

Predilection for Intervention of Text Messaging as an Effective Psychotherapy Tool During COVID-19 Pandemic, among College Students

Ms. Anshika Singh^{1*}

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has spread across the globe with its unpredictable evolutionary nature and unprecedented effects on the everyday life and health of people globally. It has increasingly imposed threats to the well-being, mental health and psychological safety of people as it continues to expand its impact on the global population. Therefore, as a measure to provide support and maintain psychological safety among people around the world, the concepts of telepsychology and suitable methods to impart psychological and mental health services have been devised with the motive to provide mental health services while maintaining COVID appropriate behavior. This study aims to determine the preference of college students regarding the introduction and usage of a text message-based intervention as an effective psychotherapy tool during the current times of the global crisis. The following study involved usage of survey method carried out on an online platform through circulating a questionnaire and it also employs the usage of various scales with the motive to assess the level of anxiety, depression, stress and well-being of the participants and their attitude towards a text based intervention in therapy. The findings of the study suggested that a considerable number of college students suffered from basic mental health problems along with stress and moderate levels of well-being. It also determines the preference of college students towards the use of the text based intervention in psychotherapy. Hence, the study carried out and the findings obtained aim towards proposing an idea regarding the introduction of proper and professionally organized program particularly emphasizing on the maintenance of psychological safety of college students by using the text based intervention in therapy during the COVID-19 pandemic while maintaining the COVID-19 protocol.

Keywords: COVID-19, Intervention, Psychotherapy, Mental well-being, College students

The COVID-19 Pandemic has undoubtedly affected the lives of many with extensive, critical and unparalleled influence on health and everyday life of human beings. The Coronavirus disease has imposed severe threats on mental health and well-being and is constantly increasing the intensity of its effects on world health. The challenge to overcome these life-threatening conditions lead us to introduce certain measures such as

¹Researcher, B.A. Psychology major- 3rd year, St. Xavier's College (Autonomous), Ahmedabad, India

*Corresponding Author

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Online Counselling and Therapy and introduction of Text Messaging based intervention through which the accessibility and efficacy of Psychological Treatment can be increased, with the aim to bridge the gap between distressed people and psychologists along with maintaining proper physical distancing. Ensuring psychological safety is vitally important as the COVID-19 global pandemic has profound effects on the demographic distribution and economic conditions of a nation as well, in addition to which the unemployment rates increase leading to the emergence of a wide-range of problems which need to be addressed and resolved efficiently.

However, one might ponder upon the fact that, what are the possible interventions to close the gap for psychological treatment and assistance? Is this method of intervention effective? Do people prefer such interventions and their introduction as a psychotherapy tool?

Prior research on a supportive text messaging programme as a mental health intervention with the motive to reduce distress levels in people during the COVID-19 crisis, primarily amid Canadians, delineates the usage of SMS text messaging (Text4Hope) as a conducive, cost-efficient and accessible population-level psychological intervention. It evaluates the widespread presence of stress, anxiety, symptoms of depression and outcomes of the Text4Hope programme in reducing distress. This particular research has been empirically supported by the results obtained through previous research which exhibits adequate outcomes and high user satisfaction. Methods used for evaluation of outcomes include valid, empirical and standardized questionnaires, providing relevant information regarding the prevalence of anxiety, stress and depression amongst the population of Canada during the COVID-19 crisis. Therefore, the valuable information gained from this particular research is of utmost importance to the practitioners and would prove to be helpful in formulation of policies by the government and policy makers with sensitivity about mental health and psychological safety of people and its correlation with this pandemic.

Another study on Text Messaging as the next generation of therapy in mental health (Hanover, N.H., 2020) states that approximately 19 percent of the adult population in the U.S. suffer from mental illness. Mental health services may not be adequate enough to cater the needs of patients due to lack of accessibility and a rigid time limit. As a response to this situation, a research team studied the effect of a text based intervention as an additional measure to a treatment programme of mental health in comparison with another treatment programme having absence of a text message intervention. According to a recent study published in *Psychiatric Services*, a text messaging intervention can be safe, clinically promising and feasible tool to provide care and support for people suffering with severe mental health illness. Although, there might be a need to administer additional therapy as well, for people with severe mental illness who are more likely to experience symptoms related to the illness on a daily basis. Through the investigation of the impact of this intervention as an add-on measure, it was found that 91 percent of the participants found it to be acceptable, 94 percent stated that it made them feel better than before and 87 percent would further recommend it to their friends. The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the daily routine and schedule of people which makes it difficult for people with mental illness and distress to have a daily or properly scheduled access to the therapist. Therefore, a text based intervention method has abilities to prove helpful in the current conditions of this global crisis and bridge this gap, by delivering mental health services on a continuous and regular basis.

