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The Many Benefits of Online Therapy

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There's no doubt that 2020 has been incredibly stressful. And, thanks to the pandemic, access to many of the things that used to keep us healthy and happy such as hanging out with friends, hitting the gym, and travel have been restricted. However, one positive thing that COVID-19 has brought is that it has become increasingly easy, and common, to talk with a therapist online.

Experts weigh in on online therapy

Before COVID-19 hit, some therapists were not sold on the idea of meeting with clients online. Dr. Euling Chong, clinic director at Peel Psychology and Therapy Centre, says that she was very much against online therapy sessions. “I thought that I needed to be able to meet with people face to face in order to help them, and that the energy and dynamic couldn't be possibly be right if I wasn't in the same room as my clients,” Chong says, “Suddenly we didn't have a choice and it was the only way we could deliver services, and I learned that, in fact, we are still able to do exactly what we were doing in office over video or even telephone sessions.”

Like many therapists who felt the same way, Chong now considers herself a convert. “I actually love being able to provide services virtually, and it gives us a lot more flexibility. I've even found that sessions over the phone are effective, and that has really surprised me,” she says.

What the research says about online mental health support

Studies have shown that online therapy sessions can be just as effective as when we meet a therapist face to face. Back in 2013, a widely-quoted study from the University of Zurich concluded that internet-based interventions for depression were just as effective as regular face-to-face therapy. A 2017 study into online therapy for veterans suffering from PTSD showed that not only was online therapy just as effective but being able to access therapy from home increased the uptake of beneficial therapy sessions. Despite research backing up the benefits of online therapy, most practices did not offer these kinds of sessions until COVID-19 came along and shook things up.

Having to adapt fast to delivering services in a pandemic forced the hand of many psychologists who had resisted using technology to meet with clients, and that's been great for the profession, and our ability to access the vital service that these therapists provide.

Reasons to love online therapy

There are many reasons why online therapy may be a better option for people, with or without living under a pandemic.

Easier access: For those at high risk from COVID-19, having to leave the house to see a therapist can cause further anxiety, being able to stay safe and comfortable at home is helpful for their mental health. For those with mobility issues, this also makes therapy more accessible.

More personal connections: It can create a stronger bond with your therapist. “Clients can share other aspects of their life, e.g. showing the therapist what their room looks like, or their beloved pets,” says Blake.

Time-saving: There's no travel time, which means that a 50-minute therapy session doesn't eat up your whole morning or afternoon. You don't need to stress about finding, or paying for parking. Online sessions also take away the need to cancel appointments or risk driving in bad weather to get to see a therapist.

Better timing: It's easier to connect with a therapist for an urgent or last minute session. To cope with increased demand, many therapists have extended their hours and now offer evening sessions. This can help parents who can log in after their children are in bed.

Confidentiality: Without travel time, a therapy session easily fits into a lunch break, offering privacy around what many feel is a delicate situation - you no longer need to ask your employer for time off and give a reason why you need to be gone from the office for an extended break.

Cons to every situation

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Though there are many positives to online therapy, it isn't a perfect solution – yet. Adopting any new technology takes some time, and therapists and clients alike have been forced to adapt very quickly to doing sessions this way. There are a few cons to consider also.

Potential technical difficulties: Online therapy requires both users and therapists having access to a strong wifi connection, along with a working computer. “Still, there have been far fewer problems than I anticipated,” Dr. Chong says, “With even my older clients being to access Zoom successfully for their sessions.”

Confidentiality concerns: Clients may have some reservations about how secure these online sessions are. This is something that it is worth checking verifying with your therapist, to see what protocols they have in place to protect your security and privacy online. Though there was a lot of concern about how secure certain video-conferencing services were at the start of the pandemic, it is fair to say that these have largely been addressed and the connection is likely secure as your therapist will be using a pro (i.e. paid) account with higher levels of security built-in.

Lack of physical privacy: Ideally, you'd be able to have your online therapy session in a quiet place with no chance of being disturbed. For parents with young children, or people sharing a smaller space with roommates or their intimate partner, that can be tricky. Dr. Chong says that she has had clients take video or phone therapy sessions locked in their bedrooms or even their cars.

The future of online therapy

Being able to talk with a therapist virtually is a great way to take care of ourselves in these trying times. Online therapy is clearly a positive experience for most people, and suits the pace of our lives with or without a pandemic. There will be a point where in-person sessions will be more possible, and for some people that will be something to look forward to.

What's great is that going forward, we'll be able to choose how we have our mental health care delivered, and where we want to see a therapist. This is an exciting development in the provision of mental health services, and something that is clearly a win/ win for both clients and therapists.

Most Ontario Blue Cross health and disability insurance products include the EQ virtual healthcare service free of charge, which allows you to obtain medical support anytime, day or night. Thanks to this service, you will be able to speak to health professionals who will guide you toward the appropriate care and support to look after your mental health.

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