



### 15 Cybertherapy: Fad or Future of Mental Health Care?

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The goals of this presentation are: (1) to present and discuss the technology of cybertherapy and other technological means of communication that are being used more and more in mental health care; (2) to understand the uses of these technologies and the ethical issues involved in them; and (3) to discuss the responsibility of forensic psychiatrists and other health professionals in providing standards for this technology that seems here to stay.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by underscoring the ethical issues and the impact of cybertherapy on mental health care today.

Cybertherapy is a technology that has been around for over a decade and is becoming increasingly more mainstream, as evidenced by a new Showtime show called *"Web Therapy."* It is important that clinicians as well as forensic scientists understand this technology because it is being used more commonly around the country and the world. This presentation will discuss the literature on cybertherapy including the treatment outcomes, and the ethical considerations involved with using this remote form of therapy as a treatment for mental health issues. The ethics of cybertherapy have been addressed as early as 1996 in an article in *Ethics and Behavior* called *"Case vignette: Cybertherapy"* where a case is described in which someone across the country from the web therapy doctor threatens suicide and hangs up.<sup>1</sup> Ethical issues also include going beyond one's area of expertise, and issues of confidentiality. The ethical and boundary issues presented by cybertherapy are important concerns and need to be constantly considered as the technology is growing and taking over some parts of the U.S and the world. Therapy over the internet may become more cost effective during economic crisis, and these considerations for some may potentially outweigh ethical issues and treatment considerations.

For over a decade, clinicians have been relying more and more heavily on other means of communication besides traditional face-to-face and telephone contact. These include email, texting, videophone, and the use of cybertherapy. These tools have both benefits as well as possible detriments to the clinician-patient interaction. It is important for clinicians, researchers, and forensic scientists to understand the technology and its impact on the psychiatry and psychology as it is practiced today. An Italian study entitled "New tools in Cybertherapy: the VEPSY web site" discusses this concept and provides a framework for the integration of old and new technology in mental health care.<sup>2</sup> When reviewing the literature, it is clear that there is a lack of standardization and professional leadership in the field of cybertherapy and the use of technology in medicine, particularly in mental health care.

Experiences in the United States and in Italy will be compared. Arguments for and against the technology will be addressed and discussion among the audience will be encouraged. Because the technology is constantly in flux, it is important for forensic psychiatrists and other health care professionals to have knowledge and a voice in the direction that cybertherapy as well as other forms of communication through technology is taking. The ethical issues of using technology in psychotherapy and other mental health treatments will be presented and discussed. Research possibilities and future areas of interest in this field will also be addressed.

#### References:

<sup>1</sup> Lloyd MG, Schlosser B, Stricker G., Case vignette: cybertherapy, *Ethics Behavior* 1996;6 (2) 169-77.

<sup>2</sup> Castelnovo G, Buselli C, De Ferrari R, Gaggioli A, Mantovani F, Molinari E, Villamira M, Riva G. New tools in cybertherapy: the VEPSY web site. *Stud Health Technol Inform*. 2004; 99:15-35.

#### Cybertherapy, Technology, Ethics