

Fostering Students' Mental Health in a Covid-19 Era: E- Counselling, Paradigm Shift and Issues of Policy

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Abstract

This effort theoretically examined the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on students' mental health. It evaluated the roles of school-based counselors in providing mental health services to them through e-counseling since the ongoing pandemic requires physical distancing as a means of controlling the spread of Coronavirus. Psychological disturbances among students are expected to be high due to the psychosocial disruptions produced by prolonged isolation, and other challenges attributable to the pandemic. Professionals in various disciplines have adopted e-platforms to carry out their activities. Thus, this effort sought to engage counselors with the necessity of embracing e-therapy to foster students' mental wellbeing. Thus, the essentiality of a paradigm shift from conventional counseling to online counselling cannot be overstressed; issues of policy in the administration of guidance and counseling in a Covid-19 era are crucial. Therefore, the need to put in place policy guidelines for online counseling to enhance effective delivery of counseling services with ethical values in view cannot be overemphasized. It is hereby recommended, among others, that counseling bodies worldwide need to rub minds to share knowledge and skills on how to reposition counseling to meet the emerging and peculiar counseling needs of students.

Keywords

mental health challenges; covid-19; e-counseling; new paradigms in mental health; students; counseling advocacies

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INTRODUCTION

Students' mental health remains one of the significant concerns of counselors, specifically for school-based counselors whose influence on students is quite significant. The Covid-19 pandemic has come to change counseling relationships remarkably, following the social distancing policies to check the spread of the Coronavirus. Although many countries have begun reopening schools, the condition still does not favor face-to-face counseling as physical distance should still be maintained. The pandemic has caused considerable mental health problems for students worldwide, and this requires a suitable therapeutic intervention strategy to foster psychological stability among them. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, there were reports of surging mental health challenges among school-aged students (Lambie, Haugen, Borland, & Campbell, 2019). The pandemic came and heightened mental health challenges among the adolescent population that is already volatile due to many life stressors precipitating and perpetuating psychological maladaptiveness. It means that concerted efforts of school-based counselors and researchers are needed to halt anything that would further worsen the already-not-too-good situation of mental health among students. Predictably, the pandemic will create significant emotional disturbances (WHO, 2020; UNICEF, 2020; Khan et al., 2020). This development calls for school-based counselors to go back to the drawing board to develop strategies to keep students healthy psychologically while not jeopardizing their lives and those who benefit from their helping services. School-based counselor educators must also put on their thinking caps to develop research findings to help put counseling services at the forefront of the battle against Covid-19. Research throwing more light on the workability or the operational dynamics of e-counseling will be a tremendous help to counseling practitioners and researchers.

The pandemic disruption which cuts across all spheres of life has led to the advancement of the use of e-platforms so that people can adjust and remain relevant in their chosen careers. As a result of the abrupt closure of schools, many educational institutions switched to digital teaching and learning platforms (Onyema et al., 2020). Corporate meetings are now held through different online platforms. Religious services are held online, and businessmen and women have adopted online transaction modes markedly. Thus, counseling practice at a time like this cannot remain docile or insensitive to an urgent call to accept the reality of embracing e-counseling. The pandemic should change the texture of school counseling. School-based counseling should embrace a paradigm shift from conventional counseling to e-counseling to retain its potency in fostering students' emotionality. Thus, school-based counselors should not sit on the fence in the face of an enormous challenge that threatens to put them out of service and make them irrelevant but should rise to the occasion and endorse a viable option at their disposal, which is e-counseling.

Policies in various countries guide School-based counselors. Different countries have different policies depending on how they perceive counseling and what they intend to offer their citizens through the instrumentality of counseling. Counseling in countries like Nigeria, Kenya, and the United States of America has policies to guide its operation (cf., Federal Ministry of Education, 2014; GOK, 2005 as cited in Boitt, 2016; ASCA, 2019). However, policy and implementation issues are still a significant concern in school-based counseling in terms of the scope of service delivery (Lambie et al. 2019; Aluede & Adubale, 2020). The counselors' functions in some countries are still blurred because of misconceptions (Denga, 2001). School-based counselors have enormous tasks during this

pandemic, and their roles should be clearly defined in schools so that students can benefit maximally from their psychotherapeutic functions. Proper understanding of the counselors' potential roles in students' mental health by school authorities and society at large will help de-escalate mental health challenges among students.

