Integrating Psychotherapy in a Psychiatric Outpatient Clinic

Ayesha Baluch

Follow this and additional works at: https://spark.siue.edu/dnpprojects

Part of the Nursing Commons

Recommended Citation
Baluch, Ayesha, "Integrating Psychotherapy in a Psychiatric Outpatient Clinic" (2024). Doctor of Nursing Practice Projects. 330.
https://spark.siue.edu/dnpprojects/330

This DNP Project is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Nursing at SPARK. It has been accepted for inclusion in Doctor of Nursing Practice Projects by an authorized administrator of SPARK. For more information, please contact jkohlbu@siue.edu.
Integrating Psychotherapy in a Psychiatric Outpatient Clinic

Introduction of the Problem

“It is estimated that more than one in five U.S. adults live with a mental illness (57.8 million in 2021)” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023, para. 1). Many people around the world suffer from mental illness and at times the numbers seem staggering. At times, due to overwhelming numbers of patients with mental illness and limited resources, treatment tends to focus only on medication management. However, medication therapy alone may not achieve symptom remission, and combined medication and psychotherapy for many psychiatric conditions. Some studies also showed that medications may cause more harm due to adverse side effects. According to the Citizen Commission on Human Rights, 2021, “Studies have suggested that psychiatric drugs may do more harm than good, especially in the long term”. Besides medications, psychotherapy is one of the effective ways to treat mental illness, however, it is underutilized.

The project was implemented at an outpatient psychiatric clinic in the Chicago metropolitan area. This outpatient clinic mainly serves patients who are diagnosed with anxiety, depression, and ADHD. Often, providers at the clinic only discuss pharmacotherapy as a first treatment option but neglect to recommend psychotherapy. The addition of psychotherapy screening and education can benefit these patients. Research suggested that pharmacotherapy in addition to psychotherapy can lead to better results and patients' satisfaction (Kamenov et al., 2017).

Literature Review

Psychotherapy should always be included in the treatment of mental disorders. In a comprehensive analysis of 101 randomized trials, it was found that combined psychotherapy and
pharmacotherapy give better results as compared to individual psychotherapy or pharmacotherapy for treating depression (Cuijpers et al., 2020). Although much evidence-based research demonstrates the effectiveness of psychotherapy, many outpatient psychiatric clinics only focus on pharmacotherapy to treat mental illness. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023, published data from the National Health Interview Survey which showed that in 2020 “Overall, as the level of urbanization decreased, the percentage of adults who had taken medication for their mental health increased, and the percentage who had received counseling or therapy decreased” (Terlizza & Norris, 2021, p. 1). As these studies and surveys showed that psychotherapy is decreasing with time, the question is why it is decreasing and what barriers are faced by providers to provide psychotherapy?

The first issue involves time spent prescribing versus time spent implementing psychotherapy. “The simple fact is psychiatrists can see more patients, and therefore turn higher profits, by prioritizing quick medical-management consultations over psychotherapy, which requires deeper conversations, more assessment and greater amounts of time” (Langendorf, 2022, para. 6). In addition to this, one of the problems is related to a referral system where general practitioners support self-referral, and patients consider this as a barrier in improving access to psychological therapies. It is important to understand why low-income patients cannot refer themselves to IAPT (Improving Access to Psychological Therapies) to improve the referral system and support the patients (Thomas et al., 2019). Different types of psychotherapies help patients understand their mental health conditions and manage unhealthy thoughts and behaviors. Cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) is a gold standard for many mental health disorders including depression and anxiety. “Dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) is a cognitive behavioral treatment developed to help people manage symptoms that are considered “difficult to treat,” such as:
impulsivity, interpersonal problems, emotional dysregulation, self-harm and suicidal behaviors” (Greenstein, 2017). Dialectical behavior therapy is one of the best treatments for bipolar disorder.

**Project Methods**

The purpose of this DNP project was to determine how often at baseline providers referred or asked patients if they are receiving psychotherapy and to increase the number of patients screened and referred to psychotherapy. The project was implemented at an outpatient psychiatric clinic in the Chicago metropolitan area. After Southern Illinois University Edwardsville Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, the project’s initial phase was started. In the initial phase, a ten-question survey was given to the providers. The survey was distributed to find out if providers screen patients for psychotherapy and what barriers they face while delivering education on psychotherapy. In addition, a 30-minute discussion session was scheduled to discuss barriers faced by providers to include psychotherapy. A small banner was posted in each patient’s room highlighting the importance of psychotherapy.

**Evaluation**

The evaluation of the project objectives was accomplished via pre- and post-surveys and patient data collection. First, a ten-question pre-implementation survey was given to one psychiatrist and two nurse practitioners to evaluate the psychotherapy screening and referral in their daily practice. The survey also gathered information about the barriers providers faced in utilizing psychotherapy referrals. All three providers have worked in psychiatry for more than five years and strongly agreed with the statement, “Psychotherapy is effective but underutilized”. Before the implementation of the project, a convenience sample of twenty patients was selected. Data showed that the providers only discussed psychotherapy with eight patients (40%). Data also showed that providers educated psychotherapy to four patients (20%) only.
During implementation, all the data was saved in a secure folder in the clinic. Following implementation, twenty-five patients were randomly selected. Data showed that the providers discussed psychotherapy with twenty-one patients (84%). Data also showed that providers educated twenty-one patients (84%).

As seen above, the outcomes showed that project implementation significantly increased psychotherapy referrals. However, the true effectiveness of providing education about the importance of patient referral to psychotherapy is yet to be determined. The DNP project student leader was present in the room with the provider and the patients. There is a possibility that the psychiatric provider discussed psychotherapy because of the presence of the DNP leader. The provider knows the goal of the DNP leader in the room, hence discussing psychotherapy with most of the patients. Second, patient satisfaction was not complete. Even though the provider discussed psychotherapy, it is important to know if the patient is satisfied with the discussion or needs more information.

**Impact on Practice**

The immediate impact of the project is the increased number of screenings and discussions about psychotherapy. Patients seemed more involved, engaged in their care, and were observed asking questions about psychotherapy at the front desk. The predicted long-term impact is that the providers will continue to screen and educate every patient about psychotherapy. The only change I suggest for the ongoing implementation is to keep the psychotherapy posters at the front desk and in each patient’s room. Once patients visualize the poster, they also ask questions and get involved.

**Conclusion**
Through discussion with the stakeholders and data collection, psychotherapy underutilization was identified. The literature review showed the benefits of utilizing psychotherapy in addition to pharmacotherapy. Once education was provided to the providers on psychotherapy utilization, psychotherapy screening, and psychotherapy education increased in the clinic. The continued utilization of psychotherapy screening in this clinic will help patients get better treatment outcomes. For ongoing implementation, it is important to keep educating providers about psychotherapy's importance and utilization. To sustain the project, the stakeholder agrees to continue staff training and education. In addition to this, the stakeholder will add a psychotherapy screening task in the patient's assessment for each visit to make sure the providers assess each patient for psychotherapy.

**Author Contact Information**

Ayesha Baluch: abaluch@siue.edu