Motives to Use Virtual Psychological Counseling

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Human behavior is purposeful and directed towards some goal. It is motivated, i.e. it has a driving force and this is the need.

In the case of telepsychology what are the leading motives of people that are looking for virtual support?

According to publications the possibility of establishing contact with psychologist at any time, from anywhere, the anonymity and the possibility of sharing problems, thoughts, worries as well as receiving quick answers and support are the main characteristics that attract clients. Are the sharing and timely answers the main motives to use virtual psychology consultations? The paper tries to answer this question.

As a part of more broad study the motives driving people to seek telepsychology are examined. Results based on answers of 54 subjects are presented. Age, gender, education turned out to be factors influencing motivation to use virtual psychology counseling.

Introduction

This paper deals with the combination of two, at first glance, rather different topics – telepsychology and motivation.

The first topic is telepsychology. Telepsychology is defined as a provision of psychological services in a technology-assisted environment, including telephone, Internet media (written, voice and digital pictures) and video conferencing [1-3]. The terms tele-, virtual, Internet or e-psychology are often used as synonyms.

The essence of telepsychology is a detailed sharing of information between a psychologist and a client aiming at creating a basic therapeutic alliance. The difference from face-to-face psychology consultations is that the contacts expert – client are performed in the virtual space. The communication channels for a contact with licensed psychologist are different. E-mails are preferred as main communication source. Both Skype program and video programs also gained strength. Some clients are keener in applying Skype and Chat programs as the latter gives possibility to more direct and vivid, even online interaction [4].

Telepsychology consists of short interventions and is used when face-to-face contact with licensed psychologist is impossible due to lack of transport, long distance, extreme situations, etc. Sessions are structured in a similar way as they are structured during face-to-face meetings. The information related to each session is saved and followed up, thus continuity of care is guaranteed.

Virtual consultations are alternative and valuable, especially for people who cannot afford private consulting, or for those who are afraid to speak about their difficulties face to face to a consultant. Telepsychology is also beneficial for those who want quick answers. To put it briefly, thanks to the development of new information and communication technologies this service is available and is an option for a rapid psychological counseling. At the same time telepsychology expands the group of potential users of psychological help [4-6].

An issue that is of special interest in relation to studying virtual psychological counseling is what motives drive clients to look for a telepsychology support. ***This is the second topic in the paper – motivation***.

Motivation is what initiates and drives our behavior. It is the internal energy that propels us to achieve our goals [7]. Motivation can be defined as "intensity at a task". The greater the motivation, the more persistent and intense is the performance of a certain task. Motivation directly involves choices people make regarding what they will or will not do and how intense an effort they will put forth because motives are major regulators of human behavior. They are the foundation of any behavioral act and more prolonged actions, whether they are pre-planned or not. It is essential also that the individual human activity may be driven by one motive or under the influence of a group of motives.

Motivation is based on the finding and fulfilling of unmet needs and wants.

In 1943 A. Maslow proposed a "hierarchy of motivation" that demonstrates the human needs we are most motivated to satisfy. The base of the motivational order begins with the fundamentals of life. These fundamental, life-sustaining needs must be met before the higher needs can be targeted. When lower needs are not met, the higher needs become less urgent or persuaded [8]. From top down the basic motivations are:

- Self-actualization needs: realizing one's own talents, gifts and potential
- Ego needs: respect, status and recognition
- Social needs: affection, companionship and inclusion
- Safety needs: protection from physical harm, health
- Physiological needs: food, sleep and safety.

Physiological and mental health are part of the safety need and a rather basic and our willingness to satisfy them is strong.

An important aspect of motivation is self-motivation. It is intrinsic in nature, and originates from an individual's internal drives. It is the basis for overcoming obstacles in the path of achieving one's goals. Since, in many cases the individual cannot rely on others for motivation, self-motivation has to come from within. It plays a key role wherein the individual gathers the courage and strength to achieve certain goals, and

is essential for developing new undertakings or making a positive change in one's lifestyle [7].

In sum – self-motivation leads us to satisfy one of our basic needs – the "safety need" and especially the need of health and solving personal health problems. Lots of studies reveal the effect of motivation on healthcare decisions as a whole and [9-10] and psychological health in particular [11]. Especially for measuring health motivation a Health Self-Determinism Index was developed by Cox in 1985 [12].

No such index exists to explore motives connected to controlling and solving problems with psychological health. There are no empirical studies focused on what are the motives driving people to look for virtual psychology support. There are lots of speculations what force people to look for telepsychology help. According to experts [3-5, 13-16] most popular reasons are:

- The possibility to receive quick answers,
- The freedom to plan the contacts
- The chance to share problems, worries, thoughts, feelings safely
- The chance to avoid travelling
- The possibility to avoid embarrassment to speak about her/his problems face-to-face with psychologist and
- The financial attraction of lower costs services.

Are these the real, core motives to approach telepsychology consultations?