Objectives of the Study

The objective of this study was to evaluate the ongoing Covid- 19 pandemic to appraise a workable alternative to face-to-face counseling since the social distance is needed to stem the tide of the spread of the virus and the disease. Therefore, the thrust of this effort was to evaluate the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic concerning students' mental health, intending to project e-counseling as a viable tool in addressing students' mental health. The purpose of the study was divided into the following subheadings: Introduction, the concept of mental health, effects of pandemics on mental health, e-counseling as a Panacea to mental health challenges of students in a pandemic era, policy formulation, and implication for effective e-counseling. Hence, the study advocates adopting e-counseling as a deployable therapeutic approach to foster students' mental health during the pandemic. Issues of policy guidelines that can enhance ethical practice among professional was also a pursuit in this study.

Significance of the Study

The study is a panoramic view of the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on students' mental health, emphasizing advocacy for e-therapy as a viable alternative to conventional counseling. A study of this nature is significant in several ways. As a result of this study, school counselors, psychologists, and significant others in the helping profession could appreciate the need for a paradigm shift from conventional counseling to e-counseling as a dependable alternative therapeutic approach. The outcome of this study is expected to propel educational policymakers to work towards the inclusion of e- therapy in the whole school guidance program. It is equally expected that curriculum planners in designing guidance and counseling education curriculum will find the advocacies in this study as evidence to push for the inclusion of e-counseling in counselors' curricular plan, especially the practicum design for counselors in training. It is also expected that the outcome of this endeavor serves as fertile ground to inspire further research efforts.

METHOD

This study is theoretical research that relies on secondary data sources from existing literature. It is a conceptual piece. "Conceptual piece focuses on integrating and developing relationships among constructs. Thus, the onus is on developing logical and complete arguments for associations rather than testing them empirically" (Gilson & Goldberg 2015, p.127). The researchers sought and collected data from reliable online sources by using mainly Google search engines. Keywords like "mental health," "Covid-19," "Online counseling," "Impact of Covid-19," "E-counseling guidelines," among others, were used to search for articles and reliable sites. The researchers carefully selected relevant materials, synthesized, inductively, and deductively applied them to the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Concept of Mental Health

Mental health is a state of mental wellness or state of mind. People cope well with life's stressors, display psychological resilience, make personal and social adjustments, and be productive and fruitful in their communities (WHO 2018; Mullen, 2010). Mental health challenges can lead to impairment or dysfunctionality of daily activities (Oyewunmi, Iyiola, & Ojo. 2015). Schmidt (2007) noted that Mental health problems might be associated with genetics, environmental stressors, psychological factors, brain defects, substance abuse, among others. Life stressors have been consistently reported as predictors of mental health disruptions. Studies have shown that trauma from a crime scene, sexual assault and violence, loss of a family member, natural disaster, terrorism (LeDoux & Gorman 2001), and daily hassles can precipitate or trigger mental health problems. Psychosocial variables like the distress associated with the Covid-19 pandemic can trigger mental disorders like depression, anxiety, insomnia, and trauma reactions like acute stress disorder or posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among students. Before the pandemic, there were challenges here and there about worsening situations of mental health among young people. Lawal, Mosaku, Ola, and Morakinyo (2014) reported in a study that 68.7% of people diagnosed with mental disorders in Nigeria were below the age of 32.

