In-cooperating E- Counselling in the Professional Development of Counselling Practice: Merits and Demerits

Uzoekwe, Helen E.
Department of Guidance and Counselling,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State

Obika, Juliana A.
Department of Guidance and Counselling,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State

&

Obineli, Amaka *(Rev.Sr.Dr.)*
Department of Guidance and Counselling,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State

Abstract

E-counselling is the provision of professional mental health to the clients through the internet or it can be called online counselling. This theoretical study sets out to investigate the merits and demerits of incorporating E-counselling as one of the best practices in the professional development of counselling practice in Anambra State, Nigeria. The researchers observed

from the findings that E-counselling saves time, money and it increases the sense of privacy. It helps the clients and therapist to pay close attention to their thoughts and feelings while still engaging in dialogues. Despite these amazing advantages, some disadvantages could still be found. Based on the findings, conclusions were made.

Introduction

Beginning as a revolution, the internet has now become a part and parcel of the 21st century world. Everything and everyone is getting online. And those who are not doing so are missing out on the immense power of this modern age wonder. Counselling field cannot be left far behind. Every sound profession look for and welcome new innovations into their field for the welfare of their service consumers all over the world. Internet have bring a lot of innovations in the world today such as e-learning and e-counselling.Today,people who have interest can now access education especially that of tertiary through what is called e-learning. Therefore a consumer of education can be anywhere and at any time access education that enhances their development. In the same vein, Professional counsellors can embrace e-counselling as one of the best practices in the development of counselling practice in under-developed countries for the benefit of the services' consumers who may not be able to get their services due to geographical location, time and any other problem. Developed countries have been practising this e-counselling and it has been proved effective (Cohen and Kerr, 1998).

The term, counselling according to Okorodudu, (2010) refers to a process involving a professionally trained individual in the application of psychological principles and practices in assisting individuals and groups to cope with their life adjustment needs in the society.Also, Okoye, (2008) defined a counsellor as a professionally trained person who help others solve their problems for now and in the future.

Counselling needs of clients are numerous and they are recurrent in nature and also their associated difficulties in various areas of human endeavours. Some of the clients' needs are: education, vocational, marriage, persona-social and financial needs. The face to face counselling approach can in any way meet these needs of citizens. If few consumers who are fortunate enough can access face to face counselling in meeting their needs, what of those under-served who have problems of deep concerns and at the same time find

it very difficult to meet a professional counsellor ?Can these people be overlooked to continue suffering? No. This is why the present write up is on embracing the e-counselling as one of the best practices in developing counselling practices because counselling services demands are on the increase that professional counsellors cannot be able to supply only through face-to-face counselling practice.

E-Counselling

E-counselling is the provision of professional mental health to the clients through the internet or it can be called online counselling. These counselling services are offered through e-mail, real-time chat, video-conferencing and phones. Traditional counselling of face-to-face can be used in conjunction with online counselling but some clients are using online counselling as a complete replacement to traditional office visits (Mallen, Michael, David & Vogel, 2005).The main difference between the traditional style of counselling and online lies in the way information is exchanged between the counsellor and the client. Apart from that, online counselling is very similar to the face-to-face style of work. Online counselling offers confidential and supportive space where healing can occur through exploration of one's own thoughts and feelings and moving on towards an increased sense of well-being (www2.hud.ac.uk/student.../counselling/e-counseling.php-cached-similar, retrieved 20th July, 2011)

One of the most important aspects of e-counselling is that of client's sense of safety and security, enabling them to trust the therapeutic process and become more curious about their own ways of thinking and behaving. This supportive environment in combination with the counsellor's empathy and understanding helps clients increase their level of insight and awareness (www2.hud.ac.uk/student.../counselling/e-counselling. Also, the client online is being enabled to say what he or she might find very difficult to say directly to a counsellor on face-to-face. The clients have the opportunity to think and edit, or write freely without having to cope with how counsellor is reacting to his or her at the moment. What the client needs to is to press 'send' when he or she is ready. With e-counselling, counselling services can be extended far and wide to the clients who need such services despite their environments.

E-counselling can be easily accessed by the following clients:

  ▪   students who are on placement

- people who could not go to the office to see a counsellor due to a disability

- people who have a very busy schedule who cannot be able to attend to counselling during office hours

- people who are in a remote or rural areas where counsellors are very difficult to get

- people who have a preference for this kind of contact (how2.ecounselling@hud.ac.uk).

