

Calgary Counselling Centre study finds virtual counselling is as effective as in-person services

CALGARY, June 28, 2023 – Using data collected from the Calgary Counselling Centre (CCC) before and during the pandemic, researchers have found virtual mental health services — telemental health — are as effective as in-person services in treating people with a wide range of mental health concerns.

The study titled [Effectiveness of telemental health during the COVID-19 pandemic: A propensity score noninferiority analysis of outcomes. \(apa.org\)](#), and adds to a growing body of research demonstrating the benefits of virtual services for mental health.

“Before the pandemic, a few studies identified concerns about whether counsellors are able to establish an adequate relationship with their client over the phone or video call, and whether they’d miss important non-verbal cues,” says Robbie Babins-Wagner, a social worker, researcher and CEO of CCC. “We have found virtual counselling delivers the same, if not slightly better, outcomes for clients.”

As the pandemic spread around the world and public health measures were enacted to minimize face-to-face contact, CCC pivoted from delivering in-person services to counselling over the phone, or with video calls in early 2020. This “natural experiment” provided an excellent opportunity to study the effectiveness of telemental health services.

The research team compared data collected from CCC’s telemental services during the pandemic as well as data measuring outcomes from in-person services collected before Covid-19. The study sample included 19,460 people; 16,852 had received in-person treatment between March 2015 and March 2020 and 2,788 received therapy over the phone or video conference between March 16, 2020 and March 15, 2021.

“As well as being as effective as in-person care, virtual services offers other benefits,” says Babins-Wagner. “Virtual services mean clients don’t have to get in the car, use public transit, walk, pay for parking or arrange for childcare. It also reduces any stigma people may feel sitting in a waiting room with other clients. And anecdotally, we found with the virtual connection some people reported an even stronger connection with their counsellor.”

Dr. Bruce Wampold, Professor Emeritus at the University of Wisconsin—Madison and a coauthor of the study, noted, “During the pandemic, the number of people suffering from mental disorders and stress has risen dramatically. In North America, as well as around the world, the lack of access to quality mental health care is an immense tragedy. Telemental health allows individuals to obtain care from any location, without the challenges of transportation, absences from home or work, and other structural barriers. To find that mental health services delivered at a distance are as effective, or possibly more effective, than in person services, allows for the expansion of services to those in need.”

“The future of counselling or psychotherapy services will likely include both virtual and in-person services,” says Babins-Wagner. “Calgary Counselling Centre offers both and this hybrid model gives people more options to feel better and helps address concerns around significant barriers to care such as mobility, stigma and scheduling.”

Calgarians can choose between either in-person or virtual counselling with no waitlist at Calgary Counselling Centre, where more than 20,000 counselling hours have been delivered to more than 3,000 clients to date in 2023. People across Alberta can also access services through Counselling Alberta, which offers virtual counselling across the province and in-person counselling in six locations: Edmonton, Fort McMurray, Grande Prairie, Lethbridge, Medicine Hat, and Red Deer.

About Calgary Counselling Centre:

Since 1962, Calgary Counselling Centre has been providing the most effective counselling services with the highest client results in the industry. As the preeminent research, training and knowledge-based counselling organization in Canada, The Centre offers counselling to all age groups in a variety of areas including depression, children’s programs, domestic abuse, eating disorders, separation/divorce, trauma and self-esteem. Through ongoing research and education programs, Calgary Counselling Centre is committed to meeting the changing needs of our community.

About Counselling Alberta:

Counselling Alberta is a new division of Calgary Counselling Centre that was launched in June 2022. The Calgary Counselling Centre has been providing the most effective counselling services with the highest client results in the industry for 60 years. As the preeminent research, training, and knowledge-based counselling organization in Canada, Counselling Alberta offers virtual counselling services to all age groups in a variety of areas including depression, children’s programs, domestic abuse, eating disorders, separation/divorce, trauma, and self-esteem.

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