

“Technology will not make psychotherapists redundant. They are here to stay.”



THE NEXT 30 YEARS ...

Tom Van Daele

Digital technology has increasingly become a part of our everyday lives. In psychotherapy, however, uptake has been relatively limited. Both psychotherapists and clients seemed to remain reluctant to experiment with technology and cherished the face-to-face contact they have with each other.

COVID-19 led to a big chance, as it forced all of us to quickly adapt and experiment, primarily with telepsychotherapy: online consultations allowed to remain in touch. When things 'go back to normal', should we return to conventional psychotherapy, or should psychotherapists try to continue to broaden their horizon and open up to the possibilities technology might be able to offer?

Apps and virtual reality

Especially in the context of trauma treatment, there are thoroughly researched opportunities available. The use of technology in mental healthcare, often referred to as e-mental health, has only been around for a couple decades. There is nevertheless already an extensive body of research available, particularly on mood and anxiety disorders. Because of the limited technological possibilities in the early days, most interventions

primarily focused on adults, though. Perhaps surprisingly, virtual reality exposure therapy is especially well-established. This approach has originally been developed by the United States military to help war veterans cope with trauma. As consumer-grade VR-headsets are now becoming increasingly available, VR is however gradually making its way to individual psychotherapists for use in general (trauma) treatment. Perhaps less flashy, but nevertheless also worthwhile mentioning are smartphone apps or online interventions. Some offer support in the diagnostic screening process (mirrorapp.org), whereas others offer (guided) self-help. As the majority of tools and services are currently Anglo-Saxon and often insufficiently tailored to local context, we will probably see an increase in the availability of custom tools better tailored to therapeutic background and preferences of psychotherapists and clients in the years to come.

The expertise of the psychotherapist

Technological challenges obviously remain. Fairly novel approaches are for example currently making their way from (lab) research to clinical practice. Think for example of wearables: using psychophysiology, these could help to detect triggers or challenging events that might happen to clients in their everyday lives. The main challenge at the moment, is nevertheless implementation: applying what has been established in research in clinical practice. On the one hand, this concerns learning psychotherapists, who are not necessarily tech-savvy or really into technology, how to interact with such tech. On the other hand, technology can only provide added value, if psychotherapists also learn how to incorporate technology in their clinical practice. They are best positioned to use technology as an opportunistic, meaningful extension, ideally leading to an enhancement of the way they currently offer care. As such a process heavily relies on their clinical expertise, psychotherapists do not need to fear that technology might make them redundant. They are here to stay.

Using tech as a part of a broader skillset

In the future, automated technology, like chatbots, might be able to replace some in person contact, but this will only be a minor part of psychotherapy. Technology will probably play a more important role as a part of the extensive skill set of psychotherapists. Currently, when tech is used as a part of that skill-set, we often refer to treatment as blended psychotherapy, mixing technology with conventional practice. In time though, using technology will – and probably should – no longer receive such a specific label, and will merely (again) be considered as psychotherapy.

Want to read more?

Van Daele, T., Karekla, M., Kassianos, A. P., Compare, A., Haddouk, L., Salgado, J., Ebert, D. D., Trebbi, G. (on behalf of the EFPA Project Group on eHealth), Bernaerts, S., Van Assche, E., & De Witte, N. A. J. (2020). Recommendations for policy and practice of telepsychotherapy and e-mental health in Europe and beyond. *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration*, 30(2), 160-173. <https://doi.org/10.1037/int0000218>.



BIO

Tom Van Daele is the head of the Expertise Unit Psychology, Technology & Society at Thomas More University of Applied Sciences and a research fellow at the Centre for the Psychology of Learning and Experimental Psychopathology at KU Leuven. As a clinical psychologist, he primarily conducts research in mental healthcare, particularly focussing on the added value of technology. On this topic, he recently published a book (in Dutch) with Academia Press, titled 'ePsychologie. Over technologie in therapie'.

“Perhaps surprisingly, virtual reality exposure therapy is especially well-established”

