ARTICLE

Online Psychotherapy: A Pandemic Dilemma

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ABSTRACT

The COVID pandemic has allowed people to reflect and explore their emotions, their strengths and deficiencies, how they affect them and how to address them. The globally observed, pandemic-induced social distancing, has also precipitated disturbances in the domain of mental health. Almost the entire population worldwide, went through a series of lockdowns, resulting in people getting isolated, some feeling trapped in the stressful environment of a forced shared living places-homes. This precipitated in exposing conflicts of various types and degrees, encountering a common emotion—*grief*. With no access to professionals in traditional format, the online networking boom has given a ray of hope to the people in need. This research-based article explores how online therapy is being seen as a reliable and important tool for people needing help with mental health issues, by conducting a survey on the youth of Delhi-NCR. This research article explores the ways in which people reached mental health professionals and how internet-based therapies increased manifolds during pandemic. A total of 54% participants of the survey agreed to engage in online therapy practice in situation of need.

Keywords: Internet; Pandemic; Mental health; Online psychotherapy

1. Introduction

Health according to World Health Organization (1948) [1] is defined as "a complete state of physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." Health broadly consists of two components: Physical and mental. Both together make us work properly and both need to be kept in balance and good shape or else our daily work can get affected. This article focuses on supporting and maintaining our mental health and how the digital revolution has influenced it. One method

to diagnose and treat mental health issues and disorders is known as psychotherapy.

Psychotherapy, usually referred to as talk therapy, describes methods that assist individuals in altering attitudes, feelings, and actions that lead to issues or suffering. Treatment of psychological problems and mental anguish using linguistic and psychological procedures is referred to by this general phrase. It is a practice in the field of psychology, which is practiced widely all over the world to help people to deal with issues related to their mental health conditions. The practice of "therapy" as referred by the major population, aims to solve mental health issues and various mental disorders. This practice is still uncommon in many parts of the world especially India, but the awareness about the same is increasing slowly and steadily. In this practice, a client or a person dealing with some mental health issue, face-to-face converses with a mental health professional to solve their problems. When people hear the phrase "psychotherapy", many of them have a preconceived notion of a patient talking while laying on a couch while the therapist sits nearby writing notes on a yellow notepad. In actuality, there are numerous methods and procedures employed in psychotherapy. The precise approach taken in each case can differ depending on a number of variables, including the client's preferences, the therapist's training and experience, and the precise nature of the client's current problem.

The increasing use of the internet has brought the whole world closer by propelling communication in all facets of life. It has also made knowledge and information easily accessible to the needy. The impact of this is also seen in the field of psychology and it is being seen to provide help in reaching out to people in need. This research article explores, how psychotherapy is available on various online platforms and how it has helped the population during the tough times of the pandemic and the potential it holds. Online therapy is still a new way through which psychotherapy is being conducted, wherein the same procedure of a face-to-face psychotherapy session is being followed not by sitting in a room but through a digital screen. In online therapy a client interacts with a professional using the internet as a medium, to solve their daily life problems or other problems they encounter and to help them overcome their psychological problems. As this is more technologically based, hence clients and mental health professionals both who are using this platform need to be more technologically friendly. But it also helps connect various people with professionals from far-off distances which not have been possible physically.

In the year 2020, the whole world was hit by a pandemic caused by the Coronavirus (COVID-19). During this period actual professional-client interactions were not possible as most countries went into complete lockdown to stop the spread of this virus. The population was losing their loved ones every day, people were stuck at home for months, and some were separated from their families in isolation. Hence the majority saw a negative impact on their mental health. And saw online therapy as a possible way to seek help from a mental health professional and to cure their problems that emerged during and due to the pandemic. As people started searching for mental health tips and looking for mental health professionals. People are aware of the various online platforms and the number of these platforms is increasing constantly. These online platforms have come forward to help these people in this painful time And many already existing platforms providing online therapy boosted with an increase in use.

2. Method

The objective of the present study was to explore the effect of pandemic-triggered use of online psychotherapy amongst the sample population (16-48 years) and the usage of online therapy platforms during the pandemic.

To meet the objective, the following hypothesis was developed:

There would be a significant increase in the usage of online psychological therapy.

2.1 Sample

The data were collected from a total of 100 participants out of which 48 were females and 32 were

males. All participants were between the age group of 16 years to 48 years.

