

## **psychoED: Online Alternatives for Caregiver's Support of Handicapped People**

F. Soto-Pérez<sup>1</sup>, M. Franco Martín<sup>1,2</sup>, R. Losada<sup>1</sup>, C. Rodríguez<sup>2</sup>, T. Cid<sup>1</sup>, R. Hornero<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Fundación INTRAS, [fcsotop@yahoo.com](mailto:fcsotop@yahoo.com) C/ Santa Lucía 19, 1ª planta  
Edificio Intercima, 47005 Valladolid, Spain

<sup>2</sup> Servicio de Psiquiatría de Zamora, [mfm@intras.es](mailto:mfm@intras.es) C/ Hernán Cortes 40,  
49021 Zamora, Spain

<sup>3</sup> Universidad de Valladolid, Grupo de Ingeniería Biomédica  
[robhor@tel.uva.es](mailto:robhor@tel.uva.es) Campus Miguel Delibes, Camino del Cementerio s/n  
47011, Valladolid, Spain

**Abstract:** It is presented a web platform for delivering cyber-psychoeducation called psychoED. psychoED is an own development of INTRAS Foundation that is aimed to deliver cybertherapy: i.e., providing psychological support in the Internet environment. psychoED includes a cybertherapy room where it is possible to maintain both individual and group video conferencing, a chat, the possibility of using presentations, a library which provides for Psychoeducation documents, expert forums and forums for mutual support. All the information exchange takes place through distance electronic communication, either by mail, chat, video-conferences or being it by reading and/or participating in the forums.

### Introduction

Aging process, diseases, and prolonged and severe illness may increase the dependency; in these situations the families often assume a great number of the cares. This care translates into a high burden for the caregiver as well as a great loss of free time, while requires a range of knowledge to take on the responsibility. Faced with these difficulties Psychoeducation has been shown to be an intervention that improves the quality of life of the caregiver and the cared [1].

But the process of Psychoeducation is not simply or easy. Many families have problem to assist; not have time to spend in a traditional treatment of psychoeducation; What is more, many families have fears or are reluctant to go to a health center to avoid the stigmatization [2]. All this is even more complex in the rural population where resources are limited and the possibility of stigma is greater [3]; something similar happens with rare

diseases that lack a sufficient number of professional and specialized centers.

Recently, new technologies of the information and communication, particularly the Internet, are being positioned as an ideal means to develop distance and cost-effective interventions, even the researchers are proving that distance interventions would be equivalent to some traditional face to face therapies [4].

In this context Fundación INTRAS and the Service of Psychiatry of Zamora developed a web platform called psychoED, designed to deliver cybertherapy. psychoED is an alternative to overcome the difficulties of access experienced by the caregivers to interventions of proven effectiveness like Psychoeducation. In the same direction, psychoED probably is an alternative for delivering many types of psychological interventions that could be developed in the environment of Internet.

#### Characteristics of psychoED

psychoED is a website that contains multimedia resources, characteristics of the 2.0 web and the possibility of multi-video-conference functionality. It contains, among other things, an access to a forum of questions answered by professionals that constitutes a database of questions and answers at the disposal of the web visitors; the resource of a so-called "Ask the Expert", as it is intended to result in cognitive and educational guidance, a key component of traditional psychological treatments, but this time transferred to a cybertherapy.

Another resource is "The Library", where the visitors may review multimedia files specially designed to meet their concerns (summaries of articles, books, videos, presentations, etc). The Library fulfills a self-help role and Psychoeducation.

Other forum integrated is the self-help forum for users that aims to develop mutual support as in a self-help group. This forum can be visited by therapists, who may play a role of "moderator" on occasions when it is necessary, for example, when the effect of "*disinhibition online*" is developed in its negative side [5]. In this forum, users may share with other people ways of dealing with similar situations or receive emotional support from those who go through a similar situation.

One of the main resources of psychoED is the "Cybertherapy Room". This room attempts to reproduce the traditional therapeutic encounters in a space online. On the cybertherapy room, users and therapist can simultaneously see and hear each other, and includes other elements that enhance videoconference: a chat and a place to upload presentations (eg PowerPoint) and that can be controlled by the therapist (broad, fast forward,



rewind). Thus, the chat can be used to emphasize something and presentations can facilitate the understanding of an explanation.

Is important to notice that the "Room of Cybertherapy" can held individual and group meetings. In the group meetings, up to six connections are enabled for the participants and an one for the therapist; in these cases the therapist can mute participants and determine which member of the group want others to listen. This resource facilitates the guidance of a group that communicates through online videoconferencing.

Another resources available in psychoED are the news section, where each therapist can upload news which are approved by the site administrator; a directory of therapists where it is possible to review the credentials of each professional accessing psychoED; and also includes a directory of mental health facilities in the area where psychoEd is applied .

In technical terms, the spirit of psychoED is to be a web of cybertherapy that does not need complicated technical requirements. In this sense, psychoED simply requires a computer and a domestic Internet connection, along with simple accessories (webcam, microphone, headphones or speakers) and free access software. For example, from the perspective of the user, the minimum Internet connection required for an individual video conferencing is 1MB/200Kb, and in the group situation is 1MB/300Kb, whilst the therapist requirements in the group situation is a connection of around 3MB/500Kb.

Another important feature is that it has psychoED incorporates a translator that supports up to 44 different languages, likewise its structural design has been developed integrating a multilingual function, whereas at this moment, the vast majority of the platforms are being developed in English, French and Portuguese.

Finally, PsychoED is highly flexible, its structure can incorporate different contents, so that resources can be use in all kinds of diseases, languages and in other applications. Such other applications are the use of psychoED as a learning environment, where the videoconferencing allows for synchronous work and exposure of content (Like a classroom), forums will serve to dispel doubts and library for storing information

#### Current uses of psychoED

At this moment psychoED is being used by the psychiatric services of Zamora and INTRAS Foundation. Studies on psichoEd have been conducted with careers and families of people diagnosed with schizophrenia, as well as in remote care of people with mental health problems living in a rural environment. At the same time, it has been used in the contact between tutors and users of therapeutic flats of people with

severe and prolonged mental illness. It has also been used in the monitoring group as well as distance neuropsychological assessment of people with schizophrenia. Nowadays it is planned to use psychoED as a platform to deliver psychosocial care of people with Alzheimer's and other mental disorders.

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Felipe Soto-Perez is a Chilean psychologist in charge of community care and tele-care in the province of Zamora (Spain). Works in INTRAS Foundation and develops research over cybertherapy and tele-cognitive-rehabilitation and its uses on people with severe and prolonged mental illness. Has participated studies about psychoeducation of carers of people with schizophrenia by using cybertherapy and use of cybertherapy with people inexperienced in using computers.