Mental health is a leading cause of emotional disturbances among young people globally as it has a fundamental influence on their social, biological, and psychological development. According to Beiter and colleagues (2014), the Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA) stated that 7 out of 10 adults in the United States manifested symptoms of moderate level anxiety or stress every day. Dully and colleagues (2020) also posited that a study conducted by the Global Burden of Disease stated that depression and anxiety disorders create the highest degree of dysfunctionality in mental and substance abuse disorders. Therefore, it makes sense to hypothesize that any students are likely to be experiencing depression and anxiety disorders due to the pandemic. WHO (2010) postulated that mental health impairment among children and adolescents has increased and forecasted a rise in cases by 50% in 2020. This report shows that school-aged children are likely to have increased mental health problems even without the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. The point to be stressed here is that with the outbreak of Covid-19, cases of mental disturbances among students are expected to rise.

Prolonged psychological disturbances can lead to comorbidities of mental disorders. Two or more mental disorders can be present in an individual. A study by Ebben & Spielman (2009) revealed that insomnia showed a relationship with anxiety and depression among clients; and Ohayon and Roth (2003, cited in Ebben et al., 2009) postulated that anxiety was observed before insomnia in 43% of cases and that insomnia combined with anxiety in 39% of cases. It means that students who go through traumatic episodes leading to one mental health challenge or another are likely to develop other emotional disturbances as comorbidities. WHO (2014) posited that depression was the number one cause of illness and disability of adolescents, with suicide as the number three cause of death for the same population. These scary findings concerning adolescents' mental health shows that psychological or mental instability can be typical among school-aged children and adolescents, even without the pandemic.

Mental health challenges can be treated through appropriate counseling or psychotherapy. Research evidence has shown that behavioral treatments like counseling provide better therapeutic benefits when compared with medications (Ebben et al., 2009). According to WHO (2014), if adolescents with mental health challenges get the care they need, it can prevent deaths and suffer throughout life. School-based counselors, therefore, are to assist students during this era of Covid-19 to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on them to foster psychological resilience, which can enhance emotional stability. Guidance and counseling programs should address adolescent students' physical, emotional, social, vocational, and academic difficulties (Eyo, Joshua & Esuong, 2010). School-based counselors are better positioned to render e-counseling services to their students than any other counselor because students can relate with them better since they are close to one another.

Effects of Pandemics on Mental Health

The pandemic has potentially affected many individuals' mental health, leading to rising cases of psychological distresses all over the globe (WHO, 2020; Bao, Sun, Meng, Shi, & Lu 2020; Zandifar, & Badrfam, 2020; Sood, 2020). A study conducted in China by Khan and colleagues (2020) reported a sharp increase in fear and anxiety among individuals due to the uncertainty associated with Covid-19. Lockdown and quarantine could trigger significant psychological or psychiatric disruptions like posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, panic disorders, and behavioral maladjustments. The study of Khan and colleagues (2020) corroborated another study carried out in China by Wang and colleagues (2020), which opined that the Covid-19 pandemic in a survey of 1,210 participants. 53.8% had moderate to severe psychological disturbances; 16.5% reported moderate to severe depression symptoms; 28.8% with moderate to severe anxiety; and 8.1% had moderate to severe stress levels. In Bangladesh, a study conducted by Islam and colleagues (2020) also confirmed that university students experienced increased levels of depression and anxiety.

The researchers further postulated that 15% reported moderately severe depression; 18.1% confirmed severe anxiety. Empirical research carried out by Olaseni, Akinsola, Agberotimi, and Oguntayo (2020), comprising 502 subjects between 18 and 78 years, hinted that participants confirmed insomnia and depression posttraumatic stress symptoms (PTSS), and anxiety as psychological disruptions attributable to the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, Shah and colleagues (2020) posited that the pandemic caused considerable disabling of daily functioning for many individuals worldwide; especially, children were potentially exposed to the risk of mental health disruptions due to prolonged limited social interactions and activities. The pandemic was said to have created fear and emotional distress, negatively impacting their mental health (Shah et al., 2020).

So far, researchers have, through their findings, reported various types of mental health disruptions as consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. Domestic violence increased as students were forced to stay at home. According to the European Society of Children and Adolescents Psychiatry, prolonged isolation or loneliness affects children and adolescents, short, medium, or long term (ESAP, 2020).

