

INNOVATIVE TECHNOLOGIES AND APPROACHES IN SOCIAL WORK WITH DEPENDENTS

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Abstract

This article examines the problem of dependency from the point of view of innovative technologies and approaches in social work with dependent people, referring to effective practices that have been proven over the years, but adapted according to the new trends outlined. A review of the literature shows that the use of innovative technologies and approaches in addiction therapy and support (telehealth approaches, teletherapy, trauma-oriented approaches, gender-based approaches, artificial intelligence-based tools, etc.) increases the quality of treatment and its outcomes.

Keywords: addictions, social work, innovative technologies, and approaches.

INTRODUCTION

Addiction is a severe problem that affects millions of people around the world. Data recorded by a number of international organizations (WHO, UNODC, ESPAD) show alarming statistics regarding increased levels in almost all types of addictions. For example, according to the World Narcotics Report 2025, 316 million people were reported in 2023. people who use drugs, which is a 28% increase over the past 10 years [1]. The world's largest international research project, the European School Research Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs, based on 30 years of observation, in 2024 reports new trends on substance behaviour and use – increased levels of daily smoking among 13-year-olds and younger girls and increased use of e-cigarettes; growth and change in behavioral risks – the problematic use of social media, gaming, is growing; significant gender disparities in mental well-being, with significantly worse outcomes for girls [2].

Prevention and treatment efforts are aimed at seeking new integrative

approaches to interventions and programs to prevent and address problematic use and addictions.

Problematic use and addictive behavior have negative repercussions not only on the user, but also on his family, environment, and the whole society. Effective tackling of this problem requires the implementation of complex integrative measures.

The object of research is addiction and dependent behavior as a social problem. **The subject** of the study is innovative technologies and approaches in social work with addicts.

The purpose of this article is to present an overview analysis of the current innovative technologies and approaches to support in social work with addicts, referring to effective practices that have been proven over the years, but adapted according to the contemporary trends.

EXPLOSION

For millennia, people have been using different substances to satisfy their needs at a bio-psycho-social level. It was not until

the 20th century that drug abuse began to be perceived as a global social problem.

Addiction is a complex, chronic disease that, according to the WHO, "affects a person's brain and changes their behavior so that it acts in a way that harms them. A person becomes unable to stop taking drugs or engage in certain behaviors (gambling, shopping, online games) to the point where it becomes harmful" [3].

Addiction as a social phenomenon is influenced by the environment and the life experience of the individual. As defined by The American Society for Addiction Medicine, "people with addiction use substances or engage in behaviors that become compulsive and often persist despite the harmful consequences. Prevention efforts and approaches to treating addiction are usually as successful as those for other chronic diseases" [4].

Addiction social work is a holistically oriented activity that both targets the addict by providing individualized care, and at the same time works in favor of supporting the client's social environment and overcoming societal prejudices and stigma about addiction.

In the field of support treatment and recovery from addiction, social workers have key functions:

- *Assessment and screening* – assessment of individual treatment needs; screening for comorbidities; medical, social, psychological, and other history.
- *Counseling* – providing individual and group consultations, focusing on the individuality of the client, the causes of addiction, providing a safe and protected environment.
- *Developing coping strategies* – providing tools to cope with stress, anxiety, managing use, identifying harmful patterns of behavior, and thinking.
- *Mediation* – providing information sources and institutional resources supporting the client's independence

by finding a job, housing, healthy habits.

- *Training* – development of social skills – communication, problem solving, strategies for dealing with conflict situations, etc.
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- *Work with the family and the close environment* – addiction exerts significant pressure on families whose members are addicted, affecting the personal, social, and family quality of life [5], which requires counseling and support of the family, training to understand the specifics of addiction.

By analyzing the results of the scientific searches of a number of researchers in the field of dependencies [6, 7, 8, 9], different theoretical views on the effectiveness of the applied approaches and interventions can be conceptualized. The literature review shows that widely used proven effective approaches and methods such as cognitive-behavioral therapies, motivational interviewing, 12-step programs, etc., are oriented towards awareness and motivation for understanding in modern aspects of therapy and social support of addiction.

Innovative technologies and approaches to therapy and social support of addicted persons

Globally, over the past few years, many innovative technologies such as artificial intelligence, teletechnology, virtual and augmented reality, etc., have rapidly entered people's lives. As Minkova-Nikolova notes, "in parallel with human evolution, there are more and more complex and multifaceted problems to solve, the need to process ever larger volumes of data in order to make more accurate predictions that support the development of society" [10, c. 243].

In the field of addiction therapy and social support, innovative technologies and approaches also find their significant place, contributing to increasing the effectiveness of the care provided.

A number of studies prove the positive results and higher levels of satisfaction of its users from the implementation of telehealth and digital applications [7].

In the field of mental health, the deployment of technologies and tools based on artificial intelligence is still under study regarding their effectiveness and usefulness. According to a study by Suva and colleagues, the role of artificial intelligence in various addictions to drugs, gambling, and online games should be looked at in more depth [11]. The authors point out that all has the potential for early identification, prediction and prevention of relapse, individual therapy, accessibility. When using AI tools such as chatbots, virtual assistants, etc., it should be approached with care, taking into account the individuality of the client, ethical considerations and the continuous advancement of technology, which should be primarily focused on the best interests of the client and their well-being.

