How can telemental health help reduce the loneliness and isolation of the elderly?

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The goal of the paper is to draw attention to the importance of telemental health and how it can contribute to reducing the loneliness and isolation of the elderly, by reviewing the literature. The author briefly presents how the use of digital technology has contributed to the social and mental health care of the elderly during the coronavirus epidemic, and what changes have taken place. The study concludes with recommendations for the use of ICT by social workers and the development of telemental health services for the elderly.

Results

According to the literature review and research results, digital technology can play a major role in reducing the loneliness and isolation of the elderly, providing social and mental health services, and supporting the work of caregivers. Based on a review of the literature, Farrell Bohan reports that "the utilization of telehealth visits has a potential psychological benefit by dramatically increasing the quality of life for seniors. Additionally, it can decrease the financial burden of emergency department visits or missed appointments with their primary care provider" (Farrell 2020: 3). Elderly people using telehealth services feel less lonely, their sense of security and well-being increases during the telehealth treatment. The proportion of depressed people due to loneliness decreases among the elderly who use the video conferencing service (Farell 2020). Telehealth and online group interventions can help to connect lonely and

isolated older adults (Zubatsky et al. 2020) With the assistance of technology, even the elderly living in different care homes can build new friendships and get to know each other, which can significantly reduce their loneliness and isolation, so video calls are able to improve socialization among older people and their peers (Zamir et al. 2020). Several studies have shown that there are effective interventions against social isolation and loneliness that connect the elderly with others, such as by phone, online video chat or social media (Gorenko and co-authors 2021). At the same time, it is important to note that in terms of efficiency, it is of great importance in what form, what kind of device is used, and whether the elderly have been prepared to use the technology. Also, it seems that the elderly still demand the retention of traditional forms of communication (i.e., telephone) in addition to online options (Gorenko et al. 2021). Video communication can help reduce loneliness and isolation and improve the quality of life, satisfaction and self-esteem of the elderly (Széman 2013). Particularly interesting is the research of Milliken and his co-authors, who examined the video communication of Canadians between the ages of 55 and 77 and disproved the stereotype about the elderly that they are basically dismissive and uninterested in technology use (Milliken et al. 2012). The experiences of the Skype Care intervention model program presented by Zsuzsa Széman (Széman 2012) disproved the prejudice that elderly people in need of care are incapable of acquiring technical knowledge. It has been proven that old and chronically ill people are also able to learn to use new ICT, if they are sufficiently motivated and receive support and help in learning. "Loneliness and depression of the elderly participating in the program have disappeared, and their interpersonal relationships are expanding. With the cessation of depression, many of its health problems also disappear, which reduces the expenses of the health care system and the burden on social care workers. Through the possibilities provided by infocommunication, the elderly can reintegrate themselves into society." (Széman 2012: 15) In a 2014 Australian research (Banbury et al. 2017), services provided to elderly people with chronic conditions living in their own homes were examined, the effect of video conference groups provided on a weekly basis. Participation in video conference education groups increased the social support of the participants, the expansion of their network of relationships and enhanced better self-management for older people (Banbury et al. 2017). Milliken and his co-authors described the phenomenon of how video communication reduces feelings of loneliness. "Seeing the other person in the conversation allows engagement with a deeper connection, even after a long time had passed since they had met in person. The social presence enabled by video increased their engagement in the activity. The ability for the person to make him or herself seen on video has value, since social presence

is not just about seeing other people; it is also about being seen, and presumably, heard" (Milliken et al. 2012).

The mental health of the elderly can be supported not only by the possibility of building relationships with peers and friends and by reducing loneliness. Psychologists, social workers and other professional helpers offer many services on the Internet, including online therapies and individual consultations. These can be very important, for example, in processing losses, grief, and solving social and family problems. There are online mental health programs and applications specifically for the elderly. With the help of ICT, the elderly and their caregivers can communicate more easily and stay in touch with each other. Digital technology can not only make the lives of the elderly easier and better, but also make the work of their caregivers easier, for example by providing guidance, professional and mental support (Marziali 2005, Chiu et al. 2009).

Conclusions and recommandations

In summary, it can be said that information and communication technologies can greatly support the healthy and active old age of the elderly and, if necessary, their care and support (Bene, Móré, Zombory 2020). There are many well-functioning telemental health model programs, projects, and initiatives, and it is important to share domestic and international good practices in connection with the services and care provided to the elderly with the help of ICT. It would be worth further research in the near future to what extent the pandemic situation has changed the use of technology and social media by clients and social professionals, what experiences there were during the coronavirus emergency, and how the increased use of ICT affected inequalities. The further spread of telemedicine and thus telemental health services is expected, with its effective application we can provide better, more targeted services that are better adapted to the needs of the population. The problem hindering the spread of telemental health services is that the cooperation between social and healthcare professionals is not strong enough, and in the care systems, the care of the patient/client run on separate threads. There is a lack of a holistic approach, keeping the client's physical, mental, and social well-being in mind, providing them with appropriate care, and protecting their health. In its announcement, the European Commission emphasizes that the spread of telemedicine services is also hindered by the fact that health and social workers do not know the potential of electronic health care and the potential users are unprepared (EU Commission 2012). It is also very important that the clients and helpers are involved in the design of the various tools, programs and software and that their feedback is also taken into account, that these tools are user-friendly, that they

feel that the use of the given tool helps them, supports them and does not mean extra burden, difficulty to use. It is advisable to develop solutions that the elderly can use independently or with minimal skill development. The introduction of the use of ICT in elderly care raises many legal questions and ethical dilemmas, and it would be very important to clarify them and conduct further research.

In addition to the need for infrastructural development of the social care system, it can be formulated as a recommendation that the training of social professionals, psychologists and other helpers needs to be transformed, and their digital literacy needs to be developed. As Perron and his co-authors point out, the use of ICT has not been sufficiently emphasized in the training and practice of social workers, which poses the danger that they will not be competitive in the provision of health and psychosocial services (Perron et al. 2010). Therefore, it is necessary to prepare students and practitioners for the ethical and professional use of ICT, for communication in the online space, and for the conscious use of social media. It would be important to create protocols, professional and methodological guidelines for online communication, social work and counseling. According to the results of my previous research, social professionals have a great need for this support (Tóth 2021).

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