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The Benefits of Therapy by Phone

By [Tara Parker-Pope](#)

Phone-based therapy can be less hassle for patients. (Peter DaSilva for the New York Times)

Most therapists schedule face-to-face meetings with their patients. But new data suggest that therapy by phone may be a better option for some patients.

It has long been a concern among therapists that nearly half of their patients quit after only a few sessions. As a result, a number of health care providers and employee-assistance programs now offer therapy services by phone.

A new analysis of phone therapy research by Northwestern University shows that when patients receive psychotherapy for depression over the phone, more than 90 percent continue with it. The review of a dozen studies of phone therapy showed that the average attrition rate in the telephone therapy was only 7.6 percent, compared to nearly 50 percent in face-to-face therapy. The researchers also found that telephone therapy appeared to be just as effective at reducing depressive symptoms as face-to-face treatment.

“The problem with face-to-face treatment has always been very few people who can benefit from it actually receive it because of emotional and structural barriers,” said [David Mohr](#), professor of preventive medicine at the Feinberg School of Medicine and lead author of the study, published in the September issue of [Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice](#). “The telephone is a tool that allows the therapists to reach out to patients, rather than requiring that patients reach out to therapists.”

Among patients who say they want psychotherapy, only 20 percent actually show up for a referral, and half later drop out of treatment.

Dr. Mohr said he began using phone therapy because he was working with patients who had multiple sclerosis who could not get to a therapist’s office. Some patients don’t have regular transportation to a therapist’s office or can’t take time off work or away from their families. In addition, a patient with depression may simply not be capable of getting themselves to the therapist’s office on a regular basis.

“One of the symptoms of depression is people lose motivation,” Dr. Mohr said. “It’s hard for them to do the things they are supposed to do. Showing up for appointments is one of those things.”

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