

DIRECTOR OF THE INNOVATION CENTRE OF MENTAL HEALTH & TECH AT TRIMBOS INSTITUTE

KATHERINA MARTIN ABELLO

“e-MENTAL HEALTH CAN INCREASE RESILIENCE AND WELLBEING, AND PREVENT MENTAL DISORDERS”

By Jose L. Cánovas

Katherina Martin Abello is the director of the Center of Innovation at the Trimbos Instituut in the city of Utrecht, which aims to promote the use of e-Mental health to improve the quality and accessibility of care for people with psychological problems.

Trimbos Instituut is a centre of excellence in Mental Health and Addictions. When did they decide to launch the Centre of Innovation of Mental Health and Technology?

The Centre of Innovation of Mental Health & Technology (back then called I.COM) was officially launched in 2005; since then we are committed to develop, research and implement technically innovative interventions that are scientifically sound, extreme relevant and meaningful for the end users. These vary from web-based self-help programs to mHealth and serious games. The team consists of experienced professionals in many different fields, such as psychology, research, UX and persuasive psychology, social sciences; just to mention a few.

Which are the main present and future lines of work for the Centre of Innovation?

Keep developing, researching and implementing online programs: Our main present and future objective is to keep developing, researching and implementing e-mental health solutions, digital and online programs such as websites, apps and games to prevent or treat behavioral and mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety and addiction (substance abuse),

“**The accessibility of e-Mental Health contributes to the quality of life**

as well as complaints which could lead to this problems, such as stress, worry much and sleeping problems. Implementation is a very important step, since there are evidence based online programs which are not broadly used because the general population, general practitioners or psychologists do not know they exist or, in many cases, they do not know how to apply them in their daily practice. Training, communication, marketing, follow-up, monitoring, evaluation and adaptation are essential steps in a good implementation strategy.

Mainstream e-Mental Health: We believe we can help to prevent Mental Health illness by providing 24/7, evidence based online programs accessible through mobile (smart)phones, tablets and computers to everyone around the globe. Therefore, we need to cooperate with organizations willing to help to mainstream and implement these innovative programs to reach as many people as possible. We invite profit or non-profit organization sharing this objective to contact us. We can collaborate for example by sharing knowledge, conducting research, adapting (Trimbos) existing online programs in other countries or making them suitable for specific target groups. We can also develop new programs if needed.

Create meaningful and engaging programs for specific target groups:

We are excited to make relevant solutions that actually match specific target groups' needs, e.g. an app to increase resilience, well being and prevent mental disorders for breast cancer patients, instead of a general intervention for cancer patients or general population.

Our first two innovative solutions for specific groups which help reduce the burden and impact of mental health problems are: 'Robbin' a mobile app specifically designed for breast cancer patients (www.metrobbin.nl); and 'Loss' an app for parents dealing with miscarriage, stillbirth or infant death (www.loss-app.nl). We also have developed a perinatal and post-partum online program, available in The Netherlands specifically targeted (language and content) for Turkish and Moroccan women (www.positiefzwanger.nl).

Mental health disorders often co-occur with somatic diseases; e.g. according to the American Cancer Society 25-33% of patients with breast cancer (total 231,840 patients per year in USA) experience mental problems during the first stage of treatment. In the long run 10-35% of all cancer patients struggle with severe depression or anxiety. The same is true for e.g. heart disease and diabetes. The detection and early treatment of mental disorders in patients who suffer from chronic (somatic) diseases is presently insufficient, and sometimes lacking completely. With our solutions we can fill this gap. We are confident that this approach can be broadened to various target groups suffering from specific (chronic) diseases (such as diabetes), as well as to

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informal caregivers (of e.g. patients with severe psychiatric disorders) who may also be at risk for decreasing wellbeing and developing depression. Moreover, positive mental health programs may improve overall health and support recovery from patients who undergo surgery and full recovery thereafter.

How would you define e-Mental Health?

Digital and online programs, which vary from web-based self-help programs (websites) to m-health (apps) and serious games to prevent or treat behavior and mental health problems. E-Mental Health programs and tools are 24/7 available, don't require waiting or travel time, they are user-friendly and are at the fingertips. They range from prevention programs to treatment and relapse prevention.

How e-Mental Health can help to improve the quality of life of people with psychological problems or addictions?

E-Mental Health can increase resilience and wellbeing, and prevent mental disorders therefore you improve the quality of life of people and reduce the burden and impact of mental health problems. Not only for adults but also children and older people. They provide a very convenient way to work on psychological problems in your own time and tempo, and can also offer access to get in touch with peers or professionals/coaches who can also help through digital programs.

The accessibility of e-Mental Health also contributes to the quality of life. In the Netherlands customers/patients e.g.: for breast cancer (during treatment) or people who experience for example stress, anxiety or depression complains only have access to mental health or emotional health support through Primary Care. Even if they are in treatment by a specialized health provider, they have to contact their GP to get help and eventually be referred for mental health services. This is a step many people do not dare to take, since there is still a lot of stigma regarding mental illness. As a result they go untreated becoming a population at risk to develop more severe mental health problems. If they do look for help, most of the time GP's do not know what to offer other than general interventions for mindfulness, depression, anxiety; mostly face to face, requiring travel time, handling logistics at home and work, and still not

covering their specific needs for their specific situation/illness. Most of the time they do not even know that there are online (free) prevention and treatment programs available. People with high income may choose to look for private psychology or psychiatric services, but still they will experience the same inconveniences described above.

