

# TELETHERAPY IN MENTAL HEALTH CARE: THE PERSPECTIVE OF PATIENTS, PROFESSIONALS AND CARERS

## Background

The Covid-19 pandemic changed our social context. Not only personal contacts were limited, also professional contacts and accessibility of health care were reduced. Therapy for inpatient and outpatient mental healthcare decreased in intensity and switched to e-health and teletherapy.

## Aim(s)

The study was focused on mental health care and aimed: (1) to get insight into the experiences and coping of patients, carers, and mental health professionals (MHP) with e-health and telecare/therapy; (2) to measure the barriers, possibilities and perceptions of e-health and telecare/therapy in patients, carers and MHP.

## Methods

A multicentric, mixed-method study was set up. Digital and paper questionnaires were distributed, telephone, online and face to face interviews were held supplemented with focusgroupinterviews. For the quantitative analyses SPSS was used, for the qualitative data thematic analyses took place with NVIVO.

## Results

Eleven mental health care organizations participated. During the first and second lock-down respectively, 765 and 475 questionnaires were filled out. Interviews were held with 91 professionals, 113 patients and 17 carers. Telecare/therapy was perceived as a temporary alternative and an aid to postpone but not replace hospitalization. Limited access to communication facilities and technical barriers increased irritation, feelings of helplessness and loneliness. Mental health care professionals were more positive concerning the value of telecare than patients. The qualitative research showed that MHP mainly focused on physical health, administration and control tasks. They felt alienated from their core roles. For inpatients, contact with their home environment and carers was omitted because of lack of time and communication tools. Experiences of disconnection were prominent and were reinforced by an increasingly restrictive and top-down driven management. Patients and carers felt deprived of what really matters to them e.g. being with the ones they are close to. MHP felt forced into a role they didn't want and didn't believe in. They often felt powerless. Re-establishing connection and togetherness came from sharing feelings, together searching for creative solutions to fulfill profound needs and becoming partners facing the same challenges. This contributed to mutual understanding and created space for new insights and initiatives.

## Discussion

The study shows that when social relations are threatened, the need to find connection is prominent. Telecare/therapy can be a valuable addition to the usual mental healthcare. It can help patients and their carers to overcome the waiting time for hospital admission when technical issues can be avoided or solved. Empowering MHP and patients to engage in a partnership strengthens creativity to find solutions for mutual problems. Carers and family members of patients are not recognized in their crucial role in the patient's life.

## Implications and future perspectives

The insights from the study indicate that a future-proof mental healthcare benefits from MHP who can adapt to extraordinary circumstances, not neglecting the need for contact and communication. It also revealed the importance of sensitivity for concerns and needs of professionals, patients and carers during crisis management and for combining bottom-up and top-down strategies driven by a focus on the core business and core values of the organization.

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