2.2 Procedure

A 10-item self-administered survey was used to collect data from 100 participants. The survey was converted into a Google form so that participants could fill it out at their own convenience time. The questionnaire designed as Google form by the author was developed after doing focus group discussion and validated by senior psychiatrists andwas sent to the targeted audience through online messaging platforms like WhatsApp, Email and LinkedIn. The results generated were recorded by the Google form were downloaded as an Excel sheet and were analysed.

2.3 Results

A total of 100 participants filled out the survey form (**Table 1**).

Educational status, device used to access the internet and age of participants: Educational qualifications of the participants show that 83% are less than graduate,

13% graduate, 3% post graduate, 1% Ph.D. (**Figure 1**).

94% used mobile phone whereas only 4% used laptop for internet access. The age group eligible for the survey was 16-48 years old.

Participants of the survey included 48 females and 32 males.

The percentage of participants who confirmed the effect on their mental health due to the pandemic is 57%. The percentage of participants who thought about seeking professional mental help to overcome the situation due to the pandemic is 30%. (**Figure 2**)

33% percent of participants lost their loved ones during the pandemic and 38% percent of participants used Google for seeking help for their mental health issues. Of all the participants, 35% found the level of help provided by Google useful (2%-very helpful & 33% helpful). (**Figure 3**)

Among all the participants, 10% used an online psychotherapy platform or reached out to a mental health professional for their problems. The reasons for using online psychotherapy included a) it was easily accessible (69%), b) maintaining anonymity was easy (15%), c) Offline was not available (12%) and d) Cost (4%). (**Figure 4**)
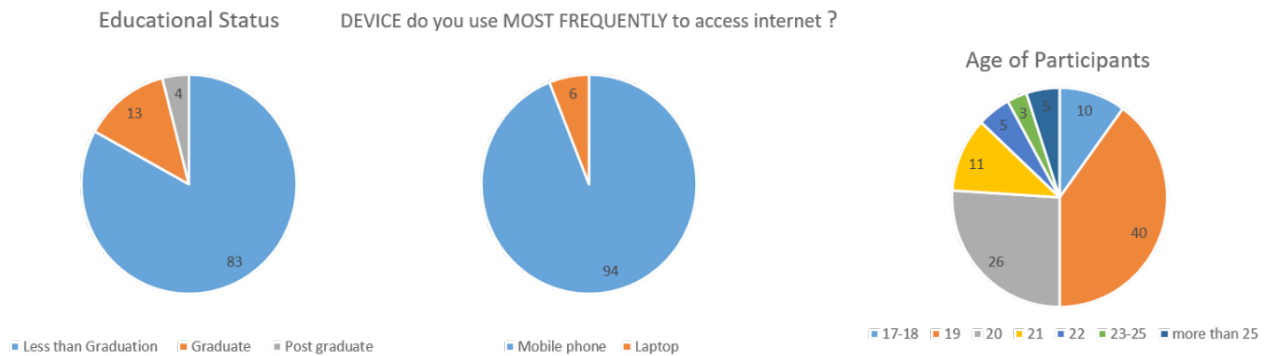

Figure 1. Educational status, device used to access internet and age of participants.

Table 1. Age distribution of participants.

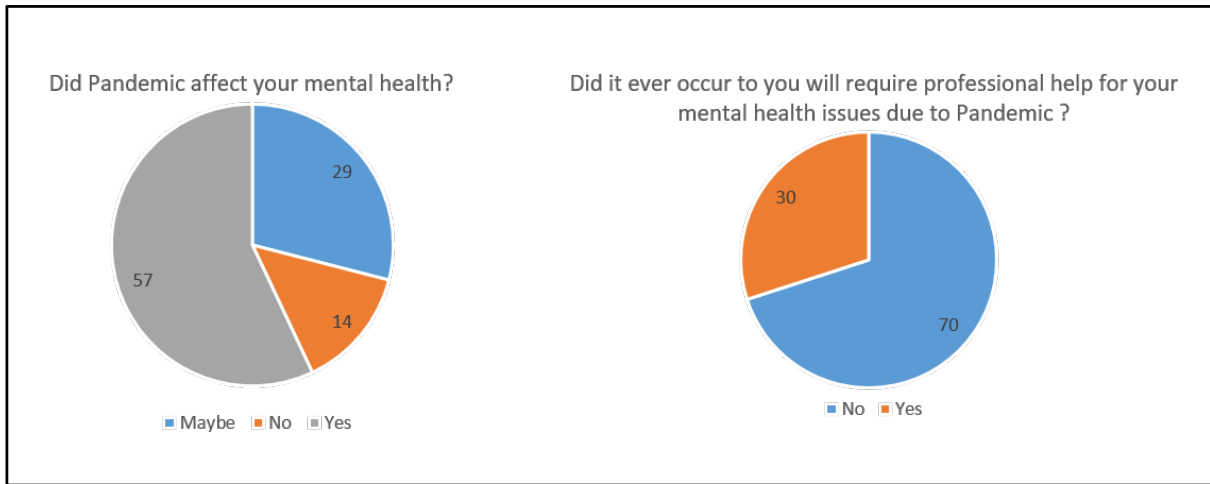| S no	Age range	Number
1	17-18	10
2	19	40
3	20	26
4	21	11
5	22	5
6	23-25	3
7	More than 25	5

