



Research Summary: Client experience of Remote Allied Health Treatment (Telehealth) during the Coronavirus outbreak (Covid-19) in Israel

Background

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic erupted in Israel in February 2020, with far-reaching consequences for all aspects of Israeli society, including public services, trade, the economy, education, culture, and of course the health system. Healthcare professionals were forced to face a new reality in which they were reliant on technology and digital communications to deliver remote healthcare services (“telehealth”). An [earlier study](#) of healthcare professionals examined their views and experiences of providing remote treatment. This study aims to learn about the experiences of patients/clients receiving this treatment.

Research Goal

The goal of this study was to learn about the experiences of clients receiving remote treatment from healthcare professionals (physiotherapists, occupational therapists, and speech, voice and language therapists), and to learn about the advantages and challenges presented by this treatment tool from their perspective. Both this study, alongside with the healthcare professionals study, give a wider and more comprehensive perspective of remote healthcare services. It aims to offer a basis for improving remote treatment by developing tools and training that will help both clients and service providers to have their needs met in the best and most professional way possible.

Study Sample and Research Method

The study sample comprised 98 individuals aged 13 and above (with an average of 41 years of age) from all over Israel. Of these, 63 reported having used telehealth services to receive allied health treatment since the outbreak of the virus (some stating that they no longer use these services). Sampling was based on client lists of the various therapists, as well as on links to social media networks, forums, and organizations in the fields of therapy and disabilities. Data collection was conducted during May and June 2020. It should be noted that the sample size of this study is small (n=63), restricting options for data processing and statistical inference.



Main Findings

- **Telehealth usage rate:** 64.3% of the client sample had accessed telehealth services for themselves or for a member of their household, in one or more of the relevant healthcare fields (physiotherapy, occupational therapy, or speech, voice and language therapy) since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. Only 6.3% had used telehealth services prior to the pandemic.
- **Abandoning telehealth services:** 10.2% of clients ended their use of telehealth services, mainly because they viewed it as inefficient and ineffective.
- **Recipients of telehealth services:** 71.4% of telehealth users reported that the service accessed was for another member of their household (mainly for children), 11% reported that it was for themselves, and 7.9% that it was both for another member of the household and for themselves (9.5% did not respond to this question).
- **Treatment types:** 61.4% of telehealth users received physiotherapy treatment for themselves or for a member of their household, 52.6% received occupational therapy, and 45.6% received speech, voice and language therapy (the figures total more than 100% because multiple response options were allowed).
- **Telehealth service types:** Synchronous (real-time) services had the highest usage rates (reported by 58.7% of telehealth users), followed by written information and guidance (33.3%). In third place were asynchronous services (28.1%), and in last place, voice-only phone conversations (27%) (Figures total more than 100% because multiple response options were allowed).
- **General perceptions of telehealth treatment:** Treatments received via telehealth were rated by clients as mediocre, with average scores ranging from 2.38 to 2.73 on a scale from 1 to 4 (weighted average: 2.57). The three parameters that received the highest ratings were “professional treatment” (average score: 2.7), “saves time” (2.73), and “enables clear communication with the therapist” (2.57). By contrast, the three parameters awarded the lowest average scores were “high-quality response to needs” (2.38), “supports the attainment of good results” (2.54) and “satisfactory form of treatment” (2.47).. There were similarities between clients and therapists in their overall perception of telehealth treatment regarding its capacity for providing a professional, high-quality service, and as a satisfactory form of treatment.



- **Perceptions of telehealth treatment for children:** 79.3% of the respondents reported that telehealth services accessed were for treatment for another member of the household, and in 90% of these cases, the client was a child (average age: 5.45 years). Parents rated telehealth treatments as mediocre, ranging from 2.0 to 3.02 on a scale of 1 to 4. The parameters that received the highest ratings were “ability to introduce the therapist to the child’s natural environment” (average score: 3.02), “enables the parent to be part of the treatment” (3.0) and “gives the parent tools that can be used in the future” (2.76). The main weaknesses identified were difficulties in coordinating the treatment session with other tasks at home (2.66), and difficulties in engaging the child in the treatment (2.38).
- **Comparison between telehealth treatment and treatment in a traditional clinic setting:** The traditional treatment room scored significantly better than telehealth in most of the examined parameters: making it possible to continue with treatment over time, facilitating professional treatment, producing good results, and enabling clients to cooperate better. The only parameter on which telehealth scored better than the traditional treatment room (though not statistically significant) was “saves time.” When examining responses with regard to specific treatment fields (physiotherapy, occupational therapy, and speech, voice and language therapy), there was still a clear advantage to the traditional treatment room in comparison to telehealth services.
- **Intention to use telehealth services in the future:** 39.7% responded that they would not use telehealth services in the future, and 23.8% that they would.

Conclusions and Insights

- **Client experience of telehealth treatment:** Treatment provided via telehealth services can be compared to a triangle formed by three components: the therapist, the client, and the therapeutic relationship between them. The experience of telehealth treatment can be compared to a triangle with broken sides: the client is forced to cope with multiple challenges; the therapist must hand over part of his role to the parent (who is not a professional); and the therapeutic relationship changes its nature when managed remotely. It is important to explore ways in which these three components can be reinforced, and stability restored to the triangle.



- **Client experience versus the experience of therapists:** There is considerable overlap between the findings of the two studies. At the same time, it appears that patients have a stronger sense of mixed feelings and challenges to overcome. This emphasizes the importance of providing training and tools both to parents and to therapists in order to make parents full partners, while also properly benefitting from the advantages offered by telehealth services and addressing the difficulties and barriers they present.
- **Relative advantages of telehealth service provision:** Telehealth supports regular contact and the maintenance of a regular treatment regime; facilitates the provision of services to populations in remote areas; enables therapists to become familiar with clients' natural environments; and increases and reinforces parental involvement in therapy.
- Realizing the great potential of telehealth services necessitates planning and preparation, including evaluation and study of the needs and adaptations required for different populations, while also taking into consideration various environmental parameters. The findings of this study indicate the need for training and instruction for both service providers and clients.