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Telehealth Services for Transgender Individuals

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The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted inequalities within our healthcare system. One of these inequalities involves the transgender community as they attempt to navigate the mental health system. Utilizing semi-structured recorded interviews of 5 transgender individuals, this study aims to focus on understanding how the transition from delivering in-person mental health services to telehealth impacted service availability and outcomes. This study helps mental health providers to better understand transgender community needs and to improve patient outcomes. The study found the transition to telehealth had both positive and negative outcomes:

- **POSITIVE:** Patients healthcare access improved.
- **NEGATIVE:** New barriers were identified as a result of transitioning to telehealth services.

It is suggested to perform larger scale studies that will provide better understanding of the transgender community needs, enable the development of service availability, and provide improved trans affirming services.

**METHODS**
- Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions focused on patient experiences were developed by the researchers.
- Via collaboration and support from the gender center in Sacramento, CA, five participant ages 23-26 for the study were identified.
- Data was collected by 60-90 minutes interviews through video via Zoom. The interviews were recorded and transcribed by the three researchers while examining the data multiple times. Thematic coding was performed and three major themes about the transgender participant’s experience with teletherapy and identified such as: experiences with therapists, mental health needs via telehealth, and telehealth versus face-to-face therapy. There were also recurring themes of safety, familiarity, privacy, lack of social cues and internet troubles.

**BACKGROUND**
The transgender community has a complex history. It wasn’t until the mid-19th century that medical professionals began to recognize individuals who identified with the opposite gender of which they were born with. The rhetoric amongst healthcare professional in describing the identification of a person as transgender has paved the way for how the transgender community accesses healthcare, treatment by providers, and ultimately, the barriers they experience in getting and receiving treatment. As the healthcare system shifts their procedures to virtual sessions due to COVID-19, a unique opportunity to study how transition from delivering mental health services in-person to telehealth impacted patient outcomes and perspectives was created. In addition, it also enabled to study how continual health disparities disproportionately impact the transgender community.

**FINDINGS**
- On average it took more than a month to receive telehealth services during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- All participants felt that their telehealth experience lacked a human connection and they were not comfortable with the settings they were in.
- In the span of 6 to 11 months participants have shown a growth in their enjoyment of receiving telehealth services.
- All participants felt their health care providers did not have enough training in gender-affirming best practices and did not promote the use of evidence-based care and education for trans people.

**CONCLUSION**
- Telehealth services opened up more opportunities for trans individual to seek culturally competent health care providers.
- Despite the additional challenges this form of service creates, participants all shared their willingness and preference to continue telehealth services.
- It is suggested that telehealth and teletherapy has provided a sense of safety for the transgender community and allowed them to be provided with better trans affirming services.

**REFERENCES**