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# IS IT TIME FOR A TELECOUNSELLING REVOLUTION IN SOUTH AFRICA? EXPLORING THE VIEWS OF CLIENTS AND MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS IN THE SADAG ONLINE COMMUNITY

## ***Joining the telehealth-telecounselling debate***

The use of technology in the remote diagnosis and treatment of patients has been defined as the 'telemedicine' revolution. For the first time, technology was used to connect doctors and patients, in real time, across vast distances. The next revolution was seen in a conceptual sense when there was a shift from

'telemedicine' to 'telehealth'. The advent of 'telehealth' marked clear defined change in the way that health care was defined and practiced. The practice of medicine was no longer seen in strict physiological terms. Telehealth implies an understanding that healing involves many activities including diagnosis, treatment, prevention and health education, and that

these can take place using technology, in the form of phones, computers, tablets and the like.

Prior to the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, numerous scholars and commentators referred to the digital revolution and its potential impacts on remote, technologically mediated counselling, or 'telecounselling'. For many, telecounselling held the exciting potential of creating

greater equality in terms of access to excellent mental health care, most especially in resource-constrained African health care contexts. However, this optimism was balanced by a dose of scepticism, where concerns about privacy, informed consent, access to technology and technological acumen abounded. Public perception was also listed as a potential barrier to the mainstream adoption of telehealth care practices.

### ***Necessity as the mother of the telecounselling revolution?***

Global and national interest in telehealth was reinvigorated by the lockdowns and social distancing campaigns brought into play during the time of Covid-19. Numerous studies have documented the immense impact that the virus has had on mental health and well-being across the globe. In South Africa, a recent SADAG survey discovered that depression and anxiety reached record highs during the early days of the lockdown, and with 59% of survey participants previously

[Telecounselling] is much more convenient than conventional counselling, less paperwork and formalities. It does feel a bit more informal because you're not in an unfamiliar, cold space. This helps you to relax and express yourself more easily. Also, for people who struggle with anxiety, it's easier to talk and listen attentively because the counsellors eyes are not constantly fixed on you. This allows you to relax and not obsess about their responses, body language, note taking or just the weird stares. Overall, it is much better. Also, it's easier to cancel or reschedule appointments very close to the appointment – Bonisiwe, client\*  
\*pseudonym

diagnosed with a mental health condition, the pandemic exacerbated an existing crisis. Just days after the nationwide lockdown was announced, the HPCSA issued new regulations

that had special implications for telecounselling. Not only was telecounselling permitted during lockdown, but South African mental health professionals were given permission to consult remotely with new clients. This right was not granted to medical doctors, who were only allowed to engage in teleconsultations with their existing patients. In this way, a rather unique tele-health tele-counselling opportunity was created for mental health practitioners by the HPCSA, with the disruptive effects of Covid-19 having some implications for the ongoing telehealth debate in the South African context.

### ***Towards the telecounselling revolution? Lessons from a survey of telecounselling clients and mental health professionals during lockdown***

While telehealth is not a new development in South Africa, the events of March 2020 created a set of circumstances that could possibly lead to a telecounselling revolution. Did this revolution materialise? A survey of 200 clients and 109 professionals in the SADAG community takes us closer to an answer. While these survey sample sizes are in no way numerically or proportionally representative of the South African population, the lived experiences of both groups add much value to exploratory research of this kind. By pointing us in the right direction, we can learn about what some telecounselling stakeholders experience, feel and think, allowing for some guided speculation on current and future trends.

#### ***Increasing numbers of telecounselling clients***

Before the lockdown, 27% of clients surveyed had experienced some form of remote counselling, using phones or online means. This number increased quite dramatically to 64% during the lockdown, indicating an increase in telecounselling engagement of 37%. Professionals reported a 47% increase in the number of telecounselling clients due to the lockdown, and this higher number was anticipated due

to the broader experience of practitioners.

#### ***Client preferences***

These increases do seem rather revolutionary, but was this growth out of necessity, preference or both? A quarter of clients (25%) surveyed expressed a clear preference for telecounselling, and this preference was based on the belief that *trust* could be forged between therapist and client during remote consultations. Pro-telecounselling clients also felt that remote counselling could be *as effective* as conventional in-person therapy sessions as they felt the telecounsellors had *understood* their problems; assisted in *problem-solving*; and helped clients to *feel better* during remote consultations that lasted a sufficient amount of *time*.

