

RAN REHAB

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CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN REHAB Working Group Meeting

24-25 March 2022, Online

Exploring hybrid and digital rehab work

Key outcomes

Until recently, rehabilitation work in the context of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) has predominantly taken place in face-to-face, in-person settings. However, throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, practitioners were occasionally forced to at least partially move their counselling and accompaniment work to remote and digital environments; whether they were video calls, increased use of messenger apps or simply phone calls. And yet, these experiences remain marginalised and appear to be widely regarded as inferior to in-person meetings as well as only temporary, while human-to-human interaction had generally been limited. Only very few programmes in the tertiary P/CVE work field actually began designing deliberately hybrid or even entirely digital programmes.

This situation looks different in related and adjacent fields of work. Especially in psychology and psychotherapy, remote appointments and counselling, often via digital means, appear to be more common and generally more accepted amongst practitioners. While the possibility of digital work in this area comes with certain challenges and caveats attached, it also provides opportunities for clients as well as practitioners.

The combined knowledge of working in hybrid or digital settings of rehabilitation practitioners as well as psychologists and psychotherapists provides a solid basis for extended, more structured discussion of how digital elements and approaches can further be incorporated into rehabilitation work. The following paper sets out to present some first insights and recommendations that may contribute to a collection of guidelines for rehabilitation work in the digital age. First key outcomes are:

- The COVID restrictions were a push factor for putting more hybrid and online work into action. However, the clock will not be turned back once the pandemic is over and hybrid and digital approaches therefore require further professionalisation and embedding in general rehabilitation practice.
- As for most of the participants in rehabilitation programmes the online and offline worlds are not separate spaces but rather aspects of the one world they live in, a holistic approach by practitioners in this sense will become increasingly important.

After a brief overview of key discussion points and key considerations, recommendations are presented further below.

Highlights of the discussion: Key considerations

Ethical considerations and safety

- Reaching clients in times of crisis is key. Alternative resources for contact (like phone numbers) in case of technical hiccups or temporary inability on the side of the participants are important lifelines that should be organised.
- There is a need to ensure practitioner safety in light of coordinated hatred (e.g. doxing, campaigns on social media), in particular from right-wing extremist actors.
- Ensuring that a person is actually in a safe space and on their own during a digital appointment may be difficult, especially in the early stages of a process and if a person is still anonymous.
- Follow-up is often difficult in purely digital approaches.

Training and prerequisites

- So far, only little efforts to train practitioners in digital tools and methods were implemented. Much was done spontaneously as the pandemic progressed. Low digital literacy of practitioners remains a challenge especially if the (younger) target group is more proficient.
- Depending on the exact format of intervention, different levels of training for practitioners may be necessary. In-depth exit interventions already require highly trained professionals and if carried out predominantly online, these practitioners need time-intensive additional training to maintain the standards of their work.
- Digital or hybrid approaches may require additional levels of bureaucracy, for example, in the form of informed consent forms. This may be a barrier for some clients, especially those with experiences of recent trauma, those in states of crisis or neurodiverse individuals.

Digital work in the criminal justice context

- Digital work is often not an option when working with imprisoned clients, but could be in the future, if prison administrations cooperate and/or security restrictions can be mitigated.
- Often, digital literacy of recently released persons is low.

Accommodating the client's needs / Reaching new target groups

- For some clients, counselling from the comfort and safety of their homes and safe spaces reduces the threshold, and provides an opportunity to reach clients who are as of yet not in programmes. Especially for persons with social anxiety issues, it may feel easier to start a process digitally.
- Moving parts or all of the counselling online may also provide an opportunity to offer support to more persons.

Lack of functioning and safe applications and digital tools

- Existing tools do not cover the needs regarding safety, confidentiality and professional standards of many practitioners. New apps or digital resources may be necessary, but this is often outside the financial and staff resources of regular programmes.
- A largely untapped potential lies in the option to build one overarching, safe platform that can be individually filled with options and resources from individual organisations or professionals. This would provide an opportunity also for organisations and practitioners with less technical and financial resources and would ensure data safety, good technical workings and low-threshold user interfaces while still allowing individual organisations to deploy their own approach.

Necessity to move further online to reach youth

- Many practitioners continue to think of the digital and non-digital worlds as separate realms. This is factually not true anymore for most people, but especially for the lived reality of younger target audiences. Programmes and approaches that fail to incorporate digital elements and options may run at risk of losing access to target groups in the future.

Maintaining an uninterrupted process

- By using digital, or at least hybrid, approaches, clients will be able to continue their process regardless of their life circumstances. Even when they become parents, move or have a demanding job, resources and regular talks with their counsellor will be available digitally.

