Will Patients Accept Daily SMS as a Communication to Support Adherence to Mental Health Treatment?

**Daily SMS: Acceptance, Feasibility, & Satisfaction**

Bonnie A Clough, Griffith University, Queensland, Australia
Leanne M Casey, Griffith University, Queensland, Australia

**ABSTRACT**

The aim of this article was to investigate the acceptability and feasibility of a daily Short Message Service (SMS) communication system to support patients attending weekly psychotherapy. The patients (N = 32) received daily SMS messages for the duration of a group therapy treatment program. Measures relating to engagement, treatment satisfaction, acceptability of the intervention and treatment outcome were administered. The patient satisfaction and acceptability were high, with patients reporting positive attitudes towards the SMS messages, particularly with regards to increased motivation and perceptions of support. Symptom reduction over the course of treatment was consistent with expectations for transdiagnostic group psychotherapy. The current study indicates that SMS is a well-received form of communication that can be used to support engagement in psychotherapy treatment programs. Future research should focus on exploring the range of adjunctive technologies that may be used to support face-to-face therapies.

**KEYWORDS**

Acceptability, E-Mental Health, Feasibility, Short Message Service, SMS

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Psychological interventions are efficacious for the treatment of a range of mental and physical health conditions (e.g., Hoffman, Papas, Chatkoff, & Kerns, 2007; Kahana, Drotar, & Frazier, 2008; Lipsey & Wilson, 1993). However, there remains a high level of unmet need for psychological services, with most individuals in need of mental health services failing to receive treatment (Kazdin, 2017; Clough, B. A., Zarean, M., Ruane, I., Mateo, N. J., Aliyeva, T. A., & Casey, L. M.). Technological adjuncts to psychological interventions may provide greater outreach and increased cost-efficiency of current services (Barnett & Scheetz, 2003; Clough & Casey, 2011b, 2015). Short Messaging Service (SMS) may have an important role to play in enhancing patient adherence to treatment tasks and recommendations. These messages have been helpful in prompting attendance in physical health settings (Guy et al., 2012), however, appointments in these settings are usually infrequent. Mental health appointments are typically associated with greater frequency and different demand and task characteristics. As such, it remains unknown as to whether patients will accept this technology on a frequent basis during psychotherapy. The study examined patients’ responses to an adherence related SMS communication delivered on a daily basis during a psychotherapy program.

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1.1. Adherence

Patient adherence in psychotherapy refers to the extent to which patients’ behaviours align with the advice given by the therapist or healthcare professional (Nose, Barbui, Gray, & Tansella, 2003). Despite the benefits associated with patient adherence to homework tasks, non-adherence is common. Whilst adherence to clinical medications has been estimated at approximately 50%, adherence with behavioural change programs is often even lower (Haynes, McDonald, & Garg, 2002). Poor patient adherence can result in increased costs associated with treatments, poor use of resources, and reduced treatment efficacy (Chen, 1991; Casey, L., & Clough, B., 2016). Use of adjunctive technologies in therapy has considerable potential to improve patient adherence (Clough & Casey, 2011c).

1.2. SMS Interventions

To date, SMS technology has primarily been researched in the periods before and after therapy. Several studies have demonstrated that text messages may be effective in increasing patient readiness to change and facilitating help seeking behaviours among participants not already engaged in treatment programs (Joyce & Weibelzahl, 2011; Mason, Benotsch, Way, Kim, & Snipes, 2014). However, there have been mixed findings with regards to the use of SMS appointment reminders in psychotherapy clinics. Whilst some studies have found positive effects associated with these interventions (Branson, Clemmy, & Mukherjee, 2013; Sims et al., 2012), Clough and Casey (2014) found no beneficial effects associated with the messages and that patient dropout was in fact higher in the SMS condition. Similarly, Delgadillo, Moreea, Murphy, Ali & Swift (2015) found that SMS appointment reminders failed to influence therapy attendance or completion rates.

Text messaging has been used to target patient engagement and adherence following discharge from inpatient programs (e.g., Bauer, Okon, Meermann, & Kordy, 2012). However, the only study that has investigated SMS during treatment is that reported by Lauersen (2010). A series of retrospective qualitative interviews with young people engaging in programs for cannabis use, indicated that regular text messages were generally well received and that the messages prompted reflection and awareness. This study did not however contain a quantitative analysis of satisfaction or feasibility. The acceptability and feasibility of SMS as an adjunct during a treatment program has yet to be investigated.

Daily use of SMS has not previously been tested within the treatment of adult anxiety and depression. As such, we felt it important to examine the feasibility and acceptability of using this form of communication. Acceptability refers to whether an individual perceives an intervention as being appropriate, fair, and reasonable for a given problem (Elliott, Witt, Galvin, & Peterson, 1984). Feasibility is a broader concept, and concerns whether an intervention can be successfully implemented with consideration to acceptability, intervention outcomes, participant engagement and retention, and practicality of the intervention (Kazak et al., 2005).

In order for SMSs to be successfully implemented as an adjunct to psychotherapy, its use should be associated with high patient acceptability, satisfaction, and feasibility. Consistent with the previous definition of feasibility, the feasibility construct investigated were patient acceptance of the intervention, treatment effects (an expected reduction in symptoms from pre-to-post intervention time points), patient engagement and retention, and practicality of the intervention. In addition, therapeutic process factors such as group cohesiveness, conflict, and working alliance were also examined. A common therapist concern regarding the use of technology in psychotherapy relates to the potential for such technologies to interfere with therapeutic process (Rees & Stone, 2005; Rochlen, Zack, & Speyer, 2004). As such, the inclusion of process measures was deemed an important component of feasibility testing for the current study. Therefore, the primary aim of the current study was to assess the acceptability of SMS communication as part of a group therapy program. A secondary aim was to examine treatment effects, retention, and overall program satisfaction for the group therapy program that included SMS messages.
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