There are also interventions aimed to increase the quality of life, for example combining positive psychology, CBT and problem solving. These online programs provide exercises e.g. to help people to learn the importance of investing in positive relationships, creativity and recreation and positive feelings; all this in order to build resilience and help people to deal with their behavioral, mental or addiction problem, to recover and have a 'normal' life again.

E-Mental Health programs (digital and online programs) have a very important attribute: many of them stimulate self-management and empower users to get control of their situation and be in charge of their health and well-being. Users are empowered through the possibilities of the program, and tools are provided to be able to manage their situation/condition, therefore they have an active role in their own health; instead of depending or giving all the responsibility to a professional. Participants of these programs get insights on their own situation, new information in shown in a simple way which provide food for thoughts to reflect and make decisions. They also can decide with whom they want to share information and whom they want to involve in this process.

You have said that online interventions in mental health care are effective, accessible, affordable and versatile.

Yes, e-Mental Health interventions are found to be clinically effective as well as cost-effective in preventing full-blown mental disorders.

There are many researches and meta-analyses which demonstrate that Internet is an effective medium to deliver interventions/programs to reduce depression and anxiety symptoms; show the effectiveness of self-help web-based interventions to reduce alcohol consumption, demonstrate statistically and clinically significant effects of web-based, problem-solving intervention on symptoms



of depression and anxiety, the effectiveness of online cognitive behavior therapy for prevention and treatment of depression and anxiety and the effectiveness of positive psychology online interventions; just to mention a few.

They are accessible because they are available when you need them, and we can distribute them through Internet and the app stores worldwide. There are simple technologies available to make them also accessible for people with disabilities, so that we can provide equal access to emotional and mental health online programs to everyone.

Explain what international projects Centre of Innovation of Mental Health & Technology have developed in collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO).

Trimbos Institute is a collaborating Centre of the World Health Organization for dissemination of good practices in mental health. We collaborated with the WHO and institutes and organizations from Belarus, Brazil, India and Mexico to develop portals on alcohol and health with a web-based self-help program for these 4 pilot countries. The online self-help intervention offers an innovative method of facilitating and supporting self-help strategies for those who want to reduce alcohol consumption or stop drinking.

"The portals were launched on December 6, 2012, and provide information not only for policymakers and professionals, but also



“ EU northern Europe is leading e-Mental Health developments and research

for the public at large. They include a self-screening tool for hazardous and harmful use of alcohol and a fully computerized self-help programme for people who wish to reduce or stop drinking alcohol. This project has been implemented by WHO Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse in collaboration with Trimbos Institute and different institutes and organizations from Belarus, Brazil, India and Mexico.

Netherlands is one of the leading countries in e-Mental Health practice.

Yes, together with some other countries like United Kingdom, Sweden and Australia. In the EU northern Europe is leading e-Mental Health developments and research at this moment.

Which main other projects are you developing nationwide?

We are quite busy developing and researching many innovative products! To mention a few:

We are implementing different positive psychology, depression prevention and alcohol prevention e-mental health

interventions in primary care, which is a new phenomenon! Since 2014 in The Netherlands early detection and treatment of depression, anxiety and problem drinking are tasks of the general practitioner. E-Mental Health programs can play a relevant role (given all the above mentioned reasons). Patients can use the online intervention as self-help or with the guidance of the doctor. We already have published a couple of infographics about this topic which will be shortly also available in English.

We are conducting research on online complaint directed interventions for sleeping better, worry less and stress less; and making them also suitable for mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets. And last but not least we are developing and researching new innovative approaches such as Virtual Reality, gamming and sensor technology.

Trimbos is also working very hard in the international field. Maybe is also relevant to mention that in January 2016 the Situation Analysis and Policy Recommendations for Depression, Suicide Prevention and E-health of the Joint Action in Europe was published and we are co-authors.

Has it been difficult to implement these e-Mental Health solutions in the healthcare system?

It has not been easy. Particularly in the healthcare system we have to deal with many different factors: knowledge on how to identify and talk about mental problems

like depression, anxiety complaints or alcohol problems, among others; knowledge level about the possibilities of e-mental health; financial considerations and limitations; quality of the e-mental health programs: how to select the right programs for each target group; law and regulations, among others.

There are also some challenges in the broad implementation of e-Mental Health in the general population, for example: people looking for resources such as apps, may find applications available in the app stores, but have little information about the quality, effectiveness and the company and research behind them.

Can digital solutions help fight the stigma of Mental Health?

Yes, they can. But also much more marketing and communication is needed to create sufficient awareness and provide information in the community, at schools, workplace and even in the professional medical field. There is a lot of stigma indeed regarding mental illness; therefore a lot of people with mental health problems are afraid to share their problems with partners, family or friends. The stigma also prevents them for seeking professional help, and in many cases they go untreated. Many effective digital programs are available online, not only to provide support or treatment for the people suffering mental illness, but also to give information, and create awareness. In this way this programs contribute to fight the stigma and reach patients and community to address such relevant worldwide problem.

e-Mental health is one of the main topics of the HIMSS eHealth Week 2016. Which practices or policies do you expect to be discussed at this event?

The eHealth Week is an excellent setting to exchange information and experiences, and we will definitely share some of the best practices of e-Mental Health programs in The Netherlands. It is also the event to get inspired and explore new possibilities and future directions, innovation! We will also share our vision and projects on this. I also hope we can discuss about the challenges and opportunities we have to mainstream e-Mental Health in order to give an impulse to the implementation in the Dutch market, as well as in many other countries. ●