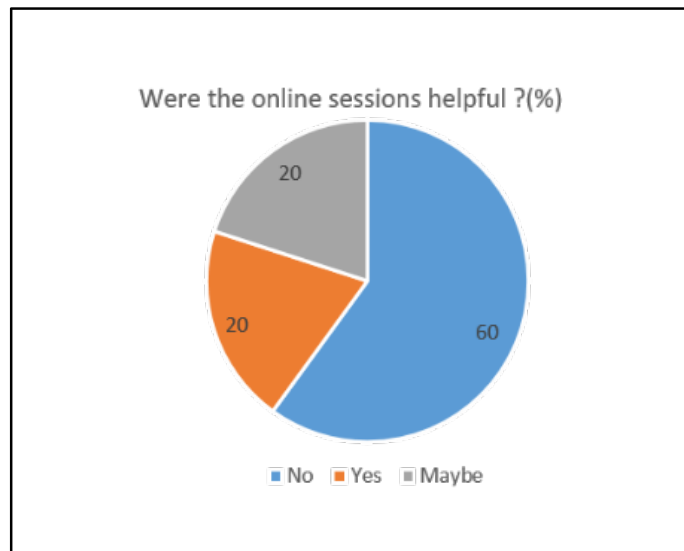**Figure 2.** Pandemic induced effect on mental health.

Figure 3. Participants' observations of the efficacy of online psychotherapy sessions.
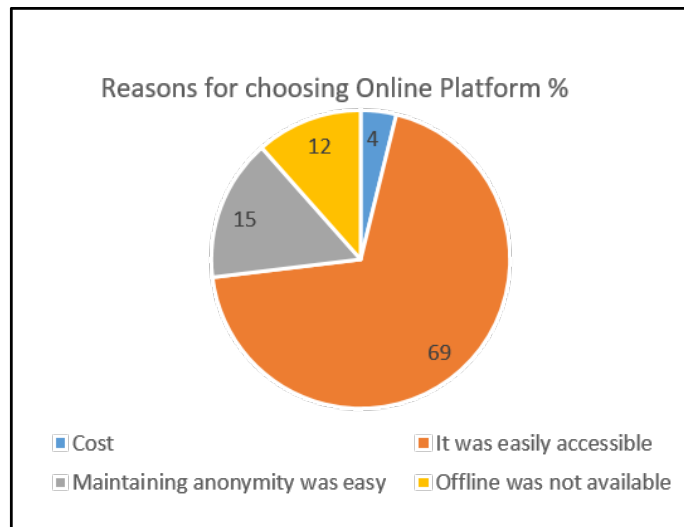

Figure 4. Reasons of participants to choose online platform of psychotherapy.

Other reasons quoted by participants included the following:

- It's feasible and affordable.
- COVID pandemic.
- It is easy to get.
- It's easy to find professionals online.
- Easy accessibility and cost.

Among the participants who used Online sessions, 48% committed to its future use also whereas 38% said that they may be using it. (**Figure 5**)

2.4 Discussion

A total of 100 participants filled out the online survey form. Where all participants were from the age range of 16-48 years old. The participant group included 48 females and 32 males, the sample included undergraduates (83%), graduates (13%) and post graduates (4%). This survey was designed to investigate how the pandemic affected the mental health of many people and how useful they found the online psychotherapy platform for their issues. It was noticed that the participants did understand their mental health situation but still they did not feel the need to reach out to a professional for help. This is due to the lack of awareness about mental health most common perception of the population is that they can handle this on their own they do not give preference to themselves and take care of themselves when they are feeling low or disturbed. Instead, they ignore the feeling by distracting themselves, such as watching TV shows or doing other things. Hence percentage of participants engaging in online therapy is less than the percentage of participants who did feel that their mental health was getting affected. Out of these, participants only 10% engaged in online therapy sessions with a professional. And they were happy with their experiences and results so much that they even want to continue it after the pandemic is over.

