

The pros and cons of online therapy - An Introduction

By: Christopher Guardino, LMHC

Recently I was asked to write an article on the emerging field of online therapy. Having been in a traditional face to face private practice for over ten years and having recently branched out into online therapy I realized a key was to be objective. Obviously my own personal investment in online therapy would naturally leave me partial but I did and still do recognize and admire traditional modalities. With that being said, I wanted to cover the basics of both online and traditional therapy.

Traditional therapy allows an intimacy and interaction level far beyond what is available online. There is no substitute for face to face contact in certain areas of interpersonal rapport building. Currently accepted treatment models of traditional talk therapy have mountains of empirical evidence backing it's efficacy in the treatment of anxiety and mood disorders. Therapy in person works. We have proven this. Furthermore, when combined with medication and regular monitoring of medication we have found the greatest success rate in treatment. Obviously by being universally accepted as effective traditional therapy is reimbursable and accepted by all insurance companies.

Traditional therapy is not without its downside. The mechanics of the traditional therapist client relationship can and are often difficult to manage in modern society. For example, scheduling and travel may be difficult. Therapists are limited by restricted availability. People have extreme demands from work and family and even the commute can be difficult. This often effects compliance and we see clients drop out of treatment. Office situations can at times be awkward and unnecessary. Clients feel uncomfortable waiting in a room sometimes or worry they may have their privacy somehow violated. Sometimes clients simply feel uncomfortable in a different surrounding. The two main drawback are obvious. In person therapy is not always geographically available. In person therapy is very expensive.

As an emerging modality online treatment is defining it's identity. There are a number of practical downsides. First and foremost being the reliance on Internet connection and technology. I personally conduct sessions on Skype and at times have had issues with lag or disconnects which can disrupt the flow of a session. There is also the lack of personal contact. In addition, not much research has been done yet to really validate online treatments effectiveness. When we were researching this article we came across more 'pro' online therapy research than 'con'. However, there is simply not enough research available to make a more definitive conclusion regarding the modalities efficacy.

There are many positives to this treatment. First and foremost it is cheaper by far than traditional therapy. Insurance companies are reimbursing me for services and soon enough all providers will be on board. Secondly, it is simply much more convenient. The client is able to find a comfortable private setting where he or she can not feel the stress of the office setting or the stereotype of laying on the couch. Often I find my clients also relieve issues such as baby sitting by being able to meet at times and places that work for them. Schedule flexibility is also a big advantage. Working from an online hub allows

therapists to work non-traditional hours. This is often a great benefit for accommodating big families or busy professionals. Finally, the reality is that mental health services are often not geographically available in many areas of the United States. As a resident of Maine I know people often have to travel quite far to see a clinician and their choices are limited. Online treatment instantly solves that problem.

So I guess the bottom line is "Should a new client try online therapy?". My answer is unequivocally 'yes' for a very simple set of reasons. Online is an easy way to 'start' and 'stop' therapy. It can be the perfect tool to get your foot in the door and test the waters of the therapy thing. It can allow you to have a professional give a quick assessment from the comfort of your home. It is excellent in conjunction with traditional therapy. It is affordable and accessible. Basically, there is nothing at all to lose and much to gain by giving it a try.

Christopher Guardino is a licensed mental health counselor since 2004. Chris worked at FFF since 1994 in various advocacy capacities. Presently he lives in Maine providing his services through e-therapy and pursuing his love of snowboarding and outdoor activities. If you have any questions or comments for Christopher you can contact him at treatmentmadesimple.com