BOOK REVIEW

The Use of Technology in Mental Health:
Applications, Ethics and Practice

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The Use of Technology in Mental Health: Applications, Ethics and Practice.
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As we progress into the 21st century, mental health problems ranging from depression, anxiety and stress to more serious illnesses are becoming particularly pervasive. The World Health Organisation estimates that mental health problems can touch the lives of 450 million people globally including a quarter of the population of the United Kingdom (Hanif, 2011, p. 41). Societies in both developed and developing countries are presented with the numerous challenges of mental health problems. For example, the 2011 Edelman's biannual Asia-Pacific Digital Health Index survey of different online channels revealed that in India mental illness was the most discussed subject eclipsing all other major health problems ("Mental Illness", 2011). Overall, providing affordable mental health services becomes a pertinent global issue with online therapy increasingly turning into a legitimate partner of face-to-face medicine.

The Use of Technology in Mental Health, published under the auspices of the Online Therapy Institute and the International Society for Mental Health Online, is a collection of 30 chapters written by 43 international authors who offer a holistic perspective on the essential variables involved in technology integration in the field of mental healthcare. This timely book surveys both scholarly and professional literature and uses case studies, reviews of best practices, empirical research, and field notes to: (a) define technologies currently used by mental healthcare practitioners, including particular applications and real-life case scenarios; (b) dwell on legal and ethical issues involved in the application of the Internet and mobile technologies to provide therapy, and (c) discuss the appropriate handling of technology in mental health practices and present a roadmap for

the future. These three dimensions provide an optimal organisational structure for the book.

Contributing authors refer to extensive categories of technology and associated applications to demonstrate the vast technological resources that mental healthcare practitioners could use to conduct a therapeutic relationship with their clients, facilitate client peer support, and enrich counsellor supervision and training. These technologies range from well-known Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) such as email, videoconferencing, online chat, instant messaging (IM), and Short Message Service (SMS or texting), to the more recent social media applications such as online forums, blogs, podcasts, and social networks. The role of gaming and deep immersive processes using virtual reality (VR) technologies as well as computer-aided cognitive behavioural therapy, are also considered. Overall, the book explores how the interactive nature of these technologies, despite the challenges associated with their misunderstanding and mishandling, provides innovative ways in practicing mental healthcare, and how these technologies can complement but also blur the boundaries of the traditional face-to-face practices of mental healthcare.

From the established ICTs, the authors explore the issues of practicing mental health care with email (Ch. 1), telephone (Ch. 9) and videoconferencing (Ch. 10), citing such advantages as their familiarity and accessibility. Several chapters (3 and 6) consider cell/mobile phone use both for therapy and peer support. The enhanced, or digitised forms of the newer ICTs, including online chat and instant messaging (Ch. 2), forums (Ch. 5), podcasting (Ch. 18), social networks (Ch. 4), websites, blogs and wikis (Chs. 7, 8), are considered next. It is emphasized that while most technology applications are utilized to supplement face-to-face therapies, there are specialised platforms such as Computer-Aided Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CCBT) that can be used to deliver entire therapies via a computer, tablet or phone (Ch. 13, 25). Gaming (Ch. 14) and virtual reality technologies (Chs. 12, 13, and 17) discussed

in the book demonstrate the rich potential of technology for the mental health profession as well as for peer support. Therapeutic interventions that can be performed through online virtual worlds such as Second Life and other immersive "computer-generated environments in naturalistic fashion" (p. 116) hold promise to revolutionise the delivery of mental health services in the future.

The Internet is the most thoroughly discussed technology in the book. The Internet seems to have provided an ideal platform for many technology applications conducive to distant therapeutic mental health interventions. In chapter 5, "Using Forums to Enhance Client Peer Support," Barak argues that this has happened for the reason that the Internet provided many truly unique features for communication, such as "convenience; anonymity and privacy; asynchronicity; textuality and saved history; optional use of external links, pictures, movies and sound; availability almost everywhere, anytime; relative inexpensiveness; and broad social acceptability" (p. 47). In Chapter 8, "The Role of Blogging in Mental Health," Nagel and Palumbo consider the implications of blogging and microblogging for therapies. They come to the conclusion that, "whether for professional or personal pursuits, when used responsibly, blogging can make a substantial and positive impact on the counseling profession and the world at large" (p. 83).

Other examples of Internet applications employed to provide online therapy (including self-therapy) for individual clients and groups include email, chat rooms and instant messaging, social networks, podcasts, online forums, websites and wikis. These applications are also debated as useful tools for providing peer-to-peer support (Ch. 17), as well as for disseminating best practices and enriching counselor training and supervision (Chs. 20-22, 27, 28). The authors, therefore, give importance to both client–therapist and therapist–therapist relationships and provide useful insights into how traditional and emerging applications could be used to bridge communication distance in face-to-face therapy, or provide online-only

healing. The use of technology, however, poses certain professional and ethical challenges.

