

Best Practices in Online Counselling for Youth



While using technology to help youth struggling with mental health challenges shows promise, changing technology and the volume of available technologies can be challenging for service providers.

WHY THIS MATTERS

93% of young adults 18-29 are active online. Identifying best practices for developing online programs to help youth is important as these programs increase the availability of mental health services for youth who might not otherwise be able to access help.

KEY POINTS

- ❑ The Mental Health Commission of Canada defines *e-mental health* as “mental health services and information delivered or enhanced through the Internet and related technologies”.
- ❑ Online mental health services include Internet-based prevention, Internet-based treatment, videoconferencing and smartphone apps.
- ❑ 58.9% of youth still prefer face-to-face services.
- ❑ The most popular technologies for youth mental health are internet applications and videoconferencing.
- ❑ Young men are more likely to choose online support compared with young women.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

- ❑ General advantages of technology-based services include increased mental health literacy, greater disclosure, ease of access, 24-hour availability, reduced costs, interactivity and a sense of independence.
- ❑ Challenges include lack of human contact and nonverbal signals, difficulty verifying therapist’s identity and credentials, making services engaging, encouraging program completion, and sustaining improvements.
- ❑ Mental health promotion initiatives can significantly increase mental health literacy, help-seeking, and mental wellbeing.
- ❑ Internet-based prevention initiatives are useful for reducing symptoms in youth at risk for depression and anxiety disorders.
- ❑ Internet prevention provides access to resources, increases privacy and anonymity, reduces costs, and is more widely accessible.

The potential for reaching youth online to prevent and treat mental health problems is enormous... however, it is difficult for research to keep up with changing technology, making it challenging to design programs to support youth mental health.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

- ❑ Web-based treatment results in active participation and compliance as well as a strong therapeutic alliance, and can be as helpful as in-person counselling for anxiety and depression.
- ❑ Internet based treatment is advantageous because of its privacy, as well as overcoming constraints based on geography, timing, and cost.
- ❑ A specific advantage of email counselling is the opportunity for both clients and clinicians to take time to consider their statements before sending them.
- ❑ Mobile app interventions showed similar promise to interventions delivered through computers, and were at least as effective as face-to-face treatment for reducing depression, anxiety and hopelessness.

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WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

- ❑ Privacy and anonymity are probably the most attractive features for youth seeking help online.
- ❑ Making services interactive, receiving feedback from moderators, and being able to see evidence of other service users are all features that increase youths' motivation to use online services.
- ❑ Features that make internet interventions relevant for young men include interactivity, graphical feedback, active engagement, tailoring to their needs, and fostering control and ownership.
- ❑ A motivational interviewing component and inclusion of innovative content may result in greater completion rates.
- ❑ Research highlights the need for a greater focus on relapse-prevention.
- ❑ Most successful programs include support from a professional therapist, email or chat components, interaction with other participants, videos, and incorporating cultural factors.

Visiting online forums, in particular, can help youth to meet others who are struggling, give them the opportunity to present themselves in a positive way and give them an important role in a group.