Of the participants who were aware of online therapy practices but 54% did not engage in any did say that they were likely to take part in it if the need arises in the future. Hence, we can say that online therapy is a developing field and will be growing in the near future. As technology advances and taboos around maintaining your mental health reduce, the population will be going on a path of active participation in online therapy [2].

It includes the most frequently used device by the participants to access the internet which turned out to be mobile phone with 94% of participants using it whereas only 6% of participants use their laptop to access the internet.
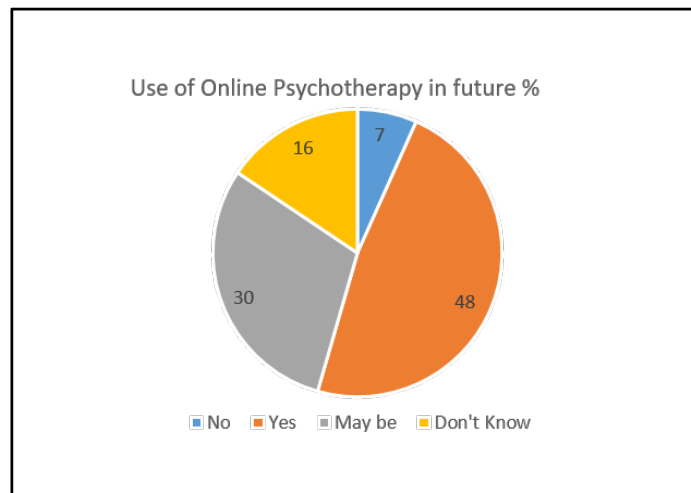

Figure 5. Percentage of participants that are willing to use online psychotherapy in future.

3. Conclusions

3.1 Major branches of online therapy and advantages

As described by Good Therapy, in one of their blog posts online therapy has evolved over the years and has been made more user-friendly, so much so, that with the advancement of technology, users have options to engage in online therapy from various modes [3]. These different modes help in connecting a wide spectrum of users. These modes provide a personalized experience for the user, as they can choose from any option that makes them feel comfortable. A few online therapy modes are:

Online therapy through Apps

Where various apps are designed with the help of a mental health professional who assists you and provides ways to weaken your mild daily life problems.

Online therapy through video

Where patients connect with a mental health professional at live time, virtually from anywhere in the world and engage in verbal communication.

Online therapy through chat

Where patients connect with a mental health professional in real time, virtually from anywhere in the world and engage in recordable communication. It maintains more anonymity.

These modes of online therapy have been functioning successfully. People who do not want to disclose their identities and want to keep their treatment anonymous prefer to go for chat-based therapy, whereas a person who wants a more interactive experience prefers to go for a video call or internet voice call. And the results of these sessions have been similar to those in face-to-face therapy as proved by research [4].

Research shows that in physical mode or face-to-face therapy, people have to go through the hassles of finding a good therapist, booking a suitable appointment, getting ready for the same, going through a rigorous amount of time in traffic and travelling [5]. For a person who wants to discuss and resolve their mental issues such as anxiety, depression, burnout etc., this whole process is tiring, challenging and sometimes threatening. Hence online therapy comes as a saviour technique, in saving time and a person does not have to go through all the hassles and tensions.

Online therapy provides rapid access to the user and hence whenever someone needs help urgently then they are just a click away. The user just needs to go on a website and with one click they can book an appointment or talk to a therapist immediately through video/telecommunication/chat. These platforms are preferred avenues at lower costs without the stress of leaving one's house, especially in the pandemic-affected society.

As this is a new technique to practice psychotherapy, online therapy also has some drawbacks which need to be addressed to provide a smooth and secure functioning of the platforms offering this technique online. One of the major drawbacks is the privacy of the client/patient, a lot of the time the privacy policy of the platforms cannot be trusted, hence verifying the platform is really important for both the client and professional. But this can be solved by choosing or making a website that does not expose confidential information between the client and the professional.