It is true that online counselling cannot totally replace traditional face-to-face therapy. Research from Stofle, (2001) and Suler, (2000) suggests that online counselling would benefit people functioning at a moderately high level. Severe situations such as suicidal ideation or a psychotic episode might be better served through traditional face-to-face methods (Zelvin, 2004). Cohen and Kerr, (1998) have conducted a study on the effectiveness of online therapy for treatment of anxiety disorders in students and found that there was no difference in the level of change for the two modes as measured by the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory. As the main goal of counselling is to alleviate the distress, anxiety, or concerns experienced by a client when he or she enters therapy, online counselling has strong efficacy under that definition (Mallen, Michael, Vogel, et al 2005).Therefore, once a consumer of counselling services has a functional internet-connected computer or handset (phone), he or she can access counselling services he or she needs.

Merits of E-counselling

Online counselling save time and money

With online counselling, the client will not need to travel for an appointment with a counsellor (how2.ecounselling@hud.ac.uk). With the popularity of the internet anyone with a computer that is connected can access counselling services at any time and from wherever, he or she may be. Visits to counsellors are hereby minimised. Once a client is able to organise his or her thought into a well-worded e-mail, review past correspondence for comfort or guidance, he or she can just log on to a counsellor he or she wants her services. The sessions costs half as much as in-person visits to a counsellor (Lindsay, 2005)

Easy accessibility

Online counselling has come to fill the unmet need for clients located in remote and rural areas that are traditionally under-served by traditional counsellors.These set of people who are not fortunate enough to be where counsellors can be seen face to face will meet their needs through online counselling services(Mallen, Michael, Vogel, et al, 2005). Also clients who may have difficulty in reaching appointments during normal business hours can egually have access to counselling services through online (Change, Yeh, & krumboltz, 2001). Research by Mallen, Michael, Vogel, Rochlen and Day, (2005) has demonstrated that disabled persons that need counselling services can benefit from online counselling.

Increased sense of privacy

Another noteworthy aspect of online counselling is its perceived privacy. Some individuals still feel shy and afraid to face someone. The counsellor's physical absence diminishes the client's initial shame or need to save face while presenting a problem. Many clients do appreciate the disinhibiting effect of not being seen in person (Joinson, 1998; & Fink, 1999).

The psyche of the client is freed from therapeutic self-reflection in many other ways. The disinhibiting effect of not being seen by the counsellor allows the client to easily open up on the core issue. Behind the scenes and static of personalities, social masks are unnecessary. Online counselling has found that text- based self disclosure can have the effect of inducing a high degree of intimacy and honesty from first exchange of e-mails. Many clients present themselves in a naked way without their usual in-person defences. The power differential is diminished as well because both parties are contributing to shared texts. they become co-architects of how the client chooses to build on or deconstruct present insights (Owen, 1995).

Having easy entrance of zone of reflection

Once ongoing online contact between client and therapist has been established, both parties enter what Sular, (2000) has termed the 'zone of reflection'. The asynchronous (time-delayed) e-mail exchange slows down the process and allows both parties to pay close attention to their thoughts and feelings while still engaged in a dialogue.

The client's inclination to ventilate is naturally channelled by the need to frame thoughts in writing .The act of composing, which often includes re-reading and reviewing what is written on both sides, leads naturally to externalizing and re-framing, thereby increasing objectivity. Even before the counsellor's perspective is added to the exchange, the client can become more composed (Gwinnell, 2003). Also in the act of e-mailing, new associations, memories and insights arise in the contemplative atmosphere of getting it down in writing creative solitude and silence are integral to the process (Pennebaker, 1997). In a face to face session, a client may talk for an hour and yet have not get to the heart of the matter but in an online counselling, client can sit in silence for an hour and then say more in one typed line that she or he has ever revealed to anyone before.

Client Enjoys a Certain Degree of Ownership in the Process

Client under this online counselling is able to set the pace, tone, volume and parameters of self disclosure without threat, positive or negative. The computer screen provides safety and containment with its built in borders (Lombard, & Ditton, 1997). The client is in control of the 'send' button. The presence and point of view of the author becomes in the re-reading and re-authoring called forth in the course of counselling.

Problem is externalized while the helper is internalised

Through online counselling the presenting problem is externalised while the helper is internalised. Both these time honoured therapeutic values are naturally enhanced by the medium and the closeness/distance of those involved in it. As the therapeutic bond strengths and evolves, the text stands as a testament to increased self-awareness. The client can always re-read, rehearse, and reinforce the solutions and resolutions it contains. When the client has words to hold onto, hope is established; clients can carry printouts in their pockets, purses and briefcases. In this way, online counselling becomes an open-ended, ongoing session with healing words accessible at any time (Allenman, 2002).

