

Clinic offers a 'virtual' helping hand

November 8 2011, By Crystal Ladiges

A sophisticated new open-access online psychology clinic is helping people with mental health disorders better manage their symptoms.

The findings about the effectiveness of five self-help eTherapy programs, delivered through Swinburne University of Technology's [Anxiety Online](#), have been published in the top-ranking [Journal of Medical Internet Research](#). The programs are tailored to treat generalised anxiety, panic, obsessive-compulsive, post-traumatic stress and social anxiety disorders.

More than 220 people with at least one mild anxiety symptom – who completed one of the five fully-automated programs over 12 weeks – showed significant improvements on 21 of 25 measures, Swinburne researchers have reported.

Each program consists of 12 modules using text-based and multimedia materials such as audio, video and animated graphics and online activities.

Swinburne National eTherapy Centre Director Associate Professor Britt Klein said that although the findings need to be replicated, the preliminary results were very pleasing.

“Essentially we have found that consumers who completed one of our self-help treatment programs reported significantly lower clinical disorder severity ratings at the three month assessment. They also became more confident in managing their own [mental health](#) care.

“Furthermore, we found significant reductions in the types of mental health symptoms and psychological distress, as well as an increase in quality of life scores for most of our five eTherapy programs,” she said.

In any given year, about 20 per cent of the Australian population has a diagnosable mental health condition. But ABS research has shown that only about a third of these people access the mental health services they need.

“The advent of open-access e-mental health services will undoubtedly be one very important means of providing Australians with greater choice and timely access to mental health assistance,” Associate Professor Klein said.

Deputy CEO of beyondblue, Dr. Nicole Highet, said online eTherapy may be an effective alternative for people with depression and anxiety who can’t or won’t access help from mental health professionals.

“We know that more than half of all Australians with depression and anxiety don’t get the help they need for a range of reasons. There may be a lack of services in their area, they may not be able to afford the consultation fees or perhaps they’re too embarrassed or ashamed to ask for help,” Dr. Highet said.

Over 7000 people have completed e-PASS, an online psychological and assessment referral system, through Anxiety Online. When compared to the labour costs involved in traditional face-to-face services, this has resulted in a potential crude cost saving of AUD\$6.7 million in the first 18 months of the online clinic’s operation.

Anxiety Online will soon become *Mental Health Online* as new eTherapy treatment programs for depression, bulimia, insomnia, problem gambling, drugs and alcohol and hoarding are offered.

From mid 2012 Mental Health Online consumers who opt for therapist assistance will be able to choose from email, instant messaging, audio or video-chat, as well as communicating and interacting within 3D virtual reality environments and collaborative working spaces.

More information: *Anxiety Online* is funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing, and in future will be accessible via the emerging National e-Mental Health Portal. See: www.anxietyonline.org.au

Provided by Swinburne University of Technology

Citation: Clinic offers a 'virtual' helping hand (2011, November 8) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-11-clinic-virtual.html>

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