



As we've all experienced, many transactions and interactions have migrated online. Increasingly, the so-called analog world finds itself nudged out by the virtual one, and mental health services are no exception.

Psychotherapy, long considered entirely a person-to-person process, faces inroads from interactive online programs and apps that replicate some of its core methods. For example, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is among the most widely used and researched treatment approaches, one that tinkers with a person's negative self-talk in an effort to positively modify emotional responses, attitudes and actions. Over the past several years, several organizations began offering something called "cCBT," meaning a computerized version wherein one interacts with an artificially intelligent (AI) algorithm rather than a therapist.

Does it work? The jury is still out, but initial research suggests there may be benefits. And, its proponents argue, given the challenges of accessing mental health services, particularly in rural and underserved urban areas, not to mention the costs, cCBT offers a viable alternative. Detractors point out that, regardless of the type of psychotherapy one utilizes, research proves the therapeutic relationship is the key variable in the healing/helping process. Absent empathy from and rapport with the therapist, clients rarely improve, regardless of how technically skilled the practitioner in question.

So, can we feel empathy from and rapport with an algorithm? Oddly enough, under certain circumstances, it appears at least some of us can, particularly younger adults and adolescents who readily embrace digital technology. We know people tend to assign human qualities and attributes to electronic entities, such as humanoid and pet robots, game avatars, and certain AI devices, such as Siri and Alexa. The more cCBT providers humanize their offerings (using images and voices instead of exclusively text, for instance), the greater this tendency.

Many psychotherapists have already migrated into a middle ground between person-to-person and digital formats, offering telephonic and video-based

counseling. Studies here indicate similar outcomes as with actual office visits. As video conferencing technology improves, an increasing number of clients consider it a viable alternative, in part because of the convenience and presumed anonymity it affords. In the not distant future, counselors and clients may be able to project themselves holographically into one or the other's physical location, further enhancing this platform.

In addition to formal psychotherapy, an increasing number of mobile apps offer elements of treatment, particularly in the CBT space. Most of these focus on one particular area for intervention. For example, an app called "Thought Challenger" (part of the IntelliCare Hub collection) employs CBT-based algorithms to help users challenge self-defeating thoughts, much as a therapist would. Most of these apps provide electronic reminders to help users remain engaged. However, research shows e-reminders are often less effective in the long run than old-fashioned hand written notes, not to mention the personal sense of accountability accompanying a person-to-person relationship with a therapist.

Regardless, the brave new digital world is here to stay, and, absent a coronal mass ejection (CME) that knocks us back to the 18th century by frying the power grid, it will likely inhabit the world of mental health services more and more.

Your e-device may not look like the proverbial psychotherapist's couch, but, increasingly, it will function as one.