Tele-psychology is very attractive and necessary and clients are actively looking for it. It is an excellent tool, offering psychological help to those who need it, no matter where they are and at what time of the day or night this happens. As the service is relatively new the motives to turn to telepsychology are not known. We were not able to find any publications concerning motives of using e-psychological counseling.

The paper presents first results of a study dedicated to enlightening motives for using virtual psychological support.

Material and Method

As a part of project OHN 1514/2005 funded by National Science Fund, Bulgaria and Bulgarian Academy of Sciences a survey, assessing motives towards virtual psychology consultations, is ongoing.

The objective was to reveal the core motives that make people look for psychological help via Internet. A specially designed questionnaire was applied. Subjects participate anonymously, voluntarily and have the right to withdraw.

Based on the literature data the following motives are studied:

- *Sharing* (mental), i.e. virtual communication is a good opportunity to share thoughts and feelings with a psychologist;
- *Timely,* i.e. clients could receive psychological help at any time when needed no matter where they are and at what time of the day or night this happens;
- *Feel free,* i.e. psychological consultation via Internet allows client to feel free – no inhabitations, no conventions;
- *Avoiding embarrassment* - online psychological counseling is preferable to face-to-face consultations with a psychologist as it helps to avoid embarrassment;
- *Communication tool* (*Internet is a communication tool*), i.e. Internet is a preferable means to communicate and form

relationships with the social environment, including the use of different health consultations.

This paper presents first results, based on 54 subjects, aged 18->55 yrs old, divided in 4 age groups.

Results and Discussion

The distribution of motives for the whole sample (fig. 1) indicates that two are the leading motives to approach virtual psychological support. At first place is the fact that Internet is subjects' *communication tool* and on the second – virtual communication make them *feel free*.

The remaining 3 motives – s*haring*, *timely* and *avoiding embarrassment* are at one and the same level.

There is s clear tendency for gender differences in the driving motives (fig. 2). As a whole women are more
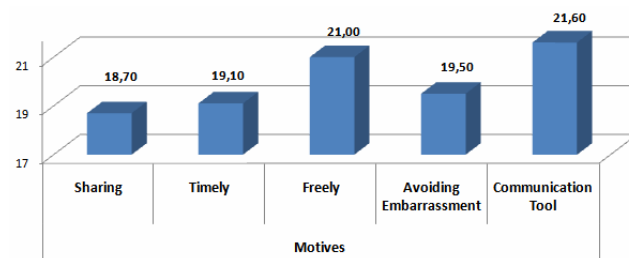

Fig.1 Distribution of motives for the whole sample (%)

motivated to use telepsychology. They score higher on all motives. The two leading motives *feel free* and *communication tool* have equal scores for women, while for men the *communication tool* motive is the strongest one.

One of our tasks is to examine whether there are age differences in the motives to approach internet psychology
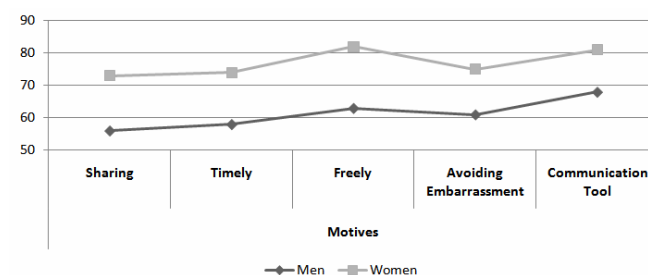

Fig. 2 Gender differences in distribution of motives

support. Unfortunately, as the study is still going on, the 5 age groups that are planned to be tested are not big enough to compare the results of all of them. A comparison of only two age groups – 18-30 and 41-55 yrs old is presented (fig. 3). In general:

1. The results reveal that younger subjects are more motivated to use virtual psychology support. One of possible explanations is that there are generations grown up with computers and Internet. For many young people today the family was not the classical family with mom, dad and children. It was the family consisting of mom, dad, children, computer and Internet. Young people are accustomed to using Internet in their everyday activity, in their work or studies, in their communication, in organizing dating, etc. During these activities they use to look for information in WWW. Thus from one hand virtual space is part of their life and as such they are looking

to shape all their contacts within this well-known frame. From the other, for them maybe it is easier to find websites for telepsychology support then to look for psychologists and their offices in their settlements. That's why, compared to the older age group, they will use Internet more, as tool to receive health advises, support or help. Let's not forget one more phenomenon – the increase of the 3C clients. This is a constantly increasing group of people, predominantly young that are characterized with college education (first C), very familiar with computers (second C) and are ready to pay cash (third C) in order to receive what they needed quickly.

Having in mind these, it is not surprisingly that the

2. The biggest age difference is for the motive Internet as a *communication tool* and authors believe that as number of subjects in the groups increased, it will reach statistical significance.