Moreover, telecounselling was also preferred by those that found it to be *cheaper* and *easier* to access remote mental health support; whilst offering *greater privacy* as the client did not need to visit a consultation room or office. Even when pro-telecounselling clients had to pay for remote sessions from personal funds, their preference for remote counselling did not wane.

It is interesting to note that 58% of all clients sampled felt that despite a preference for

It was very difficult to get a feel for telecounselling .... I have a lot of anxiety-related issues so they need to see the non-verbal cues as much as what I say. I ended up having to go in-patient as it wasn't helping me much. Now all of my medical aid funding is finished and I don't know how to continue my much-needed therapy at this point which has just caused my anxiety to get bad again while still trying to do my job as a Frontline essential worker – Carol, client\*  
\*pseudonym

face-to-face counselling, they would support telecounselling as remote mental health care was

**This way of working is more effort (and not less) and I think reimbursement should at least stay the same, if not increase (to compensate for additional time spent on admin, data costs, screen time fatigue, etc.)**  
- Psychiatrist

defined as *better than no support*. Approximately 8% of the client sample were strongly opposed to telecounselling, while a further 41% expressed a preference for face-to-face counselling but were more willing to embrace remote counselling under emergency conditions. For those clients that did not have a *quiet space* to remotely engage from, or those who relied on *non-verbal cues* to communicate effectively, telecounselling was not a viable option.

*Telecounselling from the professionals' perspective*  
The professional's survey reported that approximately 9 in 10 clients were successfully treated via teleconsultations. Formal consent processes were handled smoothly via remote means across 90% of the sample, with Zoom and WhatsApp proving the most utilised platforms. Only 69% of telecounsellors were paid in full by client medical aids, but this was often mitigated by many clients who paid in advance, using personal funds and by 87% of professionals who offered *pro bono* remote mental health care consultations.

Perhaps the greatest challenge faced by professionals pertained to the inability to maintain *adequate work/life separation* whilst telecounselling during lockdown. Hidden administrative duties piled up, with less experienced and aligned mental health professionals struggling the most. Added to this, the absence of non-verbal cues negatively impacted assessments carried out by over half of the practitioners surveyed.

While 58% complained of the hampering effects of poor internet connectivity, 41% maintained that they could reach more clients than

before. However, the ability to reach clients was only one part of the picture. Successful treatment often depended upon the location of clients, with professionals ranking urban clients as more likely to receive successful treatment outcomes than peri-urban and rural-based patient groupings. The converse applied when it came to internet connectivity, with rural clients forming the bulk of those that experienced hampered interactions due to unstable connections. *Structural constraints* such as these have every chance of hampering limiting a telecounselling revolution.

**Life did not have to stop, and people's lives did not have to completely fall apart. It was a relief to me that I could still assist in an ethical and fairly successful manner with therapy. I had to see clients face-to-face for assessments but we waited until it was safe to do so. I found mutual respect and openness worked from all side[s]. Life has changed and so the way we do therapy and psychology has had to adjust. –**  
Educational psychologist

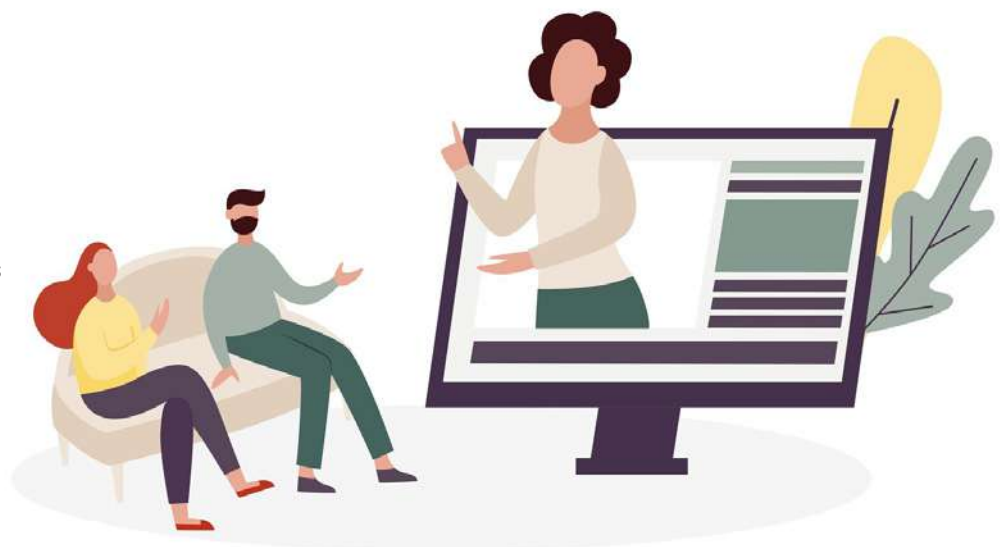
### **Time to continue the telecounselling 'revolution' after lockdown?**