3.2 Online psychotherapy: Progression—digitalization of psychological therapy

Face-to-face therapy has always been a conventional way to practice therapy. Still before the arrival of digitalization, physical interaction was not the only method considered to conduct therapy. In earlier days therapy was conducted through telephones and letters, but it was not the most convenient method. As in therapy, conversations took place through letters and hence the response from a client or a professional took a lot of time to reach one place and hence the results were greatly affected. Hence this was not a preferred method to practice therapy.

Slowly as the world developed and digitalization entered the world it started to evolve the working of every field of study. While it helped in making some of the work easier it has also made some of it possi-

ble. And then the internet arrived, and people started conversing through a new method—emails and it became a new method to practice therapy as well. With the help of the internet people living far from their mental health professionals were able to connect more easily, and people were not restricted to finding a good psychotherapist because of their locations anymore. In a recent research it was found that more than 14% of American adults with internet access go online to find mental health information [1].

As the world was going through a pandemic due to the spread of a deadly virus with no cure. People were stuck in their homes with several restrictions making it hard to move out. People were alone and isolated, while some were with their loved ones and some had to go through the process of losing their loved ones. Everywhere there was a chaotic situation and a wave of grief as people lost their loved ones every single day. To deal with all the emotions such as the negativity and a situation of uncertainty that everyone was going through, people addressed this overwhelmed feeling by reaching out to mental health professionals to seek help. As leaving one's house was not even an option, people took the help of various online therapy platforms. Due to this rise in the usage of online psychotherapy, a wave of awareness came through the world about mental health. Various influencers on social media platforms shared their stories of engaging in therapy and hence motivated their audience also. This also helped in breaking the stigma around mental health and its importance.

Analysing how much knowledge the population that actively uses the internet has about mental health, based on the data analysis from sample population, it was clearly seen that though presently only 10% reached out for online psychotherapy help, after realising its benefits, 100% of them want to continue the online psychotherapy sessions even after the pandemic is over. This helps us understand the impact of online therapy and that the client is highly satisfied with this practice. In a study titled *"Online therapy: Review of relevant definitions, debates, and current empirical support"* conducted by Speyer et.

al, it shows that various therapeutic relationships are experienced in the online context, and some clients prefer online counseling to face-to-face counseling [6]. Hence, we can expect a growth in the online platform's user percentage. But the number of people participating in online therapy is very low (10%) which could be due to less awareness about the importance of mental health. Also, both the stakeholders i.e. the patients and the therapist should be ready to make the most of this situation, which they were not due to lack of time to prepare. This is still a nascent stage of this mode of therapy which has all the potential to accelerate in acceptance. It will require awareness of this topic so that no one should ever hesitate from reaching out to help and access it easily. And so this number can be increased, by spreading the word through various platforms for example social media, advertisements etc. We can already see a positive result through this survey and the supporting research and hence we can start working towards breaking the taboos around mental health. The professionals should equip themselves with technological skills so that they can easily handle online therapy sessions and conduct them smoothly. But one thing that is clear is that today's youth understands the importance of mental health and also is aware of the modes to adopt to reach out for help.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix

1. Your AGE in years

15-48 years

2. Your Sex

Male, Female

3. Your Profession

Student, Private sector job, Government sector job, Self employed

4. Your EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS (please select highest Qualification)

Less than Graduation, Graduate, Post graduate, Ph.D.

5. Which DEVICE do you use MOST FREQUENTLY to access internet?

Mobile phone, Desktop, Laptop, Tablet

6. Did the Pandemic affect your mental health?
Yes, No

7. Did you lose any of your loved ones during pandemic?

Yes, No

8. Did it ever occur to you that you will require professional mental help to overcome the situation due to Pandemic?

Yes, No

9. Did you Google the mental health issues you were facing?

Yes, No, Not Applicable

10. Please GRADE the LEVEL of HELP provided by Google?

Helpful, Not Helpful, Not Applicable

11. Did you reach out to any professional Online psychotherapy platform or a mental health professional for your problems?

Yes, No

12. What was your reason to choose Online psychotherapy platform?

Offline was not available, Maintaining anonymity was easy, It was easily accessible, Cost, Not Applicable

13. If you want to add more reason/s for choosing Online psychotherapy platform, please type below

Open ended

14. Were the online sessions helpful in resolving your mental health issues?

Yes, No, Maybe, Not Applicable

15. Will you continue with Online therapy sessions even after the pandemic is over?

Yes, No, Maybe, Not Applicable

16. In case you have not used Online psychotherapy, would you consider it as a method of help for you during Pandemic, if needed?

Yes, No, Maybe, Don't Know, Not Applicable (as I used it)