

The use of the Internet to break the mental disability. Self-experience

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Summary

The article under consideration is about the use of computers, especially the Internet in the treatment of people with mental disorders for which the contacts made or maintained by the Internet may decrease sense of alienation and social barriers to overcome. On the other hand, giving access to the Internet carries significant help in increasing employment opportunities. The proposed program is coordinated by the Bródnowskie Stowarzyszenie "Pomost" and implemented together with NGO's from Germany and the Netherlands, which is an essential component of training on computer use. Conclusions from the study after the application program to a relatively large group, confirm the benefit for patients with acquired skills.

computer / Internet / mental illness / rehabilitation

INTRODUCTION

The computer as a tool for assisting in the rehabilitation of schizophrenic patients is a relatively recent discovery. It has been noticed and appreciated by clinicians, especially for patients with severe symptoms observed, and the manufacturing of psychosis in which the foreground stands out cognitive deficits [1]. With the ability to trace conversations conducted with the therapist on the computer's monitor, patients with deficits in memory, attention, thinking and all other information processes, are able to overcome them. The combination of cognitive deficits in psychotic symptoms often completely prevents any communication with the patient, significantly delaying the process of diagnosis and therapy. In such a situation, especially if there are severe auditory hallucinations, the ability to

use a computer is an important aid. The computer as a communication tool not only reduces the effects of psychotic symptoms themselves, but also focuses attention on the topic of conversation preventing the activation of external distractors [2]. The study highlights the restrictions on the use of traditional communication with patients with severe psychotic and cognitive symptoms [3]. These limitations can be overcome by the possibility of using the computer, which memory are pre-recorded dialogues, that you can appeal and remind even when you have an ongoing conversation [4, 5].

Mastering the computer is often the first step to use more sophisticated tools, which could include the Internet. The Internet is already known and recognized tool for work, leisure and education worldwide. It is regarded as not only a useful tool for communication between people, but also is used in various fields of medicine. It is becoming increasingly popular also in psychiatry. This popularity is obvious. First of all, the ability to provide anonymity and limited contact with another human being, which in the case of psychological difficulties may be perceived by

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users as an advantage. This applies to the situation in crisis seeking help or first contact with a psychiatrist. A specific factor operating here is to build and strengthen the therapeutic relationship by e-mail [6].

Persons with mental illness and their families looking on the Internet, not only in contact with professionals, and seek information and support to patients just experienced. It can be produced virtual discussion groups about the characteristics of self-help groups, whose effectiveness is not yet known.

Controversial attempts to use the Internet are interactive computer programs to conduct the therapy in which the figure of a psychotherapist has been replaced by a machine. And it made the diagnosis and analyze the content of speeches in contact person, adjusting it their interventions (<http://www.parnasse.com/drwww.shtml>). However, the unlimited possibilities of the Internet can be a real challenge for psychosocial rehabilitation of persons with severe mental disorders and related disabilities. Using the Internet to assist social rehabilitation of the mentally ill is low. Pioneering attempt to bridge this gap is an educational program ICAR.

Due to the specific techniques of communication the Internet can help in making new contacts in a way that is not threatening and safe. From the perspective of the needs of people with mental illness, it may be more than just a source of information about medicines, symptoms and various types of therapy. It gives opportunity to establish contacts and to obtain and provide support and assistance. Websites created by patients' organizations offer information and support to patients, their families and friends. "Virtual support groups" through techniques such as "chat room" and "newsgroups" can be used and created by people with mental illness. One of the most popular of such sites is the Self-Help Group Clearinghouse which provides access to information on hundreds of support groups (<http://www.selfhelpgroups.org>). "Mental Health Advocacy" is a popular site that allows patients and family members to express themselves (<http://www.mentalhealthadvocacy.com>). The Mental Health Foundation MindLink site is a popular website devoted to the problems of treatment and rehabilitation of mentally ill persons. MindLink is an online offer for those who un-

derwent psychiatric treatment, and is open to anyone who has or has had personal or mental health problems, (<http://www.mind.org.uk>). Mental Health Foundation website provides information about patients' rights, treatment and opportunities to obtain assistance from the support group (<http://mentalhealth.org.uk>).

