

Telehealth and Addiction Examined

By Jim Rachels



Ever since COVID hit the world has changed and changed forever. Many of the simple things we were used to doing have changed the way we do them. Addiction and recovery are not different and the landscape of addiction has changed forever. And more so now than ever do we need these things to help treat people in recovery. Telehealth has become a tool that so many of us have utilized to help with our addiction issues.

I think the first question we need to address is "what is telehealth?" Telehealth is using different types of technologies as a way of doing consultations. This can be on the telephone, facetime and any other type of technology that allows two people to communicate electronically.

When COVID really hit the world and stay-at-home orders were issued a lot of addicts lost their lifeline. These could be things like in-person group meetings or even a therapist or psychiatrist. These services were suddenly unavailable. Because of this telehealth really took off in order to serve those that were not able to make it to an appointment or doing social distancing. It was a slow start but now telehealth is quite common.

Another thing that telehealth can help with is for people who are in isolated parts of the world. Some people simply don't have access to some type of help for their addiction. So for these people that have not been able to receive the help they need can now use telehealth services to get the help they need. For people that are in a situation where they cannot receive help in person, this can be a lifesaving tool.

I think one of the first questions that should be asked is "does telehealth work?" As of now from the research, I was able to do it seems that it's a split between people who think it is just as effective if not more effective and those who believe the opposite. As of right now based on the most up-to-date data I was able to find it seems that telehealth is at the very least just as effective as in-person consultations.

An added benefit of telehealth is that the patients are more relaxed. The patient didn't have to leave the house and then go sit in traffic while driving to their appointment, sit in a waiting room and then have to go see their appointment. When people are in their own element they tend to be easier to deal with and more at ease.

Another thing that has been heavily affected is MAT (medically assisted treatment). In the past patients were almost always required to meet with someone before they were dispensed their medications. Nowadays doctors are able to prescribe their medication through telehealth. This has been utilized especially by people with opiate issues. There were some studies that were done in Canada and the results showed that telehealth was actually more effective than in-person meetings in terms of patient retention. I think this shows that telehealth has a promising future.

As of now, many people through their research are stating that telehealth treatment might be just as effective as in-person meetings. But it is also said that although it might be just as effective, it has not been shown to be more effective, although some evidence suggests that it can be more effective in certain situations but not all the time.

Some people may also be more inclined to reach out when it's through telehealth. The reason for this is the stigma of addiction. Many people are embarrassed about their addiction issues. So not having to show up at an office and be there in front of other people can be a valuable tool. And because of this, we might be able to intervene sooner as these people are more likely to ask for help when they don't have to worry about being stigmatized. This can make telehealth a new and extremely important tool in the fight against addiction. I think we need to take full advantage of this as it can end up helping many more people.

Another benefit of telehealth is continuing patient treatment even after they leave a rehab facility. Many relapses are caused by being let out of treatment too early and also the lack of a support system after they leave treatment. Having telehealth can mean the provider having continued contact with these individuals for as long as they need to continue with the proper treatment that is necessary. This allows somebody to make sure they go through everything the patient will need to fully recover from their addiction.

This has been seen to be so beneficial that in June of 2022 the Biden administration announced that it intended to keep in place the pandemic-era policies that were implemented due to the declaration of a public health emergency to make it easier for the patients to get access to the care they needed and continue on as long as it is needed. This is extremely important as some statistics say that only 1 in 10 people were getting the help they needed during the pandemic. I think the fact that people are talking about this shows that people in addiction have been getting some much-needed attention. I think telehealth is a great way of staying connected with the ones you need especially in times of distress. I think this is here to stay and will only become more common in the future.