Up Close and Personal: Counselling on the Net

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Abstract

Many counsellors have reservations about using the Internet for counselling, lest it destroy the essence of the intended relationship. Fear of the new technology is also widespread among human service professionals. Yet the potential for net-based counselling is enormous among groups who might otherwise be severely limited in their ability to locate a counsellor. As an increasing number of younger people treat the Net as a normal part of their lives, strong, close and trusting relationships develop through chat groups. There is a need for counsellors to be a part of this world, seeing it as a present challenge and a future opportunity.

While counsellors are now offering web based services, it is not an easy transition from face-to-face (f2f) counselling to relating on the Net. Without rethinking and training, the transition can be abortive. With the rapid changes in modes of communication on the Net, the counsellor also has to be making constant adaptations. This paper will describe the development of a Web-based training program for graduate counsellors, and specifically argue the benefits of using a chat program such as ICQ for natural and immediate communication. Lessons learned in the development process will be noted, with examples of the benefits clients have reported.

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Introduction

There is a solid tradition in counselling and psychotherapy that it must involve a close trusting relationship if it is to be effective. Training for this typically includes understanding the importance of nonverbal cues and the importance of spatial distance, with the assumption that closeness and intimacy are highly correlated (Argyle, 1976). Hence therapists pay a great deal of attention to the environment within which they work, seeking to make the place safe and comfortable for their clients (Brien, 1990).

It would seem to follow that communication via the Web and using email could only be a pale reflection and a poor alternative to the tried and true approach. Being able to observe gestures, to appraise appearance, and pick up the cues that arise from being in the same space with another person have been viewed as key components in the development of the trust relationship. Both therapist and client have found these messages to be important in making decisions about change and whether to continue working together.

It is therefore something of a paradox and a challenge to conventional wisdom to find that net-based communication can not only be effective, but even in some cases the preferred mode of engaging with a therapist. It certainly is confusing to traditionalists that lasting, trusting and close relationships between client and counsellor can be forged. The advent of easy access to online communication has opened up a whole new vista of possibilities, yet they also present real challenges to counsellors who have been trained to

attend in the traditional f2f mode. There has certainly been an incremental upsurge in the provision of on-line counselling services, especially in the US. This has also been the case for free services to young people in Australia (e.g. http://www.kidshelponline.com.au) and in Singapore (e.g. http://www.metoyou.org.sg) as practitioners have seen the demand for them. These programs offer training, but generally the delivery services have not been matched by a comparable attention to training, professional supply, or the exploration of the ways in which the newer approaches can be applied ethically and effectively.

Although on-line counselling was first seen as a way of providing services to those in rural and remote location, who would otherwise be unable to access a practitioner (Court & Dollard, 2000), it has become clear that the approach has much more general applications. As widespread access has become more economical and user-friendly, especially among younger people, it is clear that electronic communication has become part of the culture with an ease that makes the use of online services part of everyday life and no longer an obstacle to self disclosure. Obvious examples of this are the ways in which chat rooms and multi-player on-line gaming are being used for social contact, and to make online friendships, sometimes leading to permanent offline relationships (Mulrine, 2003). Similarly the teenage culture has moved away from long hours on the telephone, to an energetic life of SMS messaging, while email addiction is becoming a reality among many groups (Morris, 2002).

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On-Line Counselling In Use

This paper deals specifically and only with 'realtime counselling'. It doesn't address what may be deemed delayed or 'off-set' counselling as represented by messaging; e-mails et al. For a description of the pros and cons of elayed or 'off-set' counselling the reader is referred to Pelling (2009). For the purposes of on-line counselling it's important to clearly understand the differences between realtime and delayed response counselling, as it substantially affects the method in which counselling on-line is effected.

Unlike f2f counsel, on-line counselling with a delay built-in is largely, impersonal, and has no demands for the counsellor to be "alert/ immediately responsive". The delay enables proffered data to be processed at ease, and in contemplation. While this is potentially quite useful, if dealing with emotive issues, yet it has the drawback that there is no knowing what editing the client has utilised in deciding what to reveal or address.

Realtime counselling has immediacy, and is demanding on the counsellor in ways unlike any other method, even f2f.