One of the more controversial issues is online self-help support groups run by people with mental disorders. Like the entire Internet, they allow the full, uncensored self-reliance, "free from the influence of professionals." Self-help advice on-line chats, in many cases however, are also often monitored by professionals [7]. Increasingly, Web self-help groups are based on the cooperation of mentally ill people and professionals, together forming the group members' support of the environment. An excellent example of this type of activity is the "Psycho-Babble," conducted by Robert C. Hsiung (<http://www.dr-bob.org/babble/>). In the period January–April 2000, 1,516 members of the group has included on page 21 of 230 messages in 3,028 discussion threads. The inclusion of self-help group of professionals prepared to give advice seems to be optimal solution in terms of efficiency [8].

In Poland, there are also websites serving similar purposes are, inter alia, <http://www.schizofrenia.pl/> page contains lots of information about schizophrenia, for professionals, patients and families. On the other hand <http://oblicze-schizofrenii.blog.pl/> Blogs of people suffering from the disease.

The debate about the positive and negative impact of the Internet on mental health is not resolved. In the early 90's a lot was written about the 'addictive potential of the Internet' [9, 10]. There are reports that the Internet could lower the level of social interaction and induce a sense of loneliness – this involves replacing the "real" social contacts for those that take place virtually [11]. On the other hand, the virtual self-help groups are characterized by a lack of the traditional barriers to facilitate the functioning of the group. The anonymity afforded by contact "online" may be helpful for those who suffer from the stigma, or are embarrassed with situation in which they find themselves. Availability and popularity of the Internet allows you to contact people from totally different cultural back-

grounds, with completely different experiences [12].

Still remains the question of the extent to which persons with disabilities due to mental illness can use the Internet. It is a question of access to the equipment and skills. According to research conducted in the U.S. in 2001, among the patients of psychiatric outpatient care, aged between 18 and 65, 82% had access to a computer. Among this group about 80% used the Internet. Most of them spent in network less than 1 hour a day. Over 90% of a group of people using the Internet said that they were seeking information about their disease and treatments. A significant percentage of patients obtained the information about useful websites from their own doctors [13].

There is much indication, however, that in the other countries, among people with disabilities due to mental disorders, ability to use PC and Internet is limited. These people are usually in financial troubles, which hinder access to computer equipment and programs for training how to use it. Not without significance is the fact that patients, who underwent a mental illness, require special conditions and training techniques for the specifics of their disability.

One of the first training programs about personal computers for chronic psychiatric patients was prepared in the UK. The 'Day Hospital Speedwell', initiated in 1986, had two main objectives: to see psychiatric patients with personal computers and reduce their level of anxiety associated with exposure to new technology. Draft Speedwell proved able to conduct training for chronic psychiatric patients with low educational preparation. It also demonstrated that a significant number long-term unemployed patients, through the accomplished training - even in not very high hourly basis - can undertake their careers [14].

ICAR program - the use of personal computers and the Internet as educational tools for people with disabilities due to mental disorders

The aim of International program ICAR (Internet Communication and Active Rehabilitation for People with Mental Disorders) conducted in 2002-2004 was to use computers and the Inter-

net in the social rehabilitation of mentally ill persons.

ICAR was created by a 10-year collaboration of two NGOs: the Association "bridge" from Warsaw and the Verein REHA Monchengladbach (Germany). Since 1994, both organizations have been realizing the joint German-Polish rehabilitation program for persons with mental disorders, based on the mutual contacts of patients and staff. A key difficulty in implementing the program was the distance separating the two organizations. In 1998, an attempt to remedy this problem by using the Internet. In 1999 the Polish-German website "Rehabilitation" (<http://www.rehapomost.org>) was established. It was dedicated to the presentation of the activities of both organizations. Service consisted of two parts: the first -, presenting the activities of associations, and the second - in the form of "Kurier" containing text, photographs, drawings and cartoons created by the mentally ill wards associations.

Regular issue of "Courier" was the main objective of the next project. It was to help create a permanent Polish-German "Internet newspaper" for patients, through which they could communicate and exchange experiences, as well as maintain, via the Internet, contacts and relations from made during Polish-German rehabilitation holidays.

