

Telepsychology, Online Consultation, and Therapy

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The internet has revolutionized society, and the impact of Internet communication media on the practice of medicine and professional psychology is rich in its implications for development.

The practice of online psychology (telepsychology) falls within the broader scope of the practice of online medicine (telemedicine), and many of the same principles apply for both in expanding the broader delivery of professional knowledge and skills. Yet, while similar in many respects, psychotherapy is different than medicine, involving more relationship-based skill sets and collaborative agents of personal change. These differences have implications for the transition of professional psychology into cyberspace. There are two broad applications for telepsychology, consultation and therapy.

Consultation

This domain of application carries major potential for the successful use of Internet-mediated video-conferencing to improve both the availability and quality of patient care. The use of secure Internet video-conferencing platforms to provide direct professional-to-professional in-session consultation offers an avenue of application with significant advantages for patient care. For example, a specialist neurosurgeon at Johns Hopkins Medical Center can provide direct video-conferencing consultation support to another surgeon anywhere in the world, directly in the operating room. Or a doctor located anywhere in the world can seek direct video-consultation with another professional while the patient is currently present and being examined, once again improving the quality of care provided to the patient.

The use of secure online video-conferencing platforms for providing in-session consultation are as valuable for professional psychology as for medicine. When the psychologist has an consistently available online presence in an established cyberspace office location, the psychologist now lives in the computer. The morning commute to work is not to a geographic location, it's into cyberspace. Wherever there is a computer, that psychologist can be present through secure online video-conferencing. If a psychologist in Wisconsin wants consultation support from a specialist psychologist in Ohio, the consulting psychologist in Ohio can be virtually present in the session through videoconferencing, both observing and interacting in the session.

This capacity for valuable and easy to achieve in-session consultation can greatly improve the quality of patient care provided with difficult or complex cases and represents one of several prominent benefits from the integration of Internet communication media into professional practice. Internet-mediated video-conferencing provides new and accessible avenues for broader professional-to-professional consultation, increasing the spread of professional knowledge and improving the quality of patient care.

Therapy

Psychotherapy in an online format is more complex. The traditional models of psychotherapy were developed for in-person encounters. Video-mediated communication in cyberspace is less intense in its interpersonal presence, creating differences in the interpersonal nature of the encounter. These differences have both advantages and disadvantages relative to traditional in-person models of psychotherapy, and the implications of these differences are not of quality, it's the difference itself. The models of psychotherapy developed for in-person psychotherapy are not appropriate when applied directly into online video-mediated communication. Nor does the direct application of in-person therapy models and do not take full advantages of the unique differences of cyberspace interpersonal encounters from direct-intensity in-person encounters.

Dr. Childress & Online Psychotherapy

I do not conduct psychotherapy via video-conferencing. The models of in-person psychotherapy I use cannot be translated into cyberspace. My telepsychology work with online clients is more consulting than psychotherapy. I still possess and employ the same knowledge sets from professional psychology, I am simply not engaging the client as an active change-agent as I would be in my in-person psychotherapy because of the reduced presence of the encounter.

If indicated, I will conduct a different form of psychotherapy online, interactive journaling. This is where the client writes regularly in a journal and shares this journal entry with me. We then discuss this journal entry in our session, and we develop the next topic area for journaling exploration.

With interactive journaling, I am guiding the client and augmenting the power of journal writing for self-discovery and self-healing, while not serving as the active change-agent. This approach to personal growth requires some degree of comfort with self-expression through writing, and not all clients will resonate with a journaling approach. I serve as a guide in personal exploration of self-discovery.

My primary use of online video-conferencing is for consultation with clients, often surrounding my potential intervention on their behalf with the involved mental health professionals to achieve an accurate diagnosis and to assist in the development of a written treatment plan that meets the needs of the family.