E- Counseling as a Panacea to Mental Health Challenges of Students in a Pandemic Era

The enormous psychological trauma students are going through during this pandemic should propel a concerned school-based counselor to brace up to face. The task of reaching them at all costs is to give them hope and provide platforms for enhancing qualitative psychological resilience to help them stay mentally healthy to achieve such a noble task. The school-based counselor needs a strategy to bring about the result. In this case, the counselor must keep to the physical distance policies of Covid-19 to protect themselves and their clients. The online counseling approach seems to be the best option. According to Khan and colleagues (2020), tele-counseling is a suitable intervention mode that can provide alleviation of acute distress, depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress; and offer Psychological resilience to prevent psychotic or traumatic disruptions.

Online counseling uses an internet platform to reach out to clients. These platforms include telephone, internet, and teleconferencing (Bada, 2013; American Psychology Association, 2010). Some of the online resources that can be deployed in an e-therapy relationship are electronic mail or email, video conferencing, instant messaging and chats (Zamani, 2009), telephone (Christogiorgos, Vassilopoulou, Florou, Xydou, Douvou, Vgenopoulou, & Tsiantis, 2010) and counseling games (Bada, 2013). Similarly, National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC 2016) listed the format of e-counseling to include: telephone-based (voice), email-based (text message), chat-based (text message); video-based (video and audio); and social network-based (social networking mechanisms). Online therapy has proven beneficial inaccessibility, flexibility, cost-effectiveness, and time management (Andersson & Titov, 2014; Mastura, Zainudin, & Hamzah, 2001).

E-therapy can be an effective therapeutic model. A study by Thomas, Lee, and Ess (2015) titled: "Design and Implementation of Therapist Online Counseling" revealed that therapist-assisted online (TAO), an online therapeutic approach that encourages lesser contacts with therapists, was effective. The online therapist-assisted approach led to increased client treatment, engagement, compliance, and completion of therapeutic rates (Spek et al., 2007 as cited by Thomas et al., 2015). This therapeutic model can be deployed by school-based counselors to enhance students' emotional needs during a pandemic since the model encourages lesser contact periods with clients in line with the physical distancing policy of Covid-19. Similarly, Reynolds, Stiles, and Grohol (2006) compared the session impact of face-to-face therapy with online therapy. Their preliminary results proved that online clients received similar session therapeutic experiences as did face-to-face clients. In another research conducted by Kessler, Lewis, Kaur, Wiles, King, Weich, Sharp, Araya, Hollinghurst, and Peters (2009), findings claimed that with 113 participants in an intervention group and 97 in a control group, 43 (38%) of patients recovered from depression after receiving an online CBT treatment. The researchers concluded that CBT seemed to be effective when administered online by a therapist; and stated that the treatment retained its effectiveness for over eight months.

The concern of some researchers and practitioners in the helping field, including counseling, borders on the effectiveness of e-counseling processes; however, findings have evidence of effective therapeutic processes. There are reports that empathy, warmth, and related therapeutic interactions can be established and sustained throughout an e-counseling through technologically supported devices that can impact clients (Barak & Grohol, 2011). It has also been observed that clients and therapists can have similar

therapeutic experiences in an online counseling mode, as obtainable in a face-to-face counseling relationship (King, Bambling, Reid, & Thomas, 2006). Furthermore, in a study, Duffy and colleagues (2020) elucidated that CBT was a valuable option that reduced waiting times and enhanced clinical efficiency in patients with anxiety and depression.

With the enormous advantages of e-counseling, students' mental health can be maintained in a pandemic era. Research has shown the effectiveness of e-counseling processes and outcomes, making it a viable alternative counseling medium to face-to-face counseling. Reports of evidence of the effectiveness of e-therapy are a testament to the fact that transition from face-to-face to e-counseling could be hitch-free if appropriate training and enhancements are put in place by school-based counselors and other stakeholders.