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According to the findings and extensive reading about the researches stated above and other resources as well, there is little empirical support and evidence on whether the Text Messaging based intervention is preferred by the College students in the Indian population as an effective psychotherapy tool as opposed to real-time therapy sessions, during the COVID-19 crisis. Therefore, further study on the preference of this text messaging intervention and its effectiveness as a psychotherapy tool during this pandemic in the context of the College students comprising the Indian population would prove to be beneficial as it would be of utmost importance in policy formulation and provide help in determining the attitude of people regarding the introduction of this intervention in therapy as opposed to the traditional method of therapy. The results and findings would also contribute essentially by creating awareness for maintaining psychological safety and ensuring the betterment of the world health collectively, as it is a necessary measure through which the gap between a psychologist and a distressed individual or a mentally ill person can surely be shortened while maintaining the protocol of physical distancing as well.

Another research based on the text or SMS based intervention in therapy, studies the feasibility and acceptability of using text messaging and SMS for promotion of mental health amongst young women belonging to an urban lower economic strata in Bangalore, India. The findings suggest that 25 out of 40 participants (62.5 %) called back to avail the mental health services provided and to express their satisfaction regarding the services provided, 23 out of 40 participants (57.5 %) messaged back expressing their feelings. Whereas, 62 % of the participants felt that the mental health messages were supportive. The male members belonging to the families of the female participants called back with the motive to check the authenticity of the service and most women did not encounter any problem during the duration of this research. Therefore, the findings through research indicate that mobile text messages are a culturally acceptable and feasible method for prevention of mental health related problems and it is culturally acceptable as well, amid young women belonging to urban slums of India. Whereas, problems related to the study include consent from the family and the woman, maintaining confidentiality, authenticity and reliability of the services provided during the course of the study.

Hence, the relatively sparse research on the preference for the introduction of text message based intervention in therapy during the COVID-19 pandemic on Indian students has left room for further research to be conducted.

According to a study conducted on the Effectiveness of mobile phone messaging in prevention of type-2 diabetes by lifestyle modification in men in India (Ramachandran, Ambady; Chamukuttan, Snehlata, 2013) states that mobile phone messaging is an inexpensive alternative way to deliver educational and motivational advice about lifestyle modification.

According to the findings of a study released earlier this year by the Association for University and College Counselling Center Directors, implementation of what is known as Telepsychology is increasing in mental health services. According to American Psychological Association (APA), the expanding role of technology in the provision of psychological services and the continuous development of new technologies that may be useful in the practice of psychology present unique opportunities, considerations and challenges to practice. In the academic year of 2013-14, Telepsychology was used in some form in 6.6 percent of counselling centers, whereas the following year reported increase in numbers by 9.1 percent.

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Anne Hudgens, executive director of Colorado State University Health Network said, “One of the things really concerning folks at university counselling centers is the growing demand for student counselling services.” Dan Jones, chair of the Higher Education Mental Health Alliance and former president of the AUCCCD (Association for University and College Counselling Center Directors) said that “The colleges that use hotlines, text messaging services and online behaviour therapy platforms are not aiming to replace face to face counselling but to supplement it.” “The fact that there’s so many students using electronic equipment, these services are sort of a natural progression for counselling.”

The Jed Foundation, a non-profit organisation working for suicide prevention among college students, states that digital tools – both text message counselling and online assessment platforms can be a mixed bag. “Having access to virtual treatment is better than nothing,” Schwartz said, “but you have to make sure there’s some kind of process to very carefully vet who those people are on the other end of the line.”

