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THERAPEUTIC GOALS IN ONLINE THERAPY

Annotation. *The aim of this study is to examine the nature of therapeutic goals in online therapy in light of the theoretical literature. With the development of digital communication technologies, psychotherapy services have shifted to online environments. Online therapy is becoming increasingly widespread due to its accessibility and cost advantages. However, the identification of therapeutic goals, the establishment of the therapeutic alliance, and the structuring of intervention processes are influenced by the unique dynamics of the online environment. A review of the literature reveals that therapeutic goals in online therapy largely overlap with those in traditional therapy. However, the form of communication, technology use, and the client's environmental conditions appear to be decisive in the goal-setting process.*

Key words: *Psychotherapy, online therapy, therapeutic goals.*

Research Type: *Review.*

Анотація. *Метою цього дослідження є вивчення природи терапевтичних цілей в онлайн-терапії у світлі теоретичної літератури. З розвитком цифрових комунікаційних технологій психотерапевтичні послуги перемістилися в онлайн-середовища. Онлайн-терапія стає все більш поширеною завдяки своїй доступності та економічним перевагам. Але*

визначення терапевтичних цілей, встановлення терапевтичного альянсу та структурування процесів втручання залежать від унікальної динаміки онлайн-середовища. Огляд літератури показує, що терапевтичні цілі в онлайн-терапії значною мірою перетинаються з цілями в традиційній терапії. Проте форма комунікації, використання технологій та умови середовища клієнта, здається, є вирішальними в процесі постановки цілей.

Ключові слова: психотерапія, онлайн-терапія, терапевтичні цілі.

Тип дослідження: огляд.

Introduction. Online therapy encompasses psychotherapy processes conducted through various digital communication tools such as video conferencing, telephone, email, and messaging. In recent years, internet-based psychological counseling and psychotherapy applications have become an important component of mental health services. Telepsychology applications, in particular, increase access to psychological services by removing geographical barriers. Research in this field shows that internet-based therapies are particularly effective in cognitive behavioral therapies and constitute an important alternative in the treatment of anxiety disorders (Andersson, 2016) [2]. The clear and structured determination of therapeutic goals is one of the fundamental components of the psychotherapy process. In the context of online therapy, the goal-setting process is shaped by technology-mediated communication, the client's environmental conditions, and the dynamics of the therapeutic relationship. With the pandemic, demand for online therapy in Turkey has rapidly increased. Clients living outside major cities, in particular, have begun to utilize psychotherapy services via the internet. Anxiety, depression, stress management, and relationship issues have been reported as the most common target areas in online therapy in Turkey (Erdem & Özdemir, 2020 [9], Andersson, 2016 [2]).

Purpose of the Study. Traditional face-to-face psychotherapy practices have been accepted as a fundamental treatment method in the fields of psychology and psychiatry for years. However, it is noteworthy that therapeutic processes conducted

through digital platforms (internet therapy, video-based sessions, mobile application-supported interventions) have rapidly become widespread over the past decade.

Research Results. Literature Review. Therapeutic Goals. Therapeutic goals are planned and measurable objectives established by the client and therapist at the beginning of the therapeutic process, aimed at improving the client's psychological well-being. According to Beutler, Consoli & Lane (2005) [5] these goals include not only the reduction of specific symptoms but also the development of behavioral and cognitive skills. Structured approaches such as solution-focused and cognitive-behavioral therapies treat the clear definition of therapeutic goals as a fundamental process. Notably, goals can be viewed as different to needs and wants. For instance, at the bottom-line of the Maslow's hierarchy of needs, basic needs start with food, sleep, and warmth; while higher order needs for safety, sociality, and esteem arise due to deprivation. On the other hand, wants are formed more on a cognitive level, around those things individuals would like to acquire (i.e. a round-the-world-cruise), rather than should have in order to survive. Cooper & McLeod, 2011; 2012) [6; 7] suggests is that wants should be considered synonymous with desires, defined as «desires for some state of affairs». Goals estimate where possible options fall on the spectrum and what could/should be prioritised within the dimensions we see to be most important, and make a move forwards. In the current context, a goal therefore is thought to add equilibrium to needs and wants, a cost and benefit analysis to our choices, and a pathway to chart our priorities. Discussions around the importance of goals in therapy have pervaded numerous therapeutic approaches. They have been present within the humanistic/existential view of therapy within the cognitive and behaviourist approach in the integrative approach and within the pluralistic approach to therapy (Cooper & McLeod, 2011) [6]. From each of these perspectives, goals are viewed as an important part of the therapeutic course, if not at the heart of the therapy. Nevertheless, regardless of the differences on their retical underpinnings, all therapeutic approaches mostly agree on the collaborative nature of goals work (Flückiger, Del Re, Wampold & Horvath, 2018 [11]).

