

Title: Effects of telehealth mental health services for worsening mood, sleep difficulties and anxiety in older adults

Ananthalakshmi Iyer

Older Person's Mental Health, Australia

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Statement of the Problem: The COVID-19 pandemic is a major public health issue that has posed disruptions globally. While telehealth mental health services have increased in Australia, the lowest utilization was amongst older adults above the age of 65 (Jayawardana & Gannon, 2021). This was of concern as older adults have been found to be vulnerable to increased social disconnectedness (Wand et al., 2020) which in turn predicts higher depression, and anxiety symptoms (Santini et al., 2020).

In Western Sydney, NSW, older adults were noted to be experiencing worsening mood, disrupted sleep, anxiety, and loneliness during the lockdown in July to Dec 2021. The Older People's Mental Health (OPMH) Team in Western Sydney attempted to address these concerns, as per recommendations (Wand et al., 2020) by increasing telehealth psychology sessions, promoting coping strategies and maintaining access to mental health care. The psychologist sits in a multidisciplinary team including nurses, psychiatrists and social workers, lending to an integrated care model. 15 clients were supported by the psychologist.

Methodology & Theoretical Orientation: Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) sessions were offered to consumers. Additionally, sessions were offered to build necessary technological skills (i.e., how to set up phone or video sessions). Qualitative findings were collected through self-report.

Findings: Consumers reported improvements to their mood and level of anxiety, social connectedness, and confidence in using technological aids. Consumers did report difficulty learning new skills and behavioural strategies as there was no face to face support available to troubleshoot problems.

Conclusion & Significance: The COVID-19 lockdown situation posed unique mental health challenges for older adults. The OPMH team addressed this by providing integrated care including tailored psychology telehealth sessions to consumers. Further research identifying specific psychological strategies useful in addressing mood, anxiety difficulties during lockdown periods using telehealth services, would be helpful.

Biography

Ananthalakshmi Iyer is a Clinical Psychology Registrar working in the Older People's Mental Health team in Merrylands with an expertise in utilising Cognitive Behavioural strategies to improve mental health and wellbeing. She has a passion in working with adults presenting with Complex Trauma and Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) features. She completed her Bachelor of Psychology degree in the University of Sydney and Master of Clinical Psychology degree at Western Sydney University.