Time flexibility of e-mail counselling

With e-counselling, client need not commit himself to any pre-scheduled sessions. Client is free to write his or her e-mail when he or she wants within an agreed time frame. There is a minimal waiting time for appointment. A

counsellee on online counselling has minimal time to wait for an appointment with his or her counsellor (how2.ecounselling@hud.ac.uk).

Demerits of e-counselling

The demerits or weaknesses of e-counselling are as follows:

Both parties must have confidence on one another

For e-counselling to thrive well, both parties must have trust and confidence on one another. Lack of trust in the medium begins with technical threats to security and confidentiality which extends to the risk of a client taking the counsellor at his word and running quite far with it in the wrong direction. Therefore, beyond the nature and suitability of the clinical problem, the medium brings its own requirements.

- *The counsellor and client must be comfortable with the technological platform underpinning the online counseling process.* Counselors must be circumspect in using secure technology for communication, and possess sufficient technical expertise to cope with unforeseen exigencies, skills that have not been part of the traditional turf of most counsellors until now.

- *The counsellor and client must be reasonably good writers and typists.* Clients must be comfortable with what is essentially a letter-writing process. They must be able to express their thoughts and feelings clearly, and to interpret messages carefully, with a willingness to 'give the benefit of the doubt' when humour or the intended meanings miss the mark. Online counselling is best suited to those who are capable of sustained introspection, value written self-expression, and have the creative independence it takes to hold up their end of the written dialogue (http://www.rider.edu/~suler/psycyber/textrel.html).

- *A synchronicity can breed misunderstandings.* One drawback of online counselling is the absence of spontaneous clarification. Clients may not be self-validating enough to compensate for the loss of visual and auditory cues which would reassure them. On the counsellor's side, especially if training in text-based communication is lacking, important information about the client may remain "between the lines" with the real issues evading assessment. Even with the requisite skills on both sides, there are those who would

find the middle ground of cyberspace more of a void than a healing sanctuary.

The room for error in assessment limits the counsellor to making provisional hypotheses, pending the client's response. The basics of expressing warmth, genuineness, and empathy continue to be the therapeutic priority (Suler, 2002).

Increased accessibility is no panacea

This type of easy access involves some risk. The expanded base of potential clients made possible through online counselling will raise the question of its clinical limitations. Who can be effectively treated online? In many settings, web-based intake procedures have been designed expressly to screen out candidates who would be better served offline. The initial online assessments are designed to triage issues involving violence, domestic or otherwise, active suicidal ideation, serious substance abuse, or an immediate and urgent crisis. Clients in these categories may still be "seen" online en route to more appropriate resources, and they may well view the online contact as a crucial transition, or a buffer zone to relieve desperation. Yet it is generally agreed that these clients are not ideal for service that takes place entirely online (Suler et al, 2001; Stofle, 2001). Furthermore, new technology does not justify the eradication of necessary boundaries inherent in cultures and social systems. Ease of access may be secondary if a client's needs are compromised by conflicts of interest or misunderstandings.

Hence, online professionals must always understand and appreciate the limited nature of the medium. They need to:

- assess the suitability of clients and work within ethical parameters
- educate clients and provide informed consent
- advise clients regarding limitations
- have back-up resources in place to address urgent issues

Break downs of equipment may cause delay in the process

There may be risk of breakdowns in equipment and this will disrupt communication between the counsellor and the client. There will also be a

delay between writing and receiving a response from the counsellor and client (*how2.ecounselling@hud.ac.uk*).

Conclusions

"Telepresence*"* is "the illusion that a mediated experience is not mediated" (Lombard & Ditton, 1997), the feeling of being in someone's presence without sharing a physical space. When online counselling is at its best, and the positive conditions are in place, clients and therapists experience telepresence and are not only able to interact effectively, but engage in relationships that can offer something special indeed. Believe it or not, experiencing the online other as a genuine, caring person is not as difficult as it might seem.

Reeves and Nass (1996) explain that the tendency to disregard the artifice of the medium and feel we are 'really' making human contact may be a matter of evolutionary hardwiring. Those who have tried their hand at online counselling quickly find this to be the case. In our experience, most sceptics have never attempted to conduct a personal relationship online (limiting email to business transactions, etc.).

No one claims that counselling in this medium will displace the need for face-to-face meetings, any more than the increase in virtual intimacy makes the embodied kind redundant. It is well known by anyone testing the waters of online dating that you do not know who you are dealing with until you have met them in person. Many would apply that principle to the therapeutic relationship.

The scope and methods of online counselling in the hands of skilled practitioners is still in the pioneering stages. Yet we have already landed in a (brave) new world of counselling practice. We hope that this article will inspire curious clinicians to consider learning more about online counselling and to test the waters themselves. We hope we have shown that, beyond increasing accessibility for underserved populations, online counselling practice offers almost all clients a unique experience that easily stands on its own merit (cspeyer@shepellfgi.com,& http://www.ismho.org).