Questions about the ethical dilemmas involved in ICTs currently employed to provide distance therapeutic interventions are extensively discussed in *The Use of Technology in Mental Health*. They include a vast variety of issues from technology-specific ethical problems, to generalised ethical considerations that mental health professionals encounter or have to consider when planning to use different technology applications. Specific issues such as keeping professional boundaries on social networking sites to generalised ones such as maintaining the security of information through the encryption of emails, instant messaging, videoconferencing or other applications, highlight sensitivities connected with the use of technology by practitioners. In Chapter 4, "Using Social Networks and Implications for the Mental Health Profession," Thompson, for example, discusses the dual relationship that occurs between therapist and client when social networking sites are used to establish therapeutic relationships, while in Chapter 13, "The Use of Computer-Aided Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CCBT) in Therapeutic Settings," Cavanagh evaluates the risks involved when using a computer program to deliver a significant portion of therapy. These and other ethical challenges demonstrate that some types of technologies and applications can only be used to complement face-to-face therapy, or only certain types of therapies, and the book scrutinises which applications and methods are appropriate for which therapies.

For instance, would it be appropriate for a client who has a typing problem to use instant messaging in therapy, or can a client with Asperger's syndrome use email or text messaging effectively when meaning could be lost through the communication? Concerning information confidentiality and privacy, not all social media types provide the necessary level of encryption, and the book addresses these issues. In Second Life's virtual environment, for example, encrypting data to retain total anonymity would be a challenge. Therapists using texting are encouraged to frequently delete messages or reformat disk drives to safeguard their clients. Whilst the ethical issues can create certain barriers impeding the adoption of technology by practitioners, the distant or "virtual" nature of ICTs is emphasized as being therapeutically advantageous to clients in the context of the disinhibition effect.

Many authors explore the concepts of disembodied identities experienced by clients through technology. Spontaneity, anonymity, and the extension of the "real" into the "virtual" selves during the disinhibition process are discussed; there is a general sentiment that clients are less inhibited in technology-mediated environments, and therefore are more spontaneous in how they interact with the therapist or with each other in group therapy situations. Disembodiment in the context of anonymity in the virtual world is explored in the book in two forms, namely, anonymity that enhances therapy for the client, and anonymity associated with the assumed identities of both client and practitioner. Several chapters in the book cite clients' loss of inhibition as advantageous to therapy as it increases spontaneity, whether in an offline-to-online relationship or in online-only interventions.

However, concerned with the possible negative effects of assumed online identities, researchers analyse several possible scenarios including an example of domestic violence where an offender may be posing online as the victim, and how this places both the victim and the therapist in a dangerous situation. Also, it is possible that an online "therapist" offering help could be an impostor. The book warns of a mindless technology celebration and critically addresses its possible negative aspects. For example, it is stated that the disinhibition effect does not necessarily improve a therapeutic intervention. Also, anonymity in an online peer-to-peer group on a forum may not have the same positive effect as instant messaging in a one-to-one online therapy session. While the former could promote bullying and antisocial behaviour thereby worsening therapeutic outcomes, the latter could enhance the psychological process of an individual's feeling of spontaneity.

The three dimensions of technologies—applications, ethics and practice—are rounded up by discussing the debates surrounding the use of technology to provide therapy or establish therapeutic relationships, as well as revealing the widespread stereotypes associated with mental healthcare. Online therapy may be beneficial for clients, especially those from the younger generation who may have problems with engaging in face-to-face therapy. A certain degree of distance introduced by technologies can alleviate some of the client's anxieties and contribute towards a successful treatment. Furthermore, the ubiquitous nature of the Internet makes it possible for therapeutic relationships to be established across distance and geographical boundaries, thus making treatment more accessible.

However, it must be noted that the book emphasises how technologies can be used to complement the traditional delivery of mental health services such as consultations, psychiatric diagnostics, and individual psychotherapy in an age where technologies seem embedded in the routines of daily life. As it often happens in human history, advances in technology can create illusions of its omnipotence, while it is merely a tool in humanity's hands. The authors Matthews and Coyle (Ch. 14) summarise this point, stating that "technology-based interventions do not generally seek to replace existing methods. Rather they seek to offer new complementary options" (p. 135). While a mild criticism of the book can be addressed to the authors' sometimes too deep technical description of the technologies and applications used for therapeutic intervention, this book appeals to the reader in many ways.

As a resource, *The Use of Technology in Mental Health* would be useful for a wide range of mental healthcare professionals including physicians, nurses, counselors, psychotherapists, life coaches, and social workers, as well as those already incorporating technologies or considering the idea; the book summarises the pros and cons associated with each technology in-practice, and brings into focus how different applications are better suited to different clients and therapies. It can be also recommended for students as a helpful learning material since as future therapists they may have to employ technology to provide effective therapeutic interventions. Finally, the book will be a useful compendium for policy developers and service managers who can influence the adoption of technologies, as well as for potential users of mental health services. In the editors' own words, the book "is a testament to the profession that we are now accepting these technologies as the way forward rather than the avoidant attitudes that were apparent just ten years ago" (p. xviii).

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