Exploring experiences of service providers transitioning to virtual delivery of group-based services in the child and family mental health and addictions sector



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Background

Social distancing measures designed to combat the COVID-19 pandemic introduced unprecedented challenges to meeting the mental health and addictions needs of youth and families. Virtual delivery of group-based services offered a promising means of addressing these needs during a time characterized by elevated anxiety and restricted access to social support. Preliminary findings indicate that virtual groups:

• Are feasible, acceptable, and effective for treating such mental

Current Study

Objective:

To capture the processes, perceptions, and learnings of
service providers working in the child and family mental
health and addictions sector as they rapidly adapted their
group services to a virtual environment.

Research question:

Methodology

- 18 mental health and addiction professionals from 8
 Kids Come First agencies in Eastern Ontario were
 interviewed concerning their experiences facilitating
 virtual groups.
- Interviews were semi-structured following an interview guide developed from a review of the literature.
- The interviews captured:

- health issues as PTSD, anger management, and substance abuse (Jenkins-Guarnieri et al., 2015).
- Facilitate supportive peer relationships within a medium that minimizes logistical and stigma-related barriers to treatment (Douma et al., 2019).
- However, such research is limited. Particularly lacking is research examining virtual groups for youth and families and the experiences of service providers facilitating virtual groups.

What were the experiences of group facilitators working in the youth and family sector as they transitioned to virtual delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Contribution:

To inform the development of service delivery approaches
by drawing upon the emerging, situated perspectives of
service providers navigating the uniquely rapid shift to
virtual services prompted by COVID-19.

- Contextual Information on Services Provided
- Administrative and Logistical Processes Involved in Service Provision
- Barriers and Gaps to Service Implementation
- Key Learnings
- Perceived Impact of Online Service Implementation and Delivery
- Interviews were audio recorded and summary
- transcripts were generated.
- Summary transcripts were analyzed thematically.

Results

Figure 1. Themes emerging from the summary transcripts

- Some clients appear more relaxed and open to sharing when connecting from the comfort of their own home
- Clients with social anxiety seem to particularly benefit from connecting from home

Perceived increases in client comfort Challenges unique to the context of COVID-19

- Lack of private space due to everyone being at home
- Clients and facilitators experiencing Zoom fatigue

Conclusion

- Emerging themes highlight the unique demands of virtual environments, the impact of virtual delivery on accessibility to mental health and addictions services, and the adaptation required of service providers' skills, materials, and approaches to online settings.
- Facilitators expressed that virtual delivery of mental health and addictions groups for youth and families offer several unique benefits, including reduction of some geographic and logistical barriers and an enhanced comfort for clients connecting from their home environment.

Increased access for some:

 Reduced geographic and logistical barriers for individuals living in remote areas and those unable to commute due to such factors as lack of time, means of transportation, or bad weather

Reduced access for others:

 Introduction of new barriers, including lack of privacy in home, lack of necessary hardware or connectivity (especially in rural areas), and lack of experience with technology (especially among older clients) Impact of virtual delivery on access to mental health services Limitations to replicating the in-person experience

- Sense of connection
- Fundamental need for in-person contact
- Getting out of the house and sharing food/beverages
- Reading the room and clients' body language

Positive Impact:

- Satisfaction being able to reach wider audience geographically
- Heightened sense of empathy witnessing clients participate despite many challenges
- Meaningful reflection on social expectations and assumptions

Negative Impact:

- Added stress, frustration, and distraction due to reliance on technology and occurrence of technological disruptions
- Elevated concerns for client safety and engagement due to perceptual limitations (e.g., clients turning camera off)
- Increase in out-of-session tasks (e.g., administrative work)

 However, this method of delivery also involves multiple unique challenges, including heightened privacy concerns, technological disruptions, and a lower sense of interpersonal connection.

Implications

- Our study findings can inform development of a hybrid service delivery model.
- Going forward, post-pandemic, agencies offering both virtual and in-person groups can maximize the benefits of virtual delivery while mitigating against the limitations. As one participant shared,

"I see [virtual groups] as not better or worse, but meeting different types of needs to in-person."

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