Classification of Goals. These goals are generally grouped into the following areas:

- Symptom-Focused Goals: Reduction of symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and panic disorder.
- Skill Development Goals: Emotional regulation, social skills, coping strategies.
- Relational Goals: Improvement in family and social relationships.
- Quality of Life Goals: Enhancement of work, education, and overall life satisfaction.

Characteristics of Therapeutic Goals in Online Therapy

Collaborative Goal Setting. The goal-setting process in online therapy differs in some ways from that in face-to-face therapy. Clarifying goals and clearly expressing the client's expectations can be difficult, especially in situations where communication may be limited during the first session. A meta-analysis has shown that setting goals early and collaboratively in online therapy increases the likelihood of success (Erşahin-Boz, 2015 [10]; Berger, 2016 [4]).

Characteristics of Therapeutic Goals in Online Therapy. In online therapy, therapeutic goals are shaped through collaboration between the client and therapist. In online therapy studies conducted with young people, it has been found that clients' goals are generally related to emotional regulation, relationship problems, and identity development (Erşahin-Boz, 2015) [10]. It is stated that clearly expressing the client's expectations and therapy goals in the first sessions in the online environment increases the efficiency of the process.

The Impact of the Online Environment on the Goal Setting Process. In telepsychology applications, the goal-setting process is influenced by certain specific conditions:

- The client's technological competence;
- Privacy and security conditions;
- The suitability of the physical environment;

- The client's level of online participation;
- Evaluating these factors ensures that therapeutic goals are realistic and achievable.

Common Therapeutic Target Areas in Online Therapy. A review of the literature reveals that therapeutic goals in online therapy are concentrated in the following areas (Table 1).

Table 1

Most common therapeutic goal headings in online therapy

Target Area	Definition	Sample Criteria
1. Emotional regulation	Recognizing and regulating emotions	Increase in emotional maturity scores
2. Anxiety & Depression symptoms	Reduction of symptoms	Decrease in Beck Anxiety Scale scores
3. Coping skills	Strategy development	Increase in coping scale scores
4. Social relationships	Relational satisfaction	Relationship satisfaction scores
5. Quality of life	Overall life satisfaction	Increase in WHO-QoL scores

Conclusions. Recent studies have found that the goals of clients receiving online therapy in Turkey are mostly emotional awareness, anxiety management, and the development of social skills (Demir & Eren, 2024) [8]. These studies also show that cultural factors are effective in the goal-setting process. In internet-based interventions, goal-oriented techniques such as behavioral activation, self-monitoring, and psychoeducation are commonly used. Therapeutic goals are central to the psychotherapy process in online therapy. Furthermore, therapeutic goals in online therapy are important determinants of therapy outcomes. Online therapy is fundamentally no different from face-to-face therapy in terms of setting therapeutic goals; however, the form of communication and technological context can influence the structuring of goals. The client's adaptation to the online environment and the strengthening of the therapeutic alliance play a critical role in achieving goals.

Research has shown that online psychotherapy is an effective intervention method for many mental health issues. It has been demonstrated that addressing therapeutic goals in a structured manner positively affects treatment outcomes. The literature shows that therapeutic goals can be collaboratively set in an online environment and that the therapeutic alliance plays a critical role in achieving these goals. «Anecdotal and empirical evidence suggests that it is not only possible to create deep, emotional relationships online but that, while not replicating them, these can closely resemble relationships formed in face-to-face therapy» (Anthony & Jamieson, 2005) [3]. According to Aafjes-van Doorn, K., Spina, D. S., Horne, S. J. & Békés (2024) [1] indicate that there are other processes at play in teletherapy that explain variance of treatment outcomes, or that the therapist (and the relationship) has less influence on the treatment outcomes than in in-person therapy. Given the half a century of research findings showing the therapeutic relationship to be an essential ingredient of the therapeutic process and of good outcomes (Norcross, 2014 [12]; Yüksel, 2022 [13]).

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