

# Teletherapy thrives amid pandemic

Patients, therapists see benefits

By ALEXANDRA SKORES  
The Oregonian

Therapy starts in the morning, once a week for Sarah Cornwell's 15-year-old son. He leaves his bedroom to open a Chromebook laptop in a nook in the corner of the kitchen and living room. Cornwell puts earbuds in to give her son some privacy as he starts his session.

Cornwell's son is one of a growing number of Oregonians now regularly participating in therapy sessions held exclusively online.

The COVID-19 pandemic has spurred countless changes in how Americans communicate, from the workplace to personal get-togethers, and therapists have similarly embraced technology to stay connected to clients from afar. Telehealth has offered a unique and easy tool for patients to get an appointment that is flexible with their schedule.

Some patients are grateful they no longer must incur travel costs while others feel more comfortable discussing personal matters from inside their own homes. Some still prefer the value of talking in-person with their counselor, but experts say teletherapy has proven to give similar positive results in patient care and expect it is here to stay.

For Cornwell, teletherapy led her son to a happier and healthier life.

Cornwell's son has impaired processing and impaired working memory, so it takes him longer to process information than others. He's been in traditional in-person therapy since age 7, and he's developed natural coping strategies to remember and to combat the stress he feels.

Online therapy has proven to be more accessible. Now there's no more dreaded 35-minute commute to therapy from his home in Creswell, near Eugene. No time spent acclimating to the therapist's office each visit. And his therapy dog, "Dotty," an 18-month-old Great Pyrenees and Anatolian shepherd mix, gets to curl up nearby while they enjoy the comforts of home.

"Despite the world being very stressful right now, he still has his dog with him, right next to him at the computer and he's very comfortable," Cornwell said.

There's no definitive count of the number of Oregonians participating in teletherapy but the need is clear for easier access to care. People often seek therapy to overcome personal experiences or deal with loss. Counseling and other forms of therapy offer a greater self-awareness and coping mechanisms. Patients remain in therapy for a few short sessions to their entire life, depending on what they are hoping to achieve.

A national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report surveyed adults in June 2020 and showed 31% of respondents reported symptoms of anxiety or depression and 26% reported stress-related symptoms in the past 30 days.

In Oregon, a 2019 report from Mental Health America showed the state had the highest prevalence of mental illness in adults nationwide, at 22%, or about 714,000 people. The report tallied a wide range of diagnosable mental, behavior or emotional disorders, including mild anxiety and depression up to severe mental illness, and excluded development and substance-use disorders.

Licensed psychologist Brad Larsen San-



Sarah Cornwell's son is seen with his therapy dog.

Sarah Cornwell

## THERE'S NO DEFINITIVE COUNT OF THE NUMBER OF OREGONIANS PARTICIPATING IN TELETHERAPY BUT THE NEED IS CLEAR FOR EASIER ACCESS TO CARE.

chez said the pandemic has made his practice, Portland Mental Health and Wellness, shift how counselors work with their clients. When the pandemic began, the practice made the shift to 100% telehealth services.

"Demand skyrocketed throughout the pandemic," Larsen Sanchez said.

Larsen Sanchez said many of the providers may have lost the in-person elements of therapy and counseling, such as watching body language or where a person might sit in the session, but the benefits outweighed the costs.

In Cornwell's case, the lack of group sessions has been the only drawback she has noticed for her son. He has been working on remembering facial expressions, which are often easier to do with other people, so he can improve his ability to understand non-verbal communication.

"He can't really practice that if it's just one therapist there," Cornwell said. "But that doesn't detract from the positive outcomes that he's had."

Larsen Sanchez said he's found that patients are more likely to be vulnerable during their sessions at home than in a traditional office setting. The idea of being inside a safe, familiar environment was a significant benefit for patients during the pandemic.

"Psychotherapy is so much more than just

talking and listening," Larsen Sanchez said. "By necessity, we attend to the experience of the whole person."

He believes that virtual therapy will continue — even after the pandemic fades away.

In fact, most insurance companies have added telehealth to their policies. America's Health Insurance Plans, a trade group, noted that many companies adapted to the pandemic, adding telehealth as a cost covered under their plans. Telehealth encompasses any visit with a licensed doctor, including therapists.

Oregon House Bill 2508 was signed into law on June 1, stating telemedicine would be reimbursed at the same rates as in-person visits.

Sydney Ey, professor of psychiatry at Oregon Health & Science University, said the pandemic brought heightened attention to mental health. This last year proved to be a very stressful one.

"The problem is COVID is so unique in that it's not a one-time thing," Ey said. "It's been ongoing, and it's not just COVID."

Ey said the past year has brought large-scale issues to the table for many patients, including the loss of loved ones due to COVID-19, but also global issues like climate change or political instability worldwide.

"People take in multiple hits and one of

the things about stress is that you can eventually break anybody if we pile enough stress on them," Ey said.

And the research to keep it around, according to Ey, is there. People are doing just as well with telehealth appointments as they would with in-person appointments. The National Council for Mental Wellbeing reports youth patients showing more benefits, such as discussing more depth and emotion in their conversations.

Noting wellness apps like Calm and Headspace, Ey said that many of her patients have turned to the ease of getting help from technology, rather than having to go in-person to a licensed psychologist.

