Empathic interactions in online treatment

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survivors seeking for help online and the pros and cons of the use of live-chats as a first-aid tool in bereavement support. A data-driven thematic analysis with the software ATLAS.ti was carried out on 20 live-chat conversations from the major Italian association providing free-of-charge online support. Socio-demographics details were retrieved from the transcripts. Three categories were explored: users’ features, users’ requests and online interactions. The users were mainly women (18 of 20), partners, siblings, or parents of the deceased (11 of 20), aged between 24 and 56 years, who had lost their significant other between one day and 12 months before. Users expressed needs to receive practical information on how and where to find support and requests to be emotionally reassured. Features such as anonymity and accessibility were fondly appreciated. Live-chat services represent a safe space where survivors can obtain useful information and start processing their loss. Because of its anonymity and accessibility, a live-chat service may represent a valid first line of support and a tool for prevention of suicidal ideation. The strengths of the study reside in its ecology: differently from a simulated user study, this analysis stems from a real context of emergency.

Empathic interactions in online treatment: experiences of mental healthcare practitioners

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Studies on practitioners' perceptions of eMental Health repeatedly report experienced difficulties in establishing empathic interactions with their clients online – a fact that plays an important role in the adoption, or lack thereof, of technology-mediated treatments. Especially now, in times when social distancing and lockdown measures are effectuated globally to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for high-quality online formats of mental health care has become more urgent than ever. To increase our understanding of the process of achieving empathic interactions in technology-mediated communication, the current paper presents an online survey study using open questions on practitioners' experiences of establishing empathy in online therapeutic interactions (n = 363). Responses were analyzed using thematic analysis. From the derived themes, a conceptual model was built showing several properties of online communication that influence empathy and how these properties affect the therapeutic interaction on emotional, conversational and relational levels. Additionally, our findings highlight the behavioral strategies practitioners employ to find workarounds in order to manage these effects and attempt to (re)connect with their clients. Our findings thus provide experience-based insights into the process of building empathy in online treatments – insights that can be used to improve current and future eMental Health technologies, enabling practitioners to reach the desired level of empathic understanding during remote therapeutic interactions.

1. Introduction

A good empathic interaction and therapeutic alliance are considered crucial ingredients to successful therapeutic outcomes. In the research on eMental Health, there is a persisting mismatch between studies finding no differences in levels of therapeutic alliance and empathy between face to face and online psychological treatments, and the frequent reports of mental
healthcare professionals that online communication compromises the empathic interaction. So far, it remained difficult to pinpoint the source of these experienced difficulties; what are practitioners exactly missing when attempting to establish an empathic interaction online? The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic during Spring 2020, and corresponding distancing measures, led to a sharp increase in the use of online tools and technologies. While acknowledging the high burden this situation has had and still is having for both practitioners and clients, at the same time it offers the opportunity to gain more experience-based insights in online mental healthcare delivery, which could eventually contribute to improving the quality of remote mental health care. To this end, the current paper presents an explorative study on practitioners' experiences of the empathic interaction in technology-mediated communication with their clients, aiming to elucidate the most important factors in establishing empathy online and how these affect the therapeutic interaction.

2. Methods

A sample of 363 mental healthcare professionals (74% female, average age: 39.1 years) completed an online survey on eMental Health. Data was collected from May to September 2020, in the period after the first lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey included two open-ended questions on their experiences in establishing an empathic interaction with their online clients. Responses were analyzed using thematic analysis, going through the following steps: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, extracting, reviewing, defining themes, and finally drawing up the results.

3. Results

Themes derived from the responses to the open-ended questions could be divided in three overarching categories that were incorporated in a conceptual model: influencing factors, effects on the therapeutic interaction, and behavioral strategies. The most frequently reported properties of technology-mediated communication influencing online empathic interactions were technological shortcomings, limited access to non-verbal cues, absence of regular physical procedures, and (un)suitability of clients. These factors then affected the therapeutic interaction on three levels; (1) emotional: harder to emotionally tune in with the client; (2) relational: more difficulties to keep aligned with clients and support them; (3) conversational: the communication becomes more explicit and verbal. To manage these effects, professionals reported to use the following behavioral strategies to establish an empathic interaction: use more verbalizing techniques, exaggerate non-verbal cues, make adaptions to the therapeutic contact, and modify the home setting.

4. Conclusion

The current study focused on practitioners' perceptions of establishing empathic interactions while conducting online psychological treatments. By probing actual experiences with online treatment from a large representative sample, we obtained insights emerging directly from practical experience, thus addressing the how and why of experienced difficulties in establishing empathic interactions. By learning about the specific properties that are of particular influence, we can derive directions for the development of future eMental Health technologies that can more precisely address practitioners' needs, and facilitate them in
achieving desired levels of empathy in online psychological treatments. Eventually, such improvements will contribute to eMental Health becoming a more satisfactory way of conducting mental health care, for both practitioners and clients.

An online intervention coupling psychological support and physical exercise for breast cancer survivors: A pilot study

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The COVID-19 pandemic has posed several challenges to chronic patients (e.g., breast cancer survivors) in terms of health management and quality of life. Due to the strict social distancing policies, online interventions are to be preferred to help breast cancer survivors in terms of quality of life promotion. Guided physical exercises coupled with psychological support group sessions concur to improve quality of life and body image distress. Benefits of online interventions are related to the possibility of tailored programs, that are easy to implement, accessible, and without costs of participation. This pilot study aimed to assess a home-based combined regimen in which both psychological support and postural exercises were conducted through online groups. Twenty-six breast cancer survivors participated in nine postural exercise sessions and four psychological group interventions over six weeks while twenty-five acted as controls with no intervention. All participants filled in questionnaires on well-being, emotions (anxiety and depression), and body image before and after the intervention. Improvement was found in physical well-being in the experimental group compared with the control. Non-significant results in the other variables may be related to the relatively small, self-selected sample and the ongoing, complex context of the pandemic. However, the pilot study showed that the intervention is feasible and promising and could be improved within future efforts.

The key moderating role of telepresence on the strength of working alliance in videoconference-based psychotherapy. Or why can it work despite the use of such an imperfect medium?

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1. Introduction

A sound working alliance is a prerequisite for effective psychotherapies. Studies have repeatedly shown that it is possible to build a strong and effective working alliance when psychotherapy is delivered in videoconference (PVC) [1]. Results of studies on PVC are not