Working on editions of the Courier fulfilled this task. It allowed patients to maintain contacts and knowledge of the Internet as a friendly and useful tool to present themselves and their work. Home "Polish-German Internet Service" was established ten years ago. During the first 2 years of activity next editions of in every the Courier appeared. The contained most of the materials prepared by the patients' associations. It became evident that people with mental illness are full-fledged members and members of the international community of Internet users. When the "Courier", in Polish, German and English versions (including installed mail box), appeared on the Internet, other European organizations dealing with rehabilitation of mentally ill persons expressed a desire to join the project. In 2001, based on experience, the organizations that created the German-Polish website, decided that the program for the mentally ill for the use of the Internet should include a larger group of

partners. Basic assumptions of the program can be presented as follows:

1. Internet gives access to information, and as a new kind of social contact platform helps overcome the feeling of loneliness and overcome social barriers.
2. Ability to use computers and the Internet increases the chances of employment.
3. The potential of the Internet media, which is open to the public platform for presenting their own creativity, can be useful in psychiatric rehabilitation.

The project was approved by the European Union and received a grant. In its implementation 5 organizations of mentally ill persons rehabilitation attended: Bródnowski Association of Friends and Families of People with Mental Disorders "bridge" (the organization coordinating the project), the Netherlands and RIBW REHA Verein, and VIA Brudergemeinschaft Alexia - from Germany. The primary objective of the program was to enable mentally ill people gain the skills to use personal computers and the Internet. Training was carried out by a single, common for all the participants program. It includes the acquisition of the skills of computer operation and the most popular programs (MS Windows, MS Office) and Internet (e-mail, search engines, create and update websites). Course lasted for 5 months, graduates received certificates after examination. The course was attended by 243 people. European Official site of the program can be found on <http://www.icar-eu.org/>, Polish-<http://www.icar.org.pl/>.

After the end of ICAR program funding by the European Commission, it was continued by the 'Pomost' in 2005-2007, Civil Initiatives Fund. From 2008 to the present it is funded by the State Fund for Rehabilitation of Persons with Disabilities. In 2006, ICAR was awarded in competition "ICT in Education", Foundation for the Support of the Education System (the body responsible for implementing the educational programs funded by the European Union) in 2007 and counted by the European Commission to the group's top 20 educational programs for adults, carried out in 2000-2005 under the Grundtvig [15].

Effectiveness of the program has been subjected to evaluative research. It has been shown that ICAR increases in mentally ill people the skills

and motivation to use computers and the Internet, and satisfaction with life, but does not affect significantly the overall functioning and frequency rehospitalisations within 11 months after completion of the course. Further, the positive impact of the ICAR on satisfaction with life was claimed, but also it's activating effects that worsen in some people the symptoms of psychopathology, however, non-specific in nature and analogous to the impact of other environmental rehabilitation programs [16].

Specificity of training for people with mental illness

The experience gained in conducting computer courses for people with mental illness in Poland, Germany and the Netherlands, and the next 5 years to continue in Poland, helped to define the essential elements for a methodology to conduct training for this specific group. These should include the following topics:

- Work on the motivation of people with disabilities to attend the course. It is important to convince the participants that it is worthwhile to learn new skills and invest in the time and effort. People begin classes should receive accurate information about why to learn how to service computers and why it is useful to use the Internet. Supporting the motivation is one of the most important tasks facing the instructors leading the course. Reluctance to undertake new activities and withdrawal from social activity is a behavior occurring frequently in the course of chronic mental illness.
- Stimulating and encouraging the participation of their members. The need to stimulate the activity of the trainees due to the fact that in many cases, after a run of mental illness, there is a passivity and a reluctance to take any action. Often it is also associated with side effects of medication. Skillful stimulating activity of individuals participating in a course is also a specific task for the trainers.
- "Trainer-participant" relation. It is important that the relationship was built on the principles of partnership and cooperation. Coaches should be more of a companion than a science expert. Classes should be con-

ducted in a group; however, in many cases the individual contact between trainer and participant is important for the effectiveness of the learning process. Many mentally ill require the students work in sub-groups and individualized approach. This gives the opportunity for closer contact and effectively to support and encourage efforts in the event of difficulties. It should also be noticed that the group covered by the program was not homogeneous in terms of level of computer skills when they entered the course. Therefore, in many cases, individual consultations were necessary, and to equalize the differences in the skills possessed. It is worth recalling that the functioning of the group usually has a dimension of therapeutic and supportive. In the life of people with mental illness ICAR computer course was not another group of therapeutic, but "normal" group training.