The Covid pandemic has significantly impacted on the deployment of a variety of user-centric telehealth platforms and applications. According to a study by Mark et al. conducted among addiction treatment providers, the effectiveness of one-on-one counseling through telehealth is as effective as in in-person one-on-one counseling. However, equivalent results are not reported when providing group counseling and assessment of medication intake via telehealth [11, c. 484].

In 2018, the international platform for online meetings Smart Recovery was launched, the purpose of which is to ensure equal accessibility of people with addiction problems from all over the world from different settlements. Based on cognitive-behavioral therapy as an evidence-based method, Smart Recovery supports people with addiction to cope with emotions and

impulses, effectively manage their behavior, and lead a sustainable and balanced lifestyle [12].

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) in the treatment of addictions has its value and proven effectiveness. CBT is aimed, on the one hand, at helping the addict, supported by a specialist, to recognize his feelings, emotions, thoughts before and after the use of the narcotic substance. On the other hand, CBT aims to develop skills for an appropriate lifestyle and overcome life's problems and challenges.

The use of computer-based technologies in addiction treatment contributes to addressing a number of barriers faced by vulnerable groups – stigma, isolation, accessibility, complications from comorbidities, etc. As Downie points out, "the provision of CBT digitally can provide invaluable evidence-based care options for a wider group of people, including those with mobility problems, who live in remote locations and who may not seek treatment due to other mental health issues or stigma." [13, c. 2]. For example, back in 2008, the Carroll team and colleagues developed the CBT4CBT online platform, which is a computer-based CBT program aimed at training people with drug addiction skills [14]. The program's website states that at the moment work is being done to build skills for effective problem solving, change in use patterns, change negative thoughts, control over the desire to use alcohol or drugs [15].

Providing teletherapies to dependents on trained professionals, including social workers, allows for the preservation of client anonymity, real-time support, more effective accessibility. Counseling and treatment, using videoconferencing and web-based tools, allows a person to access effective therapy without having to visit a specialized addiction treatment center on site. Currently, the teletherapy service is provided in a number of online addiction treatment centers.

In recent years, understanding and respect for experience has put new

perspectives at the center of addiction treatment. A growing body of research [16, 17, 18, 19] presents and proves the link between trauma, especially in childhood development, and addiction. Trauma-informed approaches are inherently focused on trauma as a major component of the treatment of substance use post-traumatic stress disorder [16]. Using trauma-informed approaches, helping professionals can build a more effective relationship of trust, create a safe and secure space, showing understanding and respect for the violence, pain, stress, and loss experienced.

The reduction of harm from the use of narcotic substances aims at the prevention of complications arising from the use, the development of HIV, overdose, HCV. There are studies that prove the effectiveness of the Harm Reduction approach, which focuses on reducing the risk of use. For example, Forns and colleagues developed a model whose "test and treat" strategy yielded positive results, according to which the rate of reinfection reported a decrease. According to the authors, the goal of the model is in line with the WHO's goals of eliminating the hepatitis c virus by improving testing [20]. Various programs offer alternative solutions to reduce harm and risk of use, such as safe places of use, controlled consumption, programs to serve injecting drugs by providing consumables for safe use, etc. [21].

A number of studies prove the effectiveness of peer-to-peer addiction programs, which are based on the client's support approach by coaches. In the sixties of the last century, new forms of support for people addicted to alcohol and drugs were born. These new models are based on the social model of recovery, which provides support to recovering people in residential environments, based on the concept and practice of alcoholics anonymous (AA) [22]. Modern forms of supportive communities, as Boisvert et al. point out, can be an effective approach aimed at reducing relapses among alcohol and drug

users [23]. According to the authors, the most momentous change is in creating connection and support between community members. A similar format is the coaches for recovery from addiction. These kinds of recovery coaches seek to encourage recovery seekers to create their own recovery plans [24], providing a continuum of social tools that support independence (employment, housing, healthy habits, social belonging). The support provided is aimed at showing empathy and concern.

Effective therapy and social support is largely conditioned by the care and approaches offered. The WHO defines integrated services as "a continuum of services for health promotion, disease prevention, diagnosis, treatment, disease management, rehabilitation and palliative care, coordinated between different levels and places of care in the health sector and beyond, and according to their lifelong needs" [25]. According to Kolev, the integrated approach "provides a comprehensive framework of social intervention based on the theory of the system, appropriate in most social situations requiring planned and guided social change" [26, c. 14]. In the field of addictions, integrated services offer comprehensive support to those in need within a single treatment center. A number of modern studies [27, 28, 29] confirm the effectiveness of the integrated approach to therapy and social support of addicts.

In Bulgaria this year, the country's first social service for dependent women was launched, which was created by a foundation "Independent". This type of integrated social service aims to support women affected by addictions, including pregnant women and mothers with children. Based on a gender-centred approach, the main objective of the Counselling Centre is to provide effective and sustainable support to women in the recovery process by providing a range of diverse services – psychological counseling, trauma-informed approach, psychodrama, group therapy

sessions, health and social counseling, motivational interviewing, expressive therapies, increasing parental capacity, etc [30].

CONCLUSION

This overview highlights the need for more flexible approaches to support, oriented towards the opportunities provided by integrated social services and recovery centers, according to individual needs and personal choices. Combining different innovative approaches (for example, digital applications with group support, chatbots with motivational interviewing, etc.), based on proven methods of support and recovery, will increase the effectiveness of the services provided. We believe that more in-depth and specifically oriented studies are needed in the relationship between the different innovative approaches and the nature of addiction in terms of personality, substance, environment.

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