If a patient "lives in a rural community that doesn't have as many therapists ... they now have access to mental health professionals across the state," Ey said. "I think telehealth could end up being incredibly helpful and address a huge problem that exists worldwide — access to more mental health treatment."

For Cornwell and her son, teletherapy will continue to become a part of their daily routine, and it won't be going away anytime soon.

Her son looks forward to therapy now, and Cornwell has noticed less meltdowns and no stress hives from the effect of leaving for in-person therapy. He has more time to work on drawing, playing games and focusing on his schoolwork.

"Just having that consistency, and that routine and availability of a therapist to help him through things — the positives just really outweigh the negatives," Cornwell said.

# US overdose deaths reach record high

By MIKE STOBBE  
Associated Press

NEW YORK — An estimated 100,000 Americans died of drug overdoses in one year, a never-before-seen milestone that health officials say is tied to the COVID-19 pandemic and a more dangerous drug supply.

Overdose deaths have been rising for more than two decades, accelerated in the past two years and, according to new data released last week, jumped nearly 30% in the latest year.

President Joe Biden called it "a tragic milestone" in a statement, as administration officials pressed Congress to devote billions of dollars more to address the problem.

"This is unacceptable and it requires an unprecedented response," said Dr. Rahul Gupta, director of National Drug Control Policy.

Experts believe the top drivers of overdose deaths are the growing prevalence of deadly fentanyl in the illicit drug supply and the COVID-19 pandemic, which left many drug users socially isolated and unable to get treatment or other support.

The number is "devastating," said Katherine Keyes, a Columbia University expert on drug abuse issues. "It's a magnitude of overdose death that we haven't seen in this country."

Drug overdoses now surpass deaths from car crashes, guns and even flu and pneumonia. The total is close to that for diabetes, the nation's No. 7 cause of death.

Drawing from the latest available death certificate data, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated that 100,300 Americans died of drug overdoses from May 2020 to April 2021. It's not an official count. It can take many months for death investigations involving drug fatalities to become final, so the agency made the estimate based on 98,000 reports it has received so far.

The CDC previously reported there were about 93,000 overdose deaths in 2020, the highest number recorded in a calendar year. Robert Anderson, the CDC's chief of mortality statistics, said the 2021 tally is likely to surpass 100,000.

"2021 is going to be terrible," agreed Dr. Daniel Ciccarone, a drug policy expert at the University of California, San Francisco.

The new data shows many of the deaths involve illicit fentanyl, a highly lethal opioid that five years ago surpassed heroin as the type of drug involved in the most overdose deaths. Dealers have mixed fentanyl with other drugs — one reason that deaths from methamphetamines and cocaine also are rising.

Drug cartels in Mexico are using chemicals from China to mass produce and distribute fentanyl and meth across America, said Anne Milgram, administrator of the Drug Enforcement

Administration.

This year, the DEA has seized 12,000 pounds of fentanyl, a record amount, Milgram said. But public health experts and even police officials say that law enforcement measures will not stop the epidemic, and more needs to be done to dampen demand and prevent deaths.

The CDC has not yet calculated racial and ethnic breakdowns of the overdose victims.

It found the estimated death toll rose in all but four states — Delaware, New Hampshire, New Jersey and South Dakota — compared with the same period a year earlier. The states with largest increases were Vermont (70%), West Virginia (62%) and Kentucky (55%).

Minnesota saw an increase of about 39%, with estimated overdose deaths rising to 1,188 in May 2020 through April 2021 from 858 in the previous 12-month period.

The area around Mankato has seen its count of overdose deaths rise from two in 2019, to six last year to 16 so far this year, said police Lt. Jeff Wersal, who leads a regional drug task force.

"I honestly don't see it getting better, not soon," he said.

Among the year's victims was Travis Gustavson, who died in February at the age of 21 in Mankato. His blood was

**'I HONESTLY DON'T SEE IT GETTING BETTER, NOT SOON.'**

Jeff Wersal | a police lieutenant who leads a regional drug task force in Minnesota

found to show signs of fentanyl, heroin, marijuana and the sedative Xanax, Wersal said.

Gustavson was close to his mother, two brothers and the rest of his family, said his grandmother, Nancy Sack.

He was known for his easy smile, she said. "He could be crying when he was a little guy, but if someone smiled at him, he immediately stopped crying and smiled back," she recalled.

Gustavson first tried drugs as kid and had been to drug treatment as a teenager, Sack said. He struggled with anxiety and depression, but mainly used marijuana and different kinds of pills, she said.

The morning of the day he died, Gustavson had a tooth pulled, but he wasn't prescribed strong painkillers because of his drug history, Sack said. He told his mother he would just stay home and ride out the pain with ibuprofen. He was expecting a visit from his girlfriend that night to watch a movie, she said.

But Gustavson contacted Max Leo Miller, also 21, who provided him a bag containing heroin and fentanyl, according to police.

Some details of what happened are in dispute, but all accounts suggest Gustavson was new to heroin and fentanyl.

Police say to Gustavson and Miller exchanged messages on social media. At one point, Gustavson sent a photo of a line of a white substance on a brown table and asked if he was taking the right amount and then wrote "Or bigger?"

According to a police report, Miller responded: "Smaller bro" and "Be careful plz!"