The online and text based interventions in therapy, being used at some colleges are intended towards increasing accessibility of mental health services. Nathan Demers, a licensed clinical psychologist and director of clinical programs at Grit Digital Health, said that distance counselling and telepsychology are not meant to replace traditional counselling, instead the goal is intended towards reaching students who otherwise would not receive any counselling. Demers said, “We have an ethical responsibility to connect with people who are not knocking on our door. Digital technology is the first place where millennials are going to look for help.”

Therefore, the current study helps us gain a broader perspective to understand whether the text message intervention as an effective psychotherapy tool during COVID-19 pandemic is preferred over the traditional ways of therapy among college students in India. Specifically, the study investigates the attitude and preference of college students in India towards the text based intervention during this current global crisis, with the aim to motivate and initiate the introduction of Telepsychology cells or community within universities or colleges, assisted by qualified and well-trained mental health professionals, to address and help those in distress and provide adequate guidance along with further assistance to students with mental health issues with the basic motive to ensure their psychological safety and betterment of their lives and ability to adapt during the COVID-19 pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Participants included 50 volunteers, out of which the study involved respondents from age group ranging from- 18 to 22 years of age.

Materials

Preference for intervention of text messaging as a therapy tool was studied through an online survey questionnaire which primarily aimed towards administering the following scales- Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9), Generalised Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7), Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), Warwick - Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS), in order to measure depression, anxiety, stress and mental well-being during the current global pandemic. The questionnaire concluded with an evaluation of preference regarding the text based intervention in therapy by using the System Usability Scale (SUS).

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Procedure

A survey link was created using the Google forms platform, the link was circulated among the participants through the medium of Whatsapp. The survey questionnaire comprised of Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9), Generalised Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7), Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), Warwick - Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS), in order to measure depression, anxiety, stress and mental well-being respectively. It also included the System Usability Scale (SUS) for assessment of preference. The link was circulated on 28th April, 2021 at 1: 15 pm and the responses were collected till 3rd May, 2021.

RESULTS

Through the survey, a total of 50 responses were collected, and all of the responses collected were analysed. About 12.65% had anxiety and 9.35% of the respondents had depression. Moderate level of stress was reported by about 17% of the participants and 1.23% of the participants reported poor well-being. Out of the total 50 participants, around 22 participants reported that they would use the text-based intervention system frequently, around 11 participants strongly agreed on recommending it to their friends and 14 participants strongly agreed on the effectiveness of the text-based intervention in therapy during the pandemic. Therefore, the findings obtained through this study determines the level of psychological health among college students, assessed through a range of tests, and their level of preference towards the text message-based intervention in therapy as opposed to the traditional methods of therapy during the COVID-19 pandemic.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to determine whether college students prefer intervention of text messages as a psychotherapy tool during the COVID-19 pandemic, over the traditional methods of therapy. The present survey suggests that around 22% of college students suffer from common mental illnesses and stressful situations in their respective lives during the current global crisis, further leading to deterioration of mental well-being among college students. Therefore, through the findings of the current research, Colleges and Universities would be able to help students with mental distress and maintain psychological safety of these young minds by implementation of telepsychology techniques in appropriate online settings by professional and trained mental health professionals or practitioners with the motive to ensure psychological well-being of the students in the current times of crisis along with maintaining COVID appropriate behaviour. Overall, the findings of this research suggest the need to expand mental health and psychological services for people of our society during these tough and challenging times of the COVID-19 pandemic.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected the lives of many. The intervention of new methods in psychotherapy helps in facilitating the process of providing mental health services and ensuring the psychological safety of people during the pandemic. Telepsychology incorporates implementation of techniques that bridge the gap between mental health professionals and the distressed individual. An insight into the attitude of college going students towards text messaging as an effective tool in psychotherapy during the pandemic can prove to be helpful in order to ensure their proper psychological hygiene is of utmost importance in the current challenging times. Hence, this study aims at assessing the levels of distress and the condition of mental health among young college students and their attitude or preference regarding text based intervention in psychotherapy. The findings

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obtained through the data collected from survey, suggest that a considerable number of students' mental health has deteriorated during the pandemic and more than half of the sample or the participants in the survey prefer the text based intervention in psychotherapy. Therefore, we can conclude that the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly led to rise in mental health issues which need to be addressed at the earliest and novel techniques need to be adopted with the motive to expend mental health services and enhance psychological safety of students.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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