EDITORIAL

Dear colleagues,

Interest in the use of a metaverse, a virtual space that can be used for interaction with some degree of reality, is growing, and is both interesting and confusing. It may be the next evolution of the internet and become an integral part of our lives. As a space where the digital and physical worlds converge, a user can be and do whatever they want. This presents both opportunities and questions for us to consider. Currently, we really cannot predict the uses and outcomes, but we should not ignore this development. It will likely affect all of society in as little as 10 years.

In my opinion, effects will be felt even sooner. Technological changes continue to rapidly influence our lives, and our work must accommodate these innovations. We must prepare to adapt and to influence implementation as needed. At every stage of great change, there is some justifiable fear and cause for caution, but we must also manage reality.

We have adapted to many changes in recent decades, and there are important concerns about management of a metaverse. The effect on mental health of reliance on a metaverse is one area that merits examination. More and more experts have expressed worry as tech giants continue to promote a metaverse world. The effects of the isolation experienced due to the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health are still being investigated. This new step brings mixed feelings: worry, curiosity, excitement, fear...

There is concern that reliance on a metaverse could trigger or hinder treatment of psychological disorders. Studies note that excessive use of digital technology is associated with somatic symptoms of psychological problems, such as depression, schizophrenia, and paranoid thinking. It is important to consider how immersion in virtual universes may contribute to or impede treatment of psychological disorders.

Every technological innovation brings threats along with new opportunities. For some, metaverse engagement may simply represent an escape and a world of pleasure, or an easier method of interaction. However, an accepted form of distance from reality includes a great risk for those who are already struggling to connect with reality. The detachment afforded by a virtual world may also create an important separation from real life and contribute to more frequent delusions and psychotic symptoms.

Importantly, metaverse options also offer hope for progressive and innovative solutions to provide greater access and ability to address mental health issues. The value, as well as the challenges, of remote options for the delivery of care became especially clear during the COVID-19 pandemic. Metaverse alternatives can offer important opportunities, particularly for segments of the population for whom access to healthcare services may be more difficult, such as the elderly. Virtual reality exposure therapy has been used successfully with patients with phobias, psychosis, addiction, or post-traumatic stress disorder.

Although it is not clear exactly when or how we will engage with this developing virtual universe as nurses, it is both important and possible to investigate and predict the potential positive and negative effects. It is not easy to know the full effects at present; however, I believe that we should be proactive and turn innovations into opportunities, while never losing sight of the power of face-to-face communication, which draws its strength from humanity and the power of love.

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