There is a variety of realtime on-line communication programs (known as "chat programs"), but in deciding which one to use, general popularity, cost and ubiquity are

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essentials. Practical considerations meant that our primary experience is in using a

program called ICQ. Primary factors influencing this choice were:

- An established user base of some 18,000,000 + people
- Free of cost to obtain and use
- Widely and easily available
- Simple to use
- Functionality ... there are approximately 25 servers (exchanges) and so "busy signals" are rare.
- Speed
- Privacy / Confidentiality
- Facilitated record keeping
- File Transfer Protocols inbuilt
- Variety of communication modes inbuilt

Of particular use in our opinion is this last option, because it enables:

(i) The ability to leave / receive messages without both self and client being

on-line simultaneously. This means the sender can transmit whenever it suits

them, in the knowledge that the message (usually) awaits the recipient the next

time they connect to ICQ.

(ii) Instant Messaging back- and forth with both parties on-line.

(iii) International Relay Chat (IRC) mode enabling 'Group Therapy' on-line by

identifying each speaker every time they speak, a whole sentence at a time.

(iv) Chat mode, wherein each speaker has a personal customisable screen which

displays each typed character as the sender strikes that key.

Chat mode is the method we use for counselling because it has (from the

'common group' of available programs) two unique advantages. It provides a direct peer-

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to-peer connection from client to counsellor, bypassing the servers and thus ensuring privacy without the need of an encryption program. Intercepts of communications on-line are enabled by illicit accessing of servers. This truly is "real time chat" in that, as a key is pressed on the keyboard, so the appropriate letter appears on the other's screen. This allows a modicum of feed-back in that with experience one can interpret both delays and unusually speedy responses, whilst hesitations are revealing.

This approach has been developed into an on-line teaching format using CD-ROM for graduate students of counselling.

Differences/ Similarities to F2F

The only real similarity between f2f counselling and on-line counselling is in the variety of counselling modes that can be used, as best suits the counsellor, though unless a client is a proficient typist, approaches such as narrative therapy can he painfully slow. Experience has shown that the most suitable mode is Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT), and our experience is that Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) is particularly liked by clients.

The prime difference is the enhanced security clients find in not having to physically face the counsellor, enabling very rapid revelation and discussion of relevant material, particularly such as is needed by clients recovering from sexual abuse.

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Facilitated in this way, client/ counsellor relationships form rapidly and enable, with the right approach, rapid progression.

Another surprisingly effective difference between on-line and f2f counsel is that the client has a written record of what has transpired in each and every session. This is advantageous in:

a. Allowing, even encouraging, the ongoing review of the process of counselling, both between sessions and for the rest of their life, by the client. In effect, this provides a reference point.

b. As both parties have written records, any confusion or misunderstandings can be clarified in fact, without the difficulties of what was 'thought' to have been said, or remembered as having been said, yet wasn't.

c. Promoting continued thought, and on-going processing by the client of what transpired during each session. Experience shows this substantially speeds up the efficacy of counselling.

In practice, the final notable difference is in what can be termed 'client-conditioning expectations'. They are, being computer orientated, inclined to read and access information far more readily than many f2f clients. Thus they will use supplied material readily. As one's contact with clients is computer based, it is easy and cost-free to supply them with tailored written pieces on line. We are convinced that

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provision of such material, along with the written record of each session, explains why self-improvement can be so very fast when on-line counselling is used.

Suitability and Examples

It is our opinion that not all needs/ issues can be met or are suitable to address through on-line counselling. The primary type of unsuitability is relationship-based, such as marriage counselling. Certainly this has been an area we have avoided, on the basis one needs to be aware that both/ all members of the relationship (such as husband and wife) hear and process all that is said. It's somewhat uncommon for two or more members of a family to be on-line and able to communicate simultaneously with the counsellor. This said, it's interesting to note that there is only one entry in the Australian OnLine Yellow Pages for Internet counselling, and that is by Relationships Australia.

By far the majority (63%) of our work- involves a substantial element of recovery from sexual abuse, usually committed in the client's childhood (58%), and never adequately dealt with, despite long-term counselling. 5% has involved recovery from rape by an unknown assailant, and then, in order, spousal abuse (18%) primarily psychological disorders, involving depression/ self-esteem, loss of confidence (12%), with the balance (7%) made up of agoraphobics and medical problems (cancer / broken neck, etc.).

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We have turned away about another 25% of business, as being not best suited to on-line counselling in the areas of relationship and stress. A suitable stress counselling package is being constructed, and it is envisaged that, in the near future, such clients can be suitably served on-line.

