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How to assess for client suitability for online CBT programmes

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The question as to which clients are most suitable and most likely to benefit from online CBT programmes is a key question in trying to assess which clients should be offered this type of intervention. Assessing suitability is a crucial responsibility when evaluating whether a client's needs and preferences are best met by an online programme.

The present guide aims to provide a reference point for clinicians to support them in their assessment of client suitability for online interventions.

What to assess

By an individual's suitability for an online programme we mean the range of personal features such as preferences, skills, resources and clinical presentation as well as their therapeutic presentation in terms of characteristics that are more or less likely to lead to a positive therapeutic outcome.

Personal features

In terms of personal features that may indicate an individual's suitability for an online programme these can be divided in two categories of clinical presentation and individual characteristics.

Aspects to consider in assessing an individual's suitability for online programmes:

Personal features:

- Presenting issues

- Individual characteristics
  - Demographics
  - Language and literacy
  - Computer literacy and access

Suitability for CBT online programmes:

- Motivation and psychological mindedness

- Ability to formulate difficulties and goals

- Functioning and support

- Client preference

Presenting issues

A main feature of any assessment is to establish the severity level, time of onset and duration of clients' difficulties. Different services provide different levels of interventions to meet clients' needs and, since different intensities and types of interventions are recommended for different clinical presentations, it is crucial for services to assess whether they can meet an individual's needs.

Online programmes are considered a type of self-administered therapeutic, low intensity intervention and best practice guidelines recommend these for individuals presenting with mild to moderate levels of depression and anxiety (NICE, 2004,2009).

In assessing whether the individual's clinical presentation indicates that a low-intensity intervention such as an online programme might be appropriate the clinician should assess the level of distress (low to severe). The presence of suicidal ideation or psychotic symptoms should indicate a high level of distress and a need for much more intense monitoring and support than an online solution can offer.

The level of chronicity of difficulties presented also needs to be a consideration. Another factor to consider relates to concentration, which can be impaired in some clinical presentations. The time of onset, the duration and frequency of symptoms are factors to explore in assessing chronicity. It is also important to consider this as concentration difficulties may make it difficult for a client to engage with an online programme. While the literature is still inconclusive regarding the suitability for individuals with chronic presentations, it may be argued that a more recent onset and the presence of a baseline of healthy functioning would make it more likely that a low intensity intervention would succeed.

Ask yourself:

- **How distressed is the client?**

- **Is the client suicidal or experiencing psychotic symptoms?**

- **Are the difficulties of recent onset or ongoing and recurrent?**

- **How able is the client to concentrate?**

- **How well is the client currently functioning?**

Client characteristics

There are three main areas concerning client characteristics that should be assessed in establishing suitability for online interventions: demographics, literacy levels and computer literacy.

Demographics

In terms of demographic variables **research has found that individuals aged 19-39 appear to benefit the most from online interventions (Barak et al., 2008).** However, it can be argued that this coincides with the advent and development of technologies and is likely to adjust with the growing older population. It may also be important to assess whether there may be cultural associations or meanings that may mean an online programme may or may not be a suitable intervention mode.

Language and literacy

Proficiency in the use of the language in which the programme is available is also going to be crucial. While this may be true for any kind of intervention in an online environment there are not opportunities for clarifications and other in-person queues are absent, which can give raise to misunderstanding. As the written language is often a core medium used in online interventions it is also important to assess a client's literacy skills.

Computer literacy and access

Given that online programmes are by definition delivered through computer technology, it is essential to ensure that the individual client is computer literate and regularly uses technology in their daily life.

Ask yourself:

- **Is the client able to read and write in English at proficiency level?**

- **Is the client's cultural background compatible with the online programme on offer or is it likely there may be grounds for misinterpretations and misunderstandings?**

- **Does the client have easy access to a computer and internet connection?**

- **Does the client use computer technology and internet regularly?**

Suitability for CBT online programme

There are several elements that influence the extent to which an online intervention may suit a particular individual and therefore give the best chance of a positive outcome. The main factors to consider are: level of motivation, psychological mindedness, ability to set goals and formulate problems in terms of behaviours, thoughts and feelings, presence of external supports and belief that an online intervention might be helpful.

Motivation and psychological mindedness

The level of motivation is an important ingredient as a client whose motivation levels are not very high might need much more support than an online programme can provide. Similarly it is important to assess whether a client believes that they are in charge and able to affect change or whether they are expecting to 'receive' treatment. Clients who see themselves as an active agent of change in charge of their own well-being are more likely to benefit from online self- administered programmes.

Ability to formulate difficulties and goals

As online programmes tend to be structured and based on CBT protocols it is important to assess whether these models suit and make sense to the client. Is the client able to describe and see their difficulties in terms of feelings, their thoughts and behaviours? Can the client see how working on changing these can affect their mental health?

It is also important that the client be able to formulate clear and specific goals and see how a structured intervention can help them achieve these. Previous unsuccessful experiences of therapy, specifically using a CBT model may also need to be explored and considered as a potential indicator that this model may not suit the client.

Functioning and support

Another consideration concerns an individual's current functioning and resources. Some aspects to consider are whether the person is active versus inactive, whether the person has friends, family or other professionals supporting them concurrently.

Client preference

Finally a crucial element in assessing suitability for an online programme is to assess whether the individual is keen on using an online programme to help with their difficulties, whether they believe it can help or whether they may have concerns around privacy or feel it may be too impersonal.

Ask yourself:

- How motivated is the individual to engage with help for his/her difficulties?

- Does the client see themselves as able to affect their wellbeing or are they looking for someone or something to 'fix them'?

- Can the client formulate their difficulties in terms of feelings, thoughts and behaviours and see how these may impact on their wellbeing?

- Is the individual keen on using an online programme and believe it can help them with their difficulties?

- Does the client have other supports?

The client is most suited if:

- Presenting with mild to moderate levels of anxiety and depression

- Acute/ recent onset

- Able to formulate clear goals

- Has access to external supports

- Good level of literacy

- Fluent and frequent user of computer/other technology

- Believes online programme can benefit them, previous experience

- Can formulate their difficulties and goals in terms of their thoughts, behaviours and feelings

The client is less suitable/unsuitable if:

- **They are acutely distressed**
- **Currently at risk of harming self or others**
- **Presents with:**
  - **severe and enduring symptoms of depression**
  - **severe mental health difficulties (e.g. personality disorders, psychosis)**
  - **active addiction or recently recovering from addiction**
- **Has poor literacy**
- **Does not have regular access to internet in a relatively private setting.**
- **Has little or no computer skills.**
- **Does not like the idea of online therapy**
- **Is not suitable for CBT, previous experiences unsuccessful**
- **Has poor psychological mindedness, poor motivation and ability to concentrate**

In conclusion there are a number of factors to consider in assessing an individual's suitability for an online programme. There are variables such as clinical presentation, literacy levels, computer and internet skills that dictate the extent to which an individual's needs can be met by an online programme. There are also a number of factors that indicate whether an individual is likely to benefit from the type and level of support in terms of their personal preferences, belief in the efficacy of type of intervention, level of motivation, psychological mindedness and fit between a CBT based formulation and their own understanding of their difficulties.

It seems crucial that such an assessment should be carried out collaboratively with the individual to ensure the intervention offered is the best possible fit for the client, which in turn is most likely to result in a positive outcome.