The 'new normal' contains important lessons for telehealth in general, and telecounselling

in particular. Over half of clients (52%) who had engaged in some form telecounselling would like to continue with remote mental health support practices post-lockdown. Those currently battling Depression are the most keen to continue telecounselling by phone or computer. This has significance for this particular survey sample as 7 in 10 clients reported this mood disorder. The number of professionals who indicated a preference for continued remote counselling was even higher, at 87%, with one practitioner hopeful that: 'Telehealth is here to stay'.

However, there cannot be a true technologically-mediated telehealth and telecounselling revolution in South Africa until all citizens have more equal access to digital life. Additional challenges such as language barriers and cultural competency of mental health care specialists cannot be addressed by technological advances alone. Technology is a revolutionary enabler at best, not a cure for entrenched socio-economic inequality. The Covid-19 pandemic has created an opportunity for a telecounselling revolution, and the increase in telecounselling client numbers indicate that the revolution has occurred in some way, due to necessity. Perhaps the revolution has begun out of necessity, but it might soon become a stronger movement towards remote mental health care out of preference, if accompanied by the necessary structural changes. **MHM**

**References available upon request**



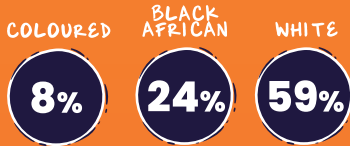
# IS IT TIME FOR A TELECOUNSELLING REVOLUTION IN SOUTH AFRICA?

SADAG INSIGHTS FROM A SURVEY OF PATIENTS AND MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS.

## PATIENTS SURVEY

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS: 200

### RACE:



### MOST POPULAR METHODS USED TO CONTACT A TELECOUNSELLOR



### BIOLOGICAL SEX:



### ATTITUDES TOWARDS TELECOUNSELLING:

68%

Would make use of telecounselling when facing future MH challenges

81%

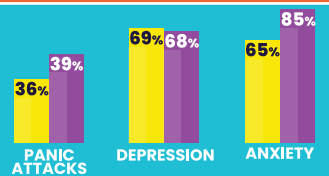
think that telecounselling allows patients to access help before in-person appointments are available

### MAJOR BENEFITS:



## CROSS-CUTTING FINDINGS ACROSS PATIENTS & PROFESSIONALS

### MOST REPORTED MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGERS DURING LOCKDOWN:



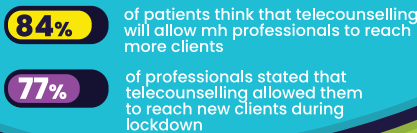
### INCREASE IN TELECOUNSELLING DUE TO LOCKDOWN:



### TELECOUNSELLING AFTER LOCKDOWN:



### THE EFFICACY OF TELECOUNSELLING IS JUST AS SUCCESSFUL AS CONVENTIONAL COUNSELING:



### MAJOR CHALLENGES:



### RACE:



### BIOLOGICAL SEX:



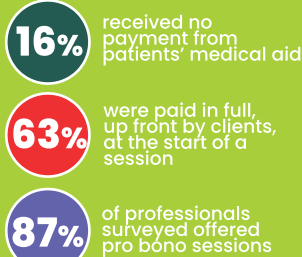
### MOST POPULAR METHODS USED TO CONTACT A TELECOUNSELLOR:



### MAJOR BENEFITS:



### PAYMENT FOR TELECOUNSELLING:



### ATTITUDES TOWARDS TELECOUNSELLING:

42%

believed that clients made use of telecounselling as an emergency measure during lockdown

## PROFESSIONALS SURVEY

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS: 109

