FamilyeJournal: Benefits of Online Guided Group Journaling for Mental Health

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Introduction

SNS (Social Networking Sites) have become an integral part of today's modern culture. SNS allow individuals to communicate and interact on a level that allows for more self disclosure than other more traditional means of communication. While motivation to use SNS varies, the current proposal is designed to examine the usefulness of a specific SNS, FamilyeJournal (FeJ), as a therapeutic tool. Specifically, use of this online Q & A website was evaluated as a mechanism for improving connections with family and friends. In a previous investigation, qualitative responses were overwhelmingly favorable from a sample of college students during a 14-week trial. The current study compared family cohesion, depression, anxiety, and health choices between FEJ users and a matched sample control group.

Methods

Fifty-one female college students from a U.S. woman's university (M = 20.2 yrs) completed an online survey called the Relationship and Lifestyle Questionnaire. The survey included a demographic section, the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet & Farley, 1988), the Depression and Anxiety Stress Scale (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1993), and several items related to health choices (e.g. smoking, diet). Half of the participants were randomly assigned to the FeJ user group. They were asked to invite 3-5 friends and/or family members to FeJ, and answer questions from the online platform 3x weekly for 10-weeks. FeJ questions are designed to help users share their thoughts and feelings about everyday life events.

FeJ asks non-confrontational and non-controversial questions and does not have an underlying agenda (e.g. religious, political, etc.). Sample questions include:
•Describe how you feel today.
•What was your first thought or feeling when you awoke this morning?
•Describe a memorable experience from elementary school.
Following the 10-week FeJ trial, all participants completed the Relationship and Lifestyle questionnaire a second time (ABA design).
It was predicted that the FeJ group would report higher family cohesion, less depression and anxiety, and better health compared to the control group.

Results

The repeated measures mixed-design ANOVA was performed to examine the differences between groups. Our first hypothesis was supported as the FeJ group reported significantly higher family cohesiveness at time 2, with no change from the control group, $F (1,100) = 6.92$, $p < .05$ (see Figure 1). Similarly, support for Hypothesis 2 for depression was also demonstrated as the FeJ group reported lower scores at Time 2, $F (1,100) = 5.71$, $p < .05$ (see Figure 2). However, no differences between groups were found with regards to anxiety or health choices ($p > .05$).

Conclusions

Our findings suggest the SNS platform FamilyeJournal may provide a simple opportunity to improve family relationships. Asynchronous online communication is immune to drawbacks and barriers associated with traditional means of communication such as busy schedules and geographic disparity (Perron, 2002). The current findings suggest that online journal sharing may provide a buffer from depression. However, we are uncertain why we found no differences in levels of reported anxiety and health choices. Perhaps these constructs are more stable and resistant to change in a 10-week period of time. Future studies should examine potential gender and cross-cultural differences before we can confidently generalize our results. FeJ may benefit military families, single parents, and the elerly. Nonetheless, internet and networked applications continue to grow, we are encouraged by the potential therapeutic benefits suggested by our findings.

Table 1: Family Cohesion

Table 2: Depression