

## ONLINE THERAPY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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### INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 is an ongoing pandemic caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). The outbreak was first detected in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 and since then, it has spread to other countries around the world. Among the worst countries to experience this outbreak are the US, Spain, UK, Italy, and Russia. This led to the World Health Organisation (WHO) declaring the outbreak a pandemic on 11th March 2020. As of 28th April 2020, more than 3.08 million cases of COVID-19 have been reported in 185 countries and territories, resulting in more than 213,000 deaths (Centre for Systems Science and Engineering, 2020). The pandemic is stressful for every one of us. Fear, anxiety, and stress about our own health and the health of our loved ones can affect our life significantly. Everyone basically reacts differently to this stressful situation. The question asked is whether COVID-19 can affect an individual's mental health? The answer will always be 'Yes, its is'. Thus, the COVID-19 can significantly affect our mental health, especially those with existing mental illnesses. Mental health refers to our emotional, cognitive, behavioural, psychological, and social well-being. With the increasing number of patients infected with the outbreak every day, it is important for us to be aware of the psychological or mental health impacts of this disaster. Depression, anxiety, restlessness and stress are commonly associated with mental illness that can have a direct impact on one's thinking, feelings, behaviour which can interfere with his or her ability to become fully functioning in daily activities. As we can see, the COVID-19 pandemic has profound and widespread effects on our mental health as billions of people are struggling to manage their lives apart from increased anxiety, social isolation, loneliness, stress and economic downturn. All these are a perfect storm to harm people's mental health and wellbeing.

Recently, we are shocked with the news which French doctor who committed suicide after being diagnosed with COVID-19 disease. As we noticed, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic lockdown is significantly affecting everyone's mental health and there is a rising risk of suicide amid this crisis globally. To stay mentally healthy during this crisis, mental well-being is one of the most important. Therefore, struggling with mental health and wellbeing are not only a major challenge faced by all during the Covid-19 pandemic, however, a guide to emotional and mental health management after the COVID-19 crisis is needed. Therefore, psychological support is critically needed to support and regulate an individual's emotional distress. In this discussion, psychological support is related to online therapy which is also known as e-therapy, involves providing mental health services and support over the internet. The positive emotional well-being of an individual is very important in facing the COVID-19 outbreak.

## E-THERAPY SERVICES RECOGNITION

Distance communication between a therapist and client is not a new concept. Self-help groups began emerging on the internet as early as 1982. Today, there are numerous sites offering mental health information as well as private e-therapy clinics. The growth in online therapy and mental health services has led to the foundation of the International Society for Mental Health Online. The availability of online health care has led to a need for information and guidelines for clients who are interested in receiving mental health services via the internet. Therefore, E-therapy services have gained popularity but the extent to which they provide real psychotherapies services even through the internet medium is not guaranteed. Recognition is the only way to ensure that E-therapy is comparable to face-to-face services. The American Psychological Association (APA) had issued an Internet service provision in 1997 which is known as "APA Statement on Services by Telephone, Teleconferencing and Internet". The provision indicated that APA recommends that all psychologists who are interested in running an online service adopt comprehensively all the APA Code of Ethics. Furthermore, the ISMHO in 2000 also released the "Guidelines for Implementing E-therapy Services". According to ISMHO (2000), there are three key elements of E-therapy operations that must be covered the process of online services:

1. *Informed Consent*

Each client is required to sign an appointment form after receiving information about the E-therapy process, E-therapist's background, the advantages and disadvantages of the E-therapy service, and the risk of E-therapy.

2. *Standard Operating Procedures (SOP)*

Under the SOP, the components involved are digital technologies and equipment's, clients' confidentiality, encryption, modality and process protocols.

3. Emergencies - a list of contactable lines if assistance is needed.

While online therapy presents some challenges in gaining its recognition, however, it has received support from many clients who have utilised online mental health treatments. In a review of studies published in the journal World Journal of Psychiatry, patients receiving mental health treatment through video conferencing reported high levels of satisfaction (Chakrabarti, 2015). The COVID-19 crisis and global pandemic has highlighted the role of digital tools like apps to offer care in times of need. Social distancing and stay-at-home measures induce a new degree of social isolation, which can cause psychological and emotional stress. At the same time, face-to-face therapy services may be restricted to limit potential exposure to the COVID-19. In these difficult times, the use of digital mental health apps, particularly those available online can help to address the issues of mental health and social connection deprivation. Research also suggests that online therapy may be effective in the treatment of several health issues. A study conducted by Gratzner and Khalid (2016), found that online CBT combined with clinical care was effective in the treatment of depression, anxiety, and illness-related emotional distress. In some cases, the results indicated that some patients had better outcomes with online treatment than those who had traditional in-person CBT.