Efficacy & Evidence

Online counselling is sufficiently new, and as yet sufficiently unregulated, as well as of such varied format, that there is as yet no way to measure long-term efficacy, and evidence, as proof, is not available. There is a variety of organisations, nearly all USA based, running surveys and feed-back options, but until the methodology is established, proof per se cannot exist (but nor can it, in any pure form, exist for f2f counselling). It is of note that the American Counselling Association has welcomed and supports on-line counselling. In our experience, supported by anecdotal feedback, clients receive fast and durable benefit from on-line counselling, with most clients being given sufficient tools to continue managing their lives within nine sessions. Such opinion is based on written feed-back, letters of appreciation, and the fact that ex-clients have not only volunteered to act as "'contacts" via email to people needing to verify the viability of on-line counsel, but also choose to share the joys of their lives (births/ marriages, etc.) with their counsellor. We have an average of two or three international phone calls coming in each week- with people sharing their news, often after years of no contact. The greatest such gap is four years, from an ex-client who wanted to share her upcoming wedding in the local cathedral after years as an agoraphobic.

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Discussion

Online counselling means many different things as new possibilities emerge and the technology keeps changing. This paper argues for the benefit of risking immediate communication along lines similar to those occurring f2f. This does not represent merely a transfer of skills from f2f counselling, as it calls for a new and specialised set of skills in reading interpersonal nuances without most of the conventional cues. Judging by the escalating use of the Internet for all forms of communication it is becoming increasingly necessary to develop on line counselling literacy to meet the needs of those many people who seek to develop and further close and/or personal relationships via the technology. This suggests a strong need for targeted training in the modality if it is to be used ethically. Such training may eventually show that there are some practitioners who are better suited to online counselling while others do better f2f. This is an empirical research question.

It is plainly obvious that the demands on an on-line real-time counsellor are for quick-wittedness, and above average communication skills. Because clients are at ease with the medium, in the comfort of their own homes (or office) and not inhibited by any awe of the counsellor, they ask questions freely, and seek clarification of concepts more readily than in f2f encounters. The counsellor needs the ability therefore to change footing speedily, and provide answers and clarifications promptly. Failure to do so

undermines a client's confidence in the counsellor's competence. Thus a ready supply of easily understood metaphors and explanations is needed, pre-prepared.

In addition, the nature of the medium is "in your face" in so many ways, with questions and information passing freely that in f2f would be seen as embarrassingly intrusive and insensitive, that there can easily be a crisis of confidence/expectation engendered if a client senses avoidance, or (in their perception) an unusually slow progression in "getting to the meat" of a session. In this modern age, using modern media, speed in counselling is valued, so any on-line counsellor needs to shed the habits of f2f counsel which emphasise "slow and steady".

The question of confidentiality of data is increasingly raised in this medium as we encounter the potential for hacking into exchanges and abuse of the information gained (Pelling, 2004; Ragusea & VanderCreek, 2003). This has relevance to the use of ICQ since that program in its latest version (ICQ 2003) warns users that if it is used in message mode, it cannot be considered safe. However, once the program is established in "chat mode", the mode advocated here for counselling, there is a direct computer-to-computer link such that one can and should disconnect from the ICQ server, making the communication remarkably safe from intrusion. It is notable that emails use a minimum of three servers, and no attempt at security is usually made unless parties use encryption, whilst with ICQ one can even protect one's IP address, over and above content of communications.

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This approach is not totally safe from intrusion, even with the most sophisticated strategies in place, any more than are on-line bank accounts, so it is ethically incumbent on practitioners to take all reasonable steps to ensure client protection. There are other communication systems available as software packages for various teaching purposes, but they tend to be too expensive for the practitioner, and less accessible for clients with limited bandwidth.

We find that it is often those who are accustomed to f2f counselling who raise concerns about hackers and confidentiality, based on incomplete information about what is possible, usually because of issues surrounding the use of email. This is somewhat ironic when we consider how f2f counsellors and therapists often work in rooms with thin walls and even thinner doors allowing conversation to leak into waiting rooms: for good measure they install microphones for audio-recordings, video cameras for remote viewing, and write up case notes. This would be no challenge to someone wanting to bug a conversation, and the permanent products can all go astray in a briefcase. When it comes to vulnerability of data I suspect online work has fewer hazards.

This account represents a work in progress based on significant online experience. Those who use this modality commonly mix online contact with f2f and telephone communication where possible in order to create a more enriched interaction. Looking forward it is clear that the technology is advancing rapidly and will soon make our current efforts appear stilted. Cost and access issues currently limit the widespread use of such advantages as voice-activated keyboards, and the use of web cams, but this is

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the time to begin training and offering services that will be increasingly in demand as

young people especially take online communication for granted.

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