Ruchi Vikas (2020), an attending psychiatrist at NYU Langone/Bellevue Hospital and a clinical assistant professor at Stony Brook University Hospital, shares the psychiatry experience of a 90-year-old female schizophrenia patient, Katie. Katie suffered from schizophrenia for about 30 years. Her irritability, delusion, and aggression make her hard to continuously attend in-person psychiatry, not to mention telepsychiatry. In my interviews, both Counselor 1 and Counselor 2 mentioned that since they started online counseling, they have hardly seen clients with severe mental illness (D. Chen, personal interview, August 16,

2020). In the interview, Counselor 2 believes that online psychological counseling is not clinically appropriate for those struggling with severe or persistent mental illness: "Since there are many challenges already in engaging with a person who struggles with SPMI [serious and persistent mental illness], this platform [online platform] presents even more challenges with engaging that may not make the treatment as effective." (C. Charlesworth, personal interview, August 25, 2020) This problem might be impalpable because we rarely pay attention to people like Katie; however, this problem does exist and has become unavoidable during the pandemic COVID-19.

### **Conclusion**

In this article, advantages and disadvantages of online psychological counseling are discussed. For now, almost every counselor has experienced benefits of using online counselling, but there are indeed many problems waiting to be solved. As many researchers and experts said, some of the problems are caused by the rapid promotion before this technology becomes totally mature. Online psychological counseling would be better after American Psychological Association and the United States government roll out policies regarding personal privacy. After large scale utilization of online counseling, many data will be collected and applied to different research, which contributes to further research. From my perspective, the next step should focus more on privacy protection, emergency response, and expanding the applicable population since these three problems are the most prominent. And I believe online psychological counseling will become a dominant way for clients to seek psychological help in the near future.

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