

Influence of Fears of COVID-19 and Overall Psychological Distress on Willingness to Use Telemental Health

Kaitlin Williams
Mentor: Jennifer Zwolinski
Department of Psychological Sciences



Introduction

- The onset of COVID-19 has been associated with a number of psychosocial stressors for all age groups and this trend is particularly problematic for college students across the United States (Browning et al., 2021).
- Since the onset of the pandemic, college students have shown increases in a number of psychological problems including anxiety, stress, hopelessness, guilt, fatigue, and overall depressive symptoms (Browning et al., 2021).
- Students with preexisting mental health challenges showed improvements or maintenance of mental health during the pandemic compared to one year prior, whereas students without preexisting mental health challenges showed increased psychological distress in this time frame (Hamza et al., 2020).
- Students who might be adversely impacted by social distancing are those who are not used to feelings of isolation compared to those who experience these feelings more frequently. These results indicate that there are still a number of psychosocial factors that are influencing functioning in the pandemic that need clarification (Druss, 2020; Yao et al., 2020).
- Fear of COVID-19 Scale (Perz et al., 2020) allowed researchers to identify and distinguish students who are showing resilience from those students who are showing distress. For example, individuals who have higher levels of generalized anxiety disorder also tend to score higher on the Fear of COVID-19 Scale (Perz et al., 2020).
- Research has validated the efficacy of telehealth, as both clinicians and clients who used telemental health reported similar therapeutic alliance and treatment results (Jenkins-Guarnieri et al., 2015).
- Increased applicability and accessibility, the telehealth platform is a beneficial resource to college students with an increased need for mental health services.

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: I propose that higher scores on the Fear of COVID-19 Scale will be associated with an increase in college students' willingness to use telemental health services.

Hypothesis 2: I also propose that willingness to use telemental health services will be associated with an increase in overall psychological distress across the last year.



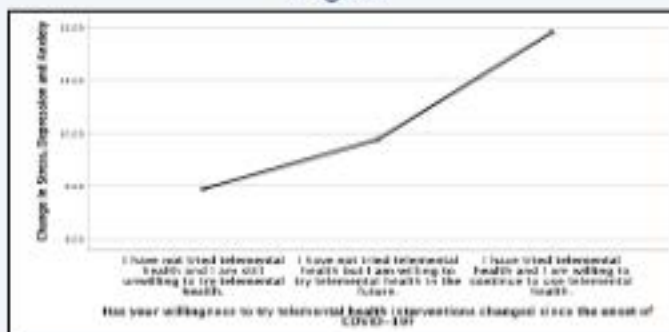
Methods

- Participants were 197 undergraduate students attending a medium sized liberal arts college and recruited during Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 semesters.
- Participants responded to:
 - Demographic measures
 - Willingness to Try Telemental Health
 - Overall Psychological Distress: Depression, Anxiety, Stress
 - Fear of COVID-19 Scale (Perz et al., 2020)
- Participants were given a score after completing each questionnaire to evaluate perceptions of telemental health and COVID-19 fears

Results

- COVID-19 Specific Distress:** A one-way between-subjects ANOVA examined whether there were group differences on willingness to try telemental health on Fears of COVID-19 Scale. Results indicated that there were no statistically significant differences between the three groups.
- Overall Psychological Distress:** A One-way between-subjects ANOVA indicated that there were statistically significant differences between the three groups. Willing-Prior Telehealth Experience Group was more likely to show distress than the Willing-No Prior Telehealth Experience Group and the Unwilling-No Prior Telehealth Experience Group. There was no significant difference between the two No Prior Telehealth groups. Raw scores for the groups are shown in the Figure below.
- Therefore, the results were not in line with our first hypothesis but supported our second

Figure



Discussion

- COVID-19 distress does not influence an increase in willingness to use telemental health services. This could be the result of the novelty transition to telemental health services and the lack of awareness and effective outcomes and training of these virtual treatment services
- Increases in overall psychological stress were shown to be associated with an increase in willingness to use telemental health especially if someone has already been using this resource.
- These results might suggest individuals who have been experiencing more distress in the last year already understand and appreciate the need for telehealth services in this pandemic more so than other individuals who are not feeling this same level of distress.
- Key strength of this study is that it sheds new light on the association between willingness to use telemental health and general and COVID-specific distress in college students
- Limited in generalizability by the fact that this group of individuals was from a predominantly Caucasian sample of college aged students from California who attend one private liberal arts school
- Due to the novelty of the pandemic the literature, this research topic is still in its infancy and more data collection is needed and ongoing

References

- Browning, B. M., Lerner, L. A., Kline, M. A., & Ridenour, T. A. (2021). Psychological impacts from COVID-19 among university students: What factors are associated with mental health outcomes? *Journal of American College Health*, 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jach.2021.03.007>
- Druss, B. E. (2020). Addressing the COVID-19 pandemic in populations with serious mental illness. *Journal of the American Medical Association Psychiatry*, Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2020.3473>
- Hamza, C. A., Elmer, T., Hooley, L. M., & Gidycz, M. A. (2020). Exploring the role of social support in buffering stress: A longitudinal study. *Psychological Science*, 31(10), 1450-1460. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797620950000>
- Jenkins-Guarnieri, M. A., & Lusk, D. D. (2015). Patient Perceptions of Telemental Health: A Systematic Review of Direct Comparisons to In-Person Psychotherapy. *Telemedicine, Journal of the American Academy of Telemedicine*, 21(5), 450-460. <https://doi.org/10.1089/jtm.2014.0165>
- Madigan, S., Rutter, N., Coker, J. E., & Kessler, D. C. (2020). COVID-19 and telemental health: Benefits, challenges, and future directions. *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie*, Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1037/psp0000288>
- Perz, C. A., Long, B. A., & Hargrett, N. (2020). Validation of the Fear of COVID-19 Scale in a US College Sample. *Journal of Health Assessment*, 14(2), 100-105. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jha2.100>
- Yao, C., Hoyle, S., & Wang, J. (2020). Psychological impacts of COVID-19 on college students' mental health in the United States. *Internet Interventions*, 21, 100360. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.invent.2020.100360>
- Yao, C., Chen, J. H., & Yu, Y. P. (2020). Patients with mental health disorders in the COVID-19 epidemic. *The Journal of Psychiatry*, 7, 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jps.2020.05.005>