

The power of individual landscapes

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Knowledge valorization

The general aim of this thesis was to explore and expand the utility of the experience sampling method for use in mental health care. This means moving away from a singular research focus towards creating an additional value for the public domain.

Societal relevance

Psychological problems are common and societal costs to deal with these problems are high. Research shows that every year, a quarter of the Dutch population is in need of mental health support¹. This is a problem, because only 7.3 percent of the Dutch population actually receive professional mental healthcare². The finances for expanding the mental health sector are lacking. So not everyone will receive accurate treatment¹. A continuous effort is required to improve the effectiveness of available care, reduce the costs involved, and prioritize care better. What could help is to provide tools that allow people to work on their mental health without the presence of a professional.

In light of these efforts, a transition is ongoing within the mental health care system in the Netherlands. The focus shifts from illness to positive health³. This is important, because a strong focus on illness, both in somatic care as well as mental health care, has iatrogenic effects and keeps patients ill. For sustainable well-being and the prevention of suffering, it is crucial to build resilience and increase autonomy¹. The professional health care field has neglected these aspects in the past, but is now adopting a more holistic care approach. This includes paying attention to someone's social network, his or her environment, work situation and general health. Resilience, in this respect, is very much a concept of everyday life. However, the professional field still misses the tools to assess these aspects.

The experience sampling method (ESM) facilitates monitoring in a holistic way; it can assess vulnerability as well as resilience, and fits within the positive health concept. Since it works on smartphones, it is accessible during the day and to the majority of people. By providing an evidence-based mobile application in the App store or Google Play store and by making sure the collected data are secure and freely accessible to users, a costs-effective alternative is available to complement treatment. The added benefit is that patients become empowered, because ESM allows them to gather information and actively test personal hypotheses outside treatment hours. Building resilience should be possible without using professional resources. People who are unwell and want to explore what helps them to feel better are also able to use ESM. Thereby providing the chance to help people early on and prevent suffering.

Innovation

The PsyMate™ as an ESM tool was used throughout this thesis. One of the benefits of this app is that it is accessible in different languages and freely available to the public. The studies in this thesis contributed to the development of this app. The knowledge gained by the naturalistic single-case trials have helped design a basic set of ESM questions that are universal across complaints and relevant during recovery. Up to five additional personal questions can be added to the free questionnaire, allowing the monitoring of specific wishes during recovery (e.g., I feel suspicious). Currently, efforts are made to provide intuitive guidelines, so that people are not dependent on an elaborate information session before they use the method. The app and the web-based reporting module (to view ESM results) could benefit from information screens that explain the method. The positive results presented in this thesis warrant a continuous investment in ESM for clinical practice. This means working towards increased user-friendliness (e.g., making the app available for people who have difficulty reading), improving the reliability of ESM feedback, and investigating the validity of ESM-based cognition tasks. Furthermore, insight is needed into the facilitators and barriers while implementing ESM in clinical practice. Colleagues at the department of Psychiatry and Neuropsychology in Maastricht are currently working on the above-mentioned projects.

Target audience

The finding described in this thesis are relevant for people suffering from mental health complaints, health care providers, researchers, health insurance companies and policy makers.

Everyone, at some point in their life, experiences mental health or somatic complaints. It could help to explore when and why complaints occur. Often, symptomatic variability is influenced by context. Knowing when pain occurs, or equally so, when someone is able to relax and become unburdened, is valuable in treatment and care. Knowing what happens is the first step towards exploring alternatives towards feeling better. ESM can provide insight into mood and context for people with somatic complaints, psychological complaints, or for anyone who is interested to increase their general well-being. The audience includes youth, elderly people, and people who suffer from severe health problems or mental illness. In the future, ESM will likely be suited to provide insight into daily cognitive functioning. This is especially relevant for people suffering from neurological conditions, such as dementia or mild cognitive impairment.

Health care professionals benefit from viewing ESM data together with their patient. It can help move away from assumptions based on group findings and center the therapy session on the individual situation. Patients sometimes struggle to express themselves. Looking at their momentary mood ratings over the past week, might open up the conversation and provide insight for both parties. Therapy then becomes a collaborative practice where both parties can equally engage. Current practices often require the use of end-of-the-day diary methods that suffer from memory bias. ESM could replace them and provide additional fine-grained information on situational processes. A well-balanced ESM questionnaire focuses on several relevant health aspects, helping clinicians to focus beyond symptomatic recovery. Important is that the user is also the owner of the data. They can choose to share the data with their care provider, not the other way around.

Our findings could be of interest to insurance companies and policy makers, given that ESM as an mHealth tool has proven merits in routine clinical practice. Next to being a useful and more accurate assessment instrument during treatment, ESM is also a relevant prevention strategy. Supporting people to increase their resilience is a useful strategy to prevent mental suffering in the future.

Implementation

To disseminate our findings among health care professionals, we give presentations and workshops on how to use ESM as a clinical tool and work with ESM feedback. Currently, a workshop is provided for psychological assistants at the general practitioners office. They are enrolled in a pilot where ESM is adjusted for and implemented in their current care practice. The clinical value of the method for both clinicians as well as patients is evaluated and adjustments are made accordingly. Most presentations are held at health care institutes in the South of the Netherlands, but efforts are made to reach interested parties across the country too. In a recent presentation at the Psychose café in Roermond, patients with a psychosis background, family members, and interested people were informed on how to use the PsyMate™ during recovery. These outreaching activities are very informative and help to guide research towards designing a practical, valuable and useful tool for the public. Future projects should continue along these lines and make sure the method is implemented in health care and freely available to the public. Ultimately, the clinician becomes an additional coach in the recovery process where the patient remains fundamentally in charge.

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