- It is important that course participants have access to computer equipment out of training hours. This allows independent overtraining recently acquired skills. Therefore, the course participants have booked once a week, outside the normal course, unlimited time access to equipment and high-speed internet in the cyber cafe. They can support themselves with the education board to allow independent tasks (each participant receives prior educational materials with interactive CD). During these separate sessions it is possible to obtain support for the instructor, but it is limited in size and less intense.

The computer and the Internet as a tool to support the expression of

Support of expression, autonomy and creativity are the elements of the program methodology ICAR, which significantly affected the improvement of social functioning of participants. Particularly important here were the following:

- Creating your own web pages. They offer the possibility of self-presentation, presentation of yourself and your strengths. This is one of the best ways to show the opportunities of the Internet in breaking the isolation. Personal Web Site may contain various

elements: text, photographs, drawings, self-recorded music. On this page you can also see the mail address of the author. Particularly popular part of the ICAR was to prepare one's own website

- Creation and presentation of their texts. A certain percentage of ICAR program participants were earlier dealing amateurishly with literature. Thanks to the acquisition of skills for using word editors, it was possible to develop their own texts and give them an interesting graphic form. Part of so prepared texts was posted in the Internet.
- Create a work of art. Graphical computer programs were very popular among the participants of the ICAR. The easy and accessible way that they allow the expression of artistic creativity.
- Digital Photography. Using a digital camera is a valued skill for ICAR program participants. Digital photos processing, image processing and experimenting with it proved to be a great way to show expression. The effects of work on digital photos were presented by participants in the Internet, their own websites were also provided with photographs of their authors.

Internet: source of information and new contacts

News search

Using Internet search engines was for the participants of the course a completely new experience. Thanks to them, they said that information is easily available, and by using the Internet, you can acquire knowledge on any subject. Internet helps in obtaining information useful in daily life - it makes it possible to establish timetables of public transport, check cinemas' listings, find out about ticket prices. It turned out that the Internet is not a device reserved for "professionals", offering only professional opportunities, but that it is friendly and useful to all users, including disabled due to mental disorders.

Communicators

The integral part of the course was the use of Instant Messengers. They proved to be an im-

portant element in supporting the training skills of establishing and maintaining contacts. Using instant messengers allowed the contact with other Internet users. A large group of ICAR participants established new contacts with people; their social network has expanded significantly. In many cases, virtual contacts turned into real meetings with people they met through instant messaging.

CONCLUSIONS

The majority of course participants have successfully completed all training provided, now they effectively use the Internet, including the techniques of communication such as chat, video conferencing and e-mails. Communication network was between the Polish, Dutch and German participants were created. They founded their own websites, together prepare Christmas cards on line, contact by e-mail, exchanging digital photos. Presenting in the network themselves, their art works, photos and music, they are not only its users but also its developers.

Experience gained during the implementation of the program allows the following generalizations and methodological notes:

In the process of training an individual approach to the participants is important. It is more useful to accompany them and interact with them than the ordinary series of lectures and exercises.

Training team, which consists of professional instructors of the computers' use and the therapists who use computers and the Internet, seems to be an optimal solution. Such a composition of professionals gives professionals an opportunity to combine the educational aspects with the therapeutic ones.

A small group of participants and the relatively frequent meetings (3 times a week) is a suitable form of training for specific groups that represent people with mental illness.

The attractiveness of training is highly influenced by the widest possible use of the Internet media.

It is important to enable participants to use the equipment outside the regular hours of training. A good method is to organize for them "Internet cafes"

It is helpful to use interactive textbooks prepared by the trainers in cooperation with the participants.

It is particularly important for the participants of the course to learn to use the messaging services. They give you a real chance to overcome social isolation and make new friendships in a safe environment.

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