Policy Formulation and Implication for Effective E-Counseling

Different countries have different policies that govern their counseling services depending on presenting psychosocial needs (Martin, Lauterbach, & Carey, 2015; Stephen & Olusegun, 2014). ASCA (2019), in its policy statement, confined school-based counselors in the USA to referral services and monitoring in terms of the mental health of students. This development has posed a considerable concern to researchers (Carey, 2020; Cinotti, 2014, Lambie et al., 2019) because of the limited scope of mental health service that is deliverable by school-based counselors. Gupta (2014) attested to the availability of policy documents for guidance and counseling for schools in India but hinted that it could not find appropriate policy instruments in organizational structure, funds, human resources, monitoring, and evaluation modalities. Cross-nationally, school-based counselors' roles can present different textures along five dimensions: Counseling Services; Advocacy and Systemic Improvement; Prevention Programs; Administrator Role; and Educational and Career Planning. (Carey, Fan, He, & Jin, 2020; Aluede & Adubale, 2020). School-based counseling is practiced in over 90 countries, yet significant differences in practice are still common among practitioners (Harris, 2013; cited in Fan, Carey, Martin, & He, 2019). The school counselors' role is somewhat blurred in the educational context in most African countries as they engage in different school activities; particularly in Nigeria, they are assigned teaching and administrative duties (Aluede et al. 2020). The challenges facing school-based counseling need to be resolved through legislation to make school counselors profitable in combating the psychological distresses of students during a pandemic. Students' mental health has to be prioritized in the roles assigned to counselors to effectively deliver mental health services to students.

A significant impediment to e-counseling, especially in developing countries, is policies and implementations. For instance, NBCC (2016) specified 20 items as standards for distance professional services to be observed by National Certified Counselors (NCCs) in America. The policies covered adherence to all NBCC policies and procedures, educational qualifications and experience, adherence to legal regulations, and more (see NBCC, 2016 for details). Australian Counseling Association, ACA (n.d) also adopted the British Association of Counseling Practitioners (BACP) guidelines for e-therapy. The purpose of the guidelines was to provide essential guidance for counseling and psychotherapy services over the internet. While it was written primarily for practitioners, it will also be helpful to providers of online therapy services.

The question that one could ask here is: what is the role of school-based counselors in various countries in providing mental health to students through online platforms in a

pandemic period like Covid-19? The more significant question is: what is the likely outcome of e-counseling in developing countries that are even still grappling with regular counseling services? The world needs the services of counselors at this time of the pandemic, and school counselors are needed to play crucial roles to alleviate the psychological traumas students face at this time. Therefore, adequate policy and implementation strategies must be put in place by various counseling bodies across the globe to address the challenges at hand. A transition from regular counseling to e-counseling at this period is a *sine qua non*. There should be a paradigm shift from regular counseling to e-counseling, and swift actions are required from school counselors and other stakeholders to make the transition smooth or seamless to help students to overcome mental health challenges occasioned by the Covid-19 pandemic.

CONCLUSION

The challenges of students' mental health in a pandemic era of Covid-19 and the role of school-based counselors in fostering students' mental health informed this effort. Looking at the restrictions placed on us by the Covid-19 pandemic, a viable option to face-to-face counseling must be adopted by school-based to align with physical distancing ethos as prescribed by health experts. E-therapy platforms should be put in place to forestall the dangers the pandemic disruptions can cause to students' emotions in the difficult periods we are presently experiencing. Recommendations; Based on the outcome of this effort, it is as a result of this recommended as follows: a policy that can support school-based counselors in the engagement of mental health counseling on the broader scale should be put in place so that their services will not be limited to prevention as prescribed by ASCA in 2019; countries, where counseling is practiced, should come with policies to guide online counseling to avoid abuse of professional ethics; training and retraining of counselors should be put in place by various governments in conjunction with counseling bodies to enhance effective service delivery, and counselors worldwide need to work hand in hand so that they can help one another in terms of knowledge and skills dissemination among practitioners.

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