## E-THERAPY SERVICES DURING THE COVID-19 OUTBREAKS

The rapid transmission of the COVID-19 has emerged to cause a serious challenge to the mental health services throughout the country. During this challenging period, there is a very limited access of movement due to Movement Control Order (MCO), all people are prohibited to engage in any social activities publicly, thus, limited to face-to-face communication and mental health services. The fact that lots of people are now unable to access face-to-face therapy or counselling, due to their health and ongoing government restrictions, means that online support is currently the preferred route for many of us. Patients, health professionals, and general public are under psychological pressure which may lead to various psychological problems, such as anxiety, fear, depression, and insomnia. To better deal with these psychological problems of people, there is an urgent need to develop a new psychological intervention model by utilising the Internet technology. Therefore, the online therapies are needed to response for urgent social and psychological problems among people who wanted for online assistance. It is agreeable that the E-therapy offers an advantage in cases where access to face-to-face therapy is limited especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Accordingly, the E-therapy services using technology mediums like WhatsApp, Telegram and Tele-therapy via Skype or Zoom are used as an alternative to replace face-to-face methods.

The high prevalence of psychological distress due to COVID-19 is a global concern as it may impair psychological and mental health wellbeing. There are two factors associated with the level of psychological distress; the coping strategies and the mental health. Basically, the main purpose of E-therapy during the COVID-19 is to reduce the psychological distress of individuals against the outbreak, to provide emotional support and to improve the coping skills. It has been suggested that the implementation of E-therapy must involve the four main elements; assessment, psychoeducation, emotional support and action strategies (Iacoviello & Charney, 2020).

### 1. *Assessment*

The first element is to evaluate the client's current situation. This step is more about listening to what the client wants to say and asking the right questions to find out what the client needs to effectively manage the crisis. It is the responsibility of the E-therapist to resolve the client's problems and at the same time empathise with the client, accept the client as they are and provide support to the client. It is very important to ensure the safety of the client, whether physical or psychological. If the E-therapist determines that the client is unsafe, it is his or her responsibility to do what is necessary to ensure the client will be safe.

### 2. *Psychoeducation*

Mental health education is an important issue for all. Mental health professionals have recognised the impact that individual's mental health has on psychological and emotional well-being, and they realise that there's a great deal that can be done to help clients with mental health issues. Individuals in crisis need to be informed about their current client's situation and the steps the clients can take to reduce distress. The therapists and psychologists should explain the clients experience is not only normal, but temporary, unless the client has ongoing mental health issues such as MDD (Major Depressive Disorder), PDD (Persistent Depressive Disorder), Bipolar Disorder, ADHD, Anxiety, Schizophrenia,

Schizoaffective. Then, the E-therapy goal is to bring awareness to the client and bring back the client into normal.

### 3. *Emotional support*

Emotional support involves showing empathy, compassion and genuine concern for others. It is one of the basic needs of a person. Studies have proved that individuals with healthy relationships and friendships have greater emotional wellbeing. Infectious disease outbreaks such as COVID-19, as well as other public health events, can cause emotional distress and anxiety. Active listening and unconditional acceptance are important. When E-therapist provides non-judgmental support to clients, it can help reduce client stress and improve client responsiveness to crisis. The E-therapist should encourage client to develop a brief reliance on individuals who are close to the client. These relationships can help client become emotionally stronger, more resilient and more independent.

### 4. *Action strategies*

It is important to ensure that E-therapy will help clients develop coping skills to deal with the COVID-19 crisis. Since there are many actionable strategies, E-therapists and client need to determine the most effective coping strategies for the client, as different client will react differently to the crisis and this will result in different distress. The E-therapist can help the client to discover different solutions to the underlying issue. Several recommended strategies are, relaxation techniques, deep breathing, stress reduction, and cognitive restructuring for the positive thinking. These strategies are not only teaching and guide clients the power of action but provide the clients awareness and commitment towards their issues and problems.

## CONCLUSION

No doubt, the outbreak of the Covid-19 epidemic has affected the community and individuals in everyday life. The situation is further exacerbated when the government formally declared the Movement Control Order (MCO) to curb further outbreaks of COVID-19 by controlling public movements. The restriction on movement and social contact might lead to intense boredom, emotional instability and other psychological issues. Psychologically, the patterns of individuals thinking can affect their negative emotions throughout the MCO implementation. Negative emotions refer to negative thoughts about oneself, dissatisfaction with the future, difficulties in family relationships, unable to express positive emotions, feelings of isolation or loneliness. The disaster outbreaks of the COVID-19 has never been stranger to human life history, but the challenges in dealing with such disasters continue to evolve considering recent modernisation changes that indirectly impact economic, social, education and more on a global scale. Sensitivity to mental health in the face of catastrophic outbreaks is essential to ensure an individual's cognitive, behavioural and emotional functioning is optimised. Limited access to face-to-face mental health services due to Movement Control Order (MCO), the online therapy (E-therapy) currently is affordable and effective to treat psychological and emotional distress at the individual convenient. It will also can strengthen online virtual care to help stop the spread of the virus.

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