Access to Counselling services helps in the development and improvements of human welfare which the counsellors are opting for and the number of clients that are seeking for these services are on the increase. Professional counsellors cannot develop the counselling services well through their usual

face to face contacts only because the number of these professional counsellors is not increasing as their service consumers are increasing. Technology has come to stay and there is need that all and sundry will learn and make use of it wisely to avoid being left behind. Apart from accessing counselling services through net, Wedel, (2000) noted that: A key advantage to using technology for education is that the use of technology is in itself crucial education". Computers and the internet are particularly suited for e-learning and for many other uses. Accessing counselling services through it is among the other uses of internet, therefore, if counselling services can be access through the use of internet, the client will also learn internet skills that will be valuable for finding international markets for local handcrafts or getting the latest crop prices on world markets. E-counselling will help the professional counsellors to rapid develop counselling services in undeveloped countries of which Nigeria is among.

Reference

Alleman, J. R. (2002). Online counseling: The internet and mental health treatment. *Psychotherapy, 39*, 199-209.

Change, T.; Yeh, Krumboltz (2001). "Process and outcome evaluation of an on-line support group for Asian American male college students". *Journal of Counseling Psychology* **48** (3): 319–329. doi:10.1037/0022-0167.48.3.319.

Cohen, G.E.; Kerr, B.A. (1998). "Computer-mediated counseling: An empirical study of a new mental health treatment". *Computers in Human Services* **15**: 13–26.

Fink, J. (1999). *How to use computers and cyberspace in the clinical practice of psychotherapy*. Northvale, NJ: Aronson.

Gwinnell, E. (2003). Unique aspects of internet relationships. In R. Wooton, P. Yellowlees, & P. McLaren (Eds.), *Telepsychiatry and e-Mental Health*, pp. 327-336. London: Royal Society of Medicine Press.

how2.ecounselling@hud.ac.uk
Telephone:014844722277.cspeyer@shepellfgi.com, & http://www.ismho.org

Joinson, A. (1998). Causes and implications of disinhibited behavior on the internet. In J. Gackenbach (Ed.) *Psychology and the Internet: Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, and Transpersonal Implications*, pp. 43-60. San Diego: Academic Press.

Lombard, M., & Ditton, T. (1997, September). At the hear of it all: the concept of telepresence. *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication* [online], 39 pp., 3(2), [http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol3/issue2/lombard.html], accessed May 21, 2003.

Mallen, Michael J.; David L. Vogel (November 2005). "Introduction to the Major Contribution Counseling Psychology and Online Counseling". *The Counseling Psychologist* **33** (6): 761–775. doi:10.1177/0011000005278623. http://tcp.sagepub.com/content/33/6/761.abstract. Retrieved 4 May 2011.

Mallen, Michael J.; Vogel, Rochlen and Day (November 2005). "Online Counseling Reviewing the Literature From a Counseling Psychology Framework". *The Counseling Psychologist* **33** (6): 819–871. doi:10.1177/0011000005278624. http://tcp.sagepub.com/content/33/6/819.abstract. Retrieved 4 May 2011.

Pennebaker, J. W. (1997). Writing about emotional experiences as a therapeutic process. *Psychological Science, 8(3),* 162-166.

Stofle, G. S. (2001). *Choosing an Online Therapist.* Harrisburg, PA: White Hat Communications.

Stofle, G.S. (2001). *Choosing an online therapist*. White Hat Communications.

Suler, J (2000). "Psychotherapy in cyberspace: A 5 dimensional model of online and computer-mediated psychotherapy". *CyberPsychology & Behavior* **3** (2): 151–160. doi:10.1089/109493100315996.

Suler, J. (2002). Hypotheses about Online Text Relationships. In *The Psychology of Cyberspace.* Retrieved May 22, 2003, from http://www.rider.edu/~suler/psycyber/textrel.html

Suler, J., Barak, A., Chechele, P., Fenichel, M., Hsiung, R., Maguire, J., Meunier, V., Stofle, G., Tucker-Ladd, C., Vardell, M. & Walker-Schmucker, W. (2001). Assessing a person's suitability for online therapy. *CyberPsychology & Behavior, 4,* 675-679.

www2.hud.ac.uk/student.../counselling/e_counselling.

Wedel, P. (2000).   Distributed education as a pathway to a knowledge economy in the Greater Mekong sub region.

Zelvin, E. (2004). *Online Counseling Skills Part I: Treatment Strategies and Skills for Conducting Counseling Online*. Academic Press.