Telephone Talk: Psychotherapy in Your Pajamas?

May 11, 2010 By David Evans

New research from Brigham Young University suggests that telephone-based psychotherapy might be about as effective as face-to-face treatment for some people with depression. Looks like we won't even have to get out of our P.J.'s to get our heads shrunk anymore.

The study was quite small, only 30 people, and it didn't directly compare the telephone intervention to standard face-to-face therapy. Rather, the authors state that the 42 percent recovery rate of those receiving telephone counseling is comparable to the roughly 50 percent of people who recover from depression through face-to-face counseling. They also state that the rate of recovery in their study is comparable to another study of antidepressant medication, which did include telephone counseling.

> "Offering a phone or webcam option for psychotherapy does appear warranted from an efficacy point of view," said Diane Spangler, a BYU psychology professor and a coauthor on the study. "It's more user- friendly - no commutes, more flexibility of place and time - and has no side effects."

I suppose for some people telephone counseling is a good option if it proves effective, especially for people who are home-bound, such as the elderly. For me, I don't think there's any substitute for face-to-face. So much of our communication is non-verbal, and there's so much more room for misunderstanding when you can't see your therapist's face and body language. Moreover, since a person's affect (how intellectually and emotionally present he or she appears to others) is such a

vital part of how a therapist can gauge improvement in symptoms, I’m not sure that telephone-only counseling is going to be an ideal alternative to sitting on the couch.

Maybe when web-cam communication improves (I hate the one or two second delay with current options like Skype) we can go virtual with counseling. In the meantime, I’ll take the couch over the phone any day. What do you think?

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