Teletherapy Boosts Access to Mental Health but Not for People of Color

The pandemic may have increased access to therapy for many Americans, but disparities persist for Black, Latino and other communities.

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For years, medical professionals have been touting telemedicine as a means of expanding access to health care by saving patients time, removing physical barriers, and making it easier to connect with providers. But data show that over the past year, when teletherapy should have been having a renaissance, many barriers to access to care persist, especially for people of color, Time reports.

According to a series of national surveys conducted by Time and Harris, about half of all survey respondents reported using telehealth since the pandemic began, compared with just 25% who said they did so before March 2020. However, only 5% said they had received mental health care during this period—findings that mirror data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which found mental health care increased only 6% during the crisis.

Meanwhile, the number of adults reporting unmet mental health needs significantly increased from 2020 to 2021, rising from 9% to almost 12%, according to a different study by the CDC. And while white people saw a 132% increase in teletherapy during the pandemic, African-American rates increased by only about 66%, and Latino respondents saw an increase of only 51%. This is troubling news considering that several studies show that minorities are experiencing far higher rates of anxiety, depression and other mental health issues than their white counterparts.

The barriers to care, experts say, are manifold. For one thing, a single therapy session can still cost more than $100 without insurance in many parts of the country, a steep price that telehealth has done very little to address. What's more, other studies reveal a dearth of therapists nationwide, with more than 125 million people living in an area with a shortage of mental health practitioners and up to 7% of American adults without the internet access needed to connect to teletherapists.

Public health advocates say culturally competent care is also an issue. Indeed, just 10% of U.S. psychiatrists are Black, Hispanic, American Indian or Asian American and Pacific Islander and even fewer are fluent in Spanish or other languages that many people of color are more comfortable speaking, especially when addressing complex emotional problems in therapy.

“If we truly want to reduce the gap [in mental health care usage] we need to make it a trustworthy system where people feel they can connect with their therapist of psychiatrist,” said Amanda Calhoun, PhD, a psychiatry resident at Yale University and a fellow on the American Psychological Association’s (APA) Council on Minority Mental Health and Health Disparities.

Advocates say making mental health care more affordable, accessible and culturally appropriate could take years, and many of them continue to fight for universal health care as a solution and propose providing incentives for Black and Latino doctors to enter the mental health care field. If you’re interested in seeking teletherapy, check out “5 Tips for a Successful Telemedicine Visit.”

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