Keeping track of the process

- Digital tools also offer the opportunity to follow up on homework, tasks and exercises and the system can provide a reasoned basis for asking the person to make an appointment or follow up on their exercises. Depending on the client's needs, this new form of control over the process may be a good opportunity.

Recommendations

General recommendations

Getting started online

1. Do not be afraid to start working online, beginning with low-threshold tools such as email, chats and video calls can be a good first step before moving on to more sophisticated tools, platforms and applications, if necessary. Search for existing platforms and tools that exist for related or adjacent fields and which can be used for your own services too.
 - a. In a close counselling relationship it may be beneficial to continue to schedule regular meetings and insisting on them, as the barrier to cancelling may be lower for some clients.
2. Continuously train your staff to ensure they are qualified and can respond to needs of clients digitally. Regardless of the level of your approach (e.g. whether it is a fully fledged digital counselling service, or a mentorship programme, or a digital addition to an otherwise primarily offline service), there cannot be enough training.
3. Involve legal experts to ensure your approach is in line with all necessary data protection laws and regulations and to develop informed consent forms and information leaflets, etc.

4. Offer a platform including resources such as instructional videos and interactive learning. These can also provide the opportunity for practitioners to see if and how clients are using resources and to evaluate their general commitment to the process. This also provides opportunities for reasoned check-ins with the person.
 - a. Such a platform can also include exercises and tools for clients that support the diagnostic and intervention planning process, such as network maps or biographic timelines (see the RAN Paper on the Potential of Social Diagnostics for P/CVE under "Further reading").

Establishing trust

5. Create a transparent presence online, be clear about yourself, your objectives, background, etc. to allow people to feel comfortable to approach you.
 - a. Be transparent about the process to create predictability and reduce uncertainty and potentially related stress.
 - b. Provide formers' testimonies or similar bits of communication to make potential clients feel more comfortable.
6. Offer easily accessible options to get in contact and get to know each other without any consequences or strings attached. Include the option to remain anonymous for the first conversations.
 - a. An easy option to make contact digitally may be the inclusion of a chat bot on the project website.
 - b. Offer support contact through a chat at any time, and also later in the process, to ensure that the client knows they can always reach out for support.

Professional practice

7. Work on professional standards regarding digital work in the rehabilitation context. Build on existing guidelines from related fields of work, such as other areas of social work or psychotherapy.

Recommendations for primarily digital approaches

8. When creating a stable working environment, make sure to signal to clients that they are understood, that you are listening, and deploy the same non-judgmental, respectful approach as in offline settings. To ensure that facial or vocal expressions and body language achieve the effect you intend them to, train together with colleagues and test how you are perceived via calls and video.
9. Make sure to offer a first aid kit of relevant resources for crisis situations (especially if you cannot respond to crises yourselves). Provide a collection of different service providers, including crisis hotline numbers and emergency contacts.
10. When working online, offer modular services, so clients can choose where to begin based on their own needs.
11. Ensure that technological support staff are planned into the design of your programme.

Recommendations for hybrid approaches

12. If a network of trusted mentors and/or peers exists, offering an opportunity to connect with individuals around the world who have similar experiences to your client's may be a useful addition to the regular counselling process. Such loose, informal exchanges can easily be facilitated and maintained in digital settings.

Relevant practices

The below practices are already active in digital and/or hybrid approaches.

1. [Exit USA – Life After Hate](mailto:info@lifeafterhate.org): First contact and continuous counselling possible via digital means. Contact: info@lifeafterhate.org
2. Stronger After: Digital Psychoeducation Interventions. Contact: Katharina Meredith, kmeredith1@student.gsu.edu
3. [Fighters for Peace](mailto:fightersforpeaceb@gmail.com): The organisation offers digital mentoring and testimony sessions with former fighters of the Lebanese civil war to organisations worldwide. Contact: Christina Foerch, fightersforpeaceb@gmail.com

Follow-up

There is need for a practical guiding document on what to take into account when working in a hybrid or entirely online situation as it will remain part of the working practice. In some adjacent fields, digital work is now included in the general code of ethics of practitioners. Others have produced practical manuals. For rehabilitation work, this is not yet the case and it would be good if RAN Practitioners could provide this, partly based on the results of this meeting.

Further reading

RAN Practitioners, 2021: [The potential of social diagnostics for P/CVE](#)

RAN Practitioners, 2022: [Hybrid youth and social work](#)

Janet M. Joiner, 2019: Digital Ethics in Social Work Education, Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 39:4-5, 361-373, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08841233.2019.1654590>

National Association of Social Workers: [Standards for Technology in Social Work Practice](#)