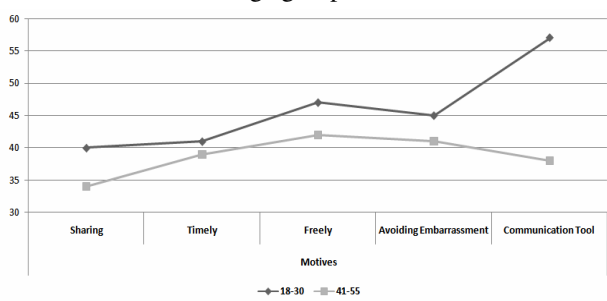3. The remaining 4 motives do not differ significantly between the two age groups.

Fig. 3 Age differences in distribution of motives (%)

Figure 4 illustrates the different patterns of motivation of people using Internet every day or more rarely, i.e. 2-3 times a week. While everyday Internet users are mainly motivated by communication possibilities of Internet, those that more rarely use Internet evaluate most highly the feeling of freedom and avoiding embarrassment. The results are interesting, worth further investigation and raise questions: Are those results due to the fact that subjects that use Internet rarely overestimate the feeling of freedom that Internet
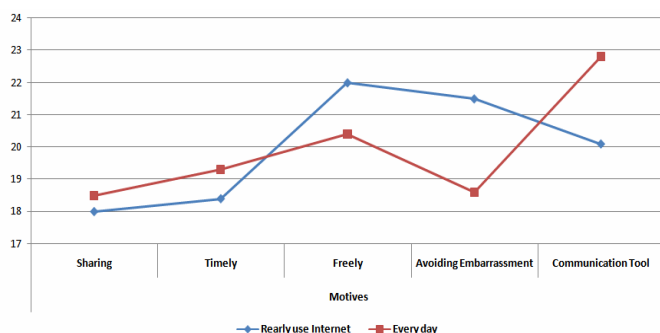

Fig. 4 Use of Internet and distribution of motives (%)

provides? Or these results are because the group is small and by chance more shy people were included in it? Perhaps the continuity of the survey will answer these questions.

In addition, the results showed that two of the motives *sharing* and *timely* are evaluated at the lowest level, though some publications speculate that getting psychological help

timely or quickly is one of the most important characteristics of telepsychology that attracts clients [1, 3-5, 13].

We were also able to compare two groups of subjects based on their educational status - secondary or higher education. Results are presented on Figure 5. There is not statistically
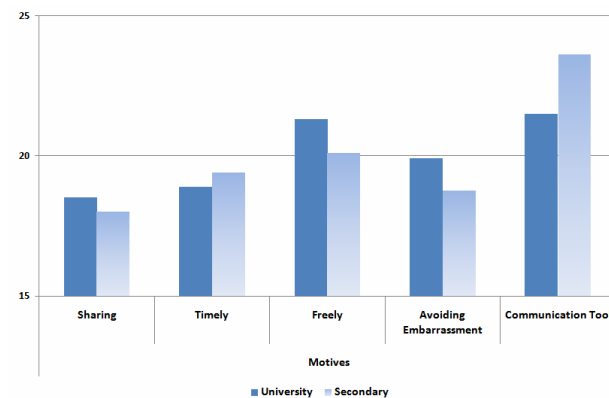

Fig. 5 Education (%)

significant difference between the two groups concerning the distribution of motives. It is worth underlining the following tendencies:

- For the group with secondary education the leading motive is communication tool, while

- For the group with higher education the leading motives are two – feeling free and communication tool. Both have equal strength.

Conclusion

Telepsychology is an excellent tool, offering psychological help to those who need it, no matter where they are and at what time of the day or night this happens. Virtual psychology is the future of psychology due to at least 2 main reasons.

1. The obvious trend of increasing of psychological disorders in the years to come and the heavy burden that these kind of disorders place on individuals, families and communities all over the world. No country is immune to them, although some disorders may differ in frequency.

2. While many people suffer from a variety of psychological disorders, care is not available to all who need it. That's why telepsychology is an excellent tool. It provides the instrument to close the gap between the need and demand in psychology counseling. Because of that it is so important to study the motives of clients approaching virtual psychological consultations.

The preliminary data of our survey revealed that out of the five motives studied – sharing, timely, feeling free, avoiding embarrassment and communication tool, only two turn out to be leading motives for using telepsychology –communication tool and feeling free. It is important to underline that despite of expectations and public opinions shaped by resent publications, sharing and timely are not the leading motives. Age, gender and education are factors influencing motivation to use virtual psychology counseling, too and have always to be considered.

Further experiments are needed. Knowing more about motivation that drive people towards virtual psychological help will help psychologists in their contacts with clients. It will also prevent misunderstanding and will give a precious

tool in the hands of experts to increase motivation in groups of sufferers and stimulate them to care more for their psychological health. It is necessary to have in mind that types and levels of motivation are good predictors of performance and well-being outcomes.

Acknowledgement

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