

Chapter 59

Online Counseling

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ABSTRACT

Online counseling is defined as the delivery of therapeutic interventions in cyberspace where communication between a trained professional counselor and client(s) is facilitated using computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies. Research considers aspects of delivering therapeutic interventions online, including process and outcome research, the therapeutic relationship online, the potential benefits and challenges in working online, client suitability for online counseling, therapists' and clients' attitudes and experiences of online counseling, professional training for working online with clients, and its very nature and definition as a therapeutic intervention. Understanding the psychology of online behavior as it applies to online counseling includes the effects of apparent anonymity and distance, disinhibition, identity and impression management, writing and emotional expression, presence, and ethical behavior in cyberspace.

INTRODUCTION

The field of cyberpsychology involves the study of human experiences (cognitive, emotional, and behavioral) that are related to or impacted by developing technologies, in other words, the psychological study of human-technology interaction. Subject areas, for example, include identity online, online addiction, and online relationships.

Online counseling, also referred to as e-therapy or cybertherapy, is another area of study. Online counseling is the delivery of therapeutic interventions in cyberspace where the communication between a trained professional counselor and client(s) is facilitated using computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies.

The phenomenon of online counseling has a brief history but, aided by technological developments, has grown exponentially in recent years. Research considers aspects of delivering

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therapeutic interventions online. These include, but are not limited to, the potential effectiveness of online counseling, establishing a therapeutic relationship in cyberspace, potential benefits and challenges, client suitability for online counseling, therapists' and clients' attitudes and experiences of online counseling, professional training for working online with clients, and its very nature and definition as a therapeutic intervention. Research has also been exploring newly observed phenomena that form part of understanding the psychology of online behavior as it applies to online counseling. Areas of interest include the effects of apparent anonymity and distance, disinhibition, identity and impression management, writing and emotional expression, presence, and ethical behavior in cyberspace.

OVERVIEW

History and Current Empirical Knowledge

While we have provided a definition of online counseling, the exact definitions of interventions involving therapists and clients online are very much in flux and a continued source of debate. A recent paper (Barak, Klein, & Proudfoot, 2009) has brought some clarity, yet the terms are not specific to any theoretical or technical approach, nor do they underscore professionals with certain levels of training (Rochlen, Zack, & Speyer, 2004). Synchronous (chat and video conferencing) and more popularly asynchronous (e-mail) communication have been used by client(s). Additionally, online counseling has been provided as a stand-alone service and as an adjunct to other services. Virtual reality environments, allowing both synchronous and asynchronous communication, have also been used to conduct counseling (Nagel & Anthony, 2011). Some web-based self-administered treatments for a variety of disorders have included online counseling support, usually in

the form of asynchronous post-sessions feedback, which appears to increase adherence and yield enhanced outcomes (Newman, Szkodny, Llera, & Przeworski, 2011).

It has been argued (Castelnuovo, Gaggioli, Mantovani & Riva, 2003) that online counseling is a transposition of face-to-face counseling online, with technologies mediating the therapeutic communication and impacting the process with their associated advantages and limitations. From this perspective online counseling is not perceived as a new and distinct way of engaging therapeutically and is therefore not seen as necessitating a different theoretical framework from face-to-face counseling.

Conversely, it is argued (Fenichel et al. 2002; Grohol, 1999, 2001) that online counseling should be considered a new type of therapeutic intervention, characterised by fundamentally distinctive features. From this perspective online counseling is not seen as a substitute to face-to-face interventions but rather as a versatile and flexible resource with the potential to complement and support other types of interventions

From its beginning online counseling has been criticized by professionals and laypeople alike (Barak, Hen, Boniel-Nissim, & Shapira, 2008). The roots of the criticisms have largely concerned a number of key areas that have populated the literature since. Firstly, concerns have been voiced regarding the impact of the loss of cues on the process of therapy. Secondly, ethical issues and their legal implications regarding all aspects of the construction and delivery of online counselling feature. Thirdly, a variety of practical issues have arisen concerning training for conducting online counseling and concerns about relying on technology. Our understanding of these issues, while they still exist, has developed through research, the development of advanced technologies, the development of ethical codes of practice, and specialized training for professionals.

The goal of counseling is to alleviate the concerns that clients can present. Counseling attempts

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