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Chapter 1

Introduction to Online Counselling

In this chapter we explore why clients and counsellors choose to work online. We examine some of the negative views that have developed as online counselling has spread in popularity, and we give a brief overview of how this form of counselling has developed over the years. It is important to say at this point that we do not see online therapy as better or worse than face-to-face (f2f) work – simply different. As this chapter introduces both online counselling and this book, we refer to other chapters that examine issues such as how to respond to emails, how to contract with clients and online supervision in greater detail. Finally, in Chapter 11, we consider how our ideas might be put into practice and attempt to identify new directions in which online counselling might be heading. This is a field where change is likely to be extremely rapid, and some methods of practice and the terminology may well become dated.

Various terms are used to describe the work of counsellors and therapists online: for example, e-therapy, online counselling, e-counselling and email counselling. We use all of these throughout the book to familiarize the reader with them all, and to avoid suggesting that one is better than another.

The terms describe the process by which counsellors and therapists use the power and convenience of the internet to help clients resolve their issues. Like f2f therapy, online counselling is a conversation or dialogue between two people, and the success of the work depends largely on the relationship that they are able to form. The counselling can take place through email exchanges (asynchronous communication) or simultaneous

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conversations in a chat room (synchronous communication). It can of course be a mixture of both.

Technologically, all that is needed is a computer that connects to the World Wide Web (the web), an email address, ways of ensuring privacy and confidentiality on the computer, and the skills to do this. Importantly, what is also needed is a working space that reflects good practice in engaging in a therapeutic relationship – e.g. lack of interruptions and distractions – and the mind set to ensure that the work is of as high a professional standard as if it were being undertaken in the client's physical presence. There is no room or excuse for bad practice, whatever the medium used.

WHY DO CLIENTS CHOOSE TO WORK ONLINE?

A myth is cited by Fenichel *et al.* (2002) that only people who cannot make relationships choose to work in this medium. This suggests that online work will not help the client, but rather reinforce the problem. However, our experience is that this is indeed a myth. The client range is as great as the range one might meet in an f2f consulting room.

Some clients choose this way of working because of their geographic circumstances. It enables them to engage in counselling if:

- they live in remote areas,
- they live in less remote areas, but where public transport is a problem, or
- few counsellors are available,

For others, there may be reasons why it is difficult to leave home, for example responsibility for care of the young, the old or the infirm. Those who work shifts, particularly when these have a variable pattern, may not be able to engage in regular f2f sessions.

Online counselling is also useful for clients with a disability. Those with mobility problems may have difficulties in accessing f2f premises, and/or difficulties with public transport. Those with hearing impairment may find e-counselling suitable, particularly where there is no access to a signer, or the nature of the issue means that the client prefers not to have a third person present in the room.

We have had a number of clients who regularly travel with their work and cannot commit to ongoing f2f sessions. Using email or instant messen-

ger sessions, they can pursue their work and also engage in counselling.

In a few cases, clients may choose to work this way for emotional reasons. They may find it is easier to talk about shameful feelings or experiences online than face-to-face.

So far, it would seem that the reason for engaging in e-therapy is that access to f2f counselling is impossible. Metanoia's research paper on e-therapy states: 'the data seem to suggest that many of those who are drawn to contact a therapist on the Internet do so because, for them, traditional psychotherapy is not accessible' (<http://www.metanoia.org/imhs/history.htm>)

Our experience would again suggest that this notion that people only turn to online work if they cannot access f2f therapy is another myth, or perhaps an outdated concept. Increasingly, clients decide to engage in online counselling as a first choice. As use of the internet becomes more and more a part of daily life, many people regularly email and chat online to friends and family. They buy and bank online. The web is being used to access all types of information, and both computers and the internet are an integral part of the workplace. Thus using the internet for counselling does not seem to be such a difficult step to envisage. Many children use computers and the internet at school from a very young age, and so have few of the fears that older people may have about using them. In the UK, student counselling services are increasingly offering e-therapy as an alternative to f2f sessions. Cornell University in the USA is thought to have offered the first organizational online service in 1986 (<http://www.cuinfo.cornell.edu/Dialogs/EZRA>).

However, it should be remembered that not everyone is enthusiastic about using the internet. Hudson (2002) suggests that poverty and a lack of technological training, as well as the fact that the older you are, the less likely you are to be comfortable with computers, are all reasons why some people may not use them. We expect this to change over time. Indeed, the growth in the number of internet users in Africa and the increasing use of it by 'silver surfers' worldwide suggest that this is already the case.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

At this point, it might be useful to give a short historical overview of online counselling. As many authors have cited (e.g. Fenichel *et al.*, 2002; Kanani and Regehr, 2003), non-f2f therapeutic work is by no means new.

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Freud corresponded solely or partly with a number of clients which is worth bearing in mind when we question the possibility of engaging in any way other than face to face. At a more basic level, many of us have conducted relationships with friends and lovers through letters. Pen friends who have never met face to face will sometimes claim that they have established very close relationships. Therefore, perhaps after all there is nothing revolutionary about working relationally with text and image.

As far back as 1972, during a conference on Computer Communication, there was a demonstration of a simulated therapy session between computers in two American universities. Before that, there were software programs intended to be used to help patients, either alongside or instead of, work with a therapist. Perhaps the best known of these early programs was ELIZA, developed by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. This was based on a person-centred means of responding. Although Weizenbaum, the originator of the system, did not see it as ever replacing the therapist and it ultimately proved unsuccessful, it was an interesting early development. Moving to 2007, WaysForward (<http://www.waysforwards.com>) have developed interactive programs that can be used by organizations or individual therapists with clients in schools, youth counselling services, universities and workplaces, but working from a solution-focussed brief therapy perspective. Hales (2006), who developed this software, reminds us such programs can sometimes seem too simplistic to counsellors, but that clients often find them helpful.

Since the mid-1990s, the Samaritans have been offering an email service alongside their perhaps better-known telephone service. Although the online service does not offer instant contact, which is available by telephone, it has become a well-established and well-used service.

Increasingly, student counselling services are finding that online counselling is a useful adjunct to f2f provision. This is possibly because internet communication is a daily part of students' experience, but also because students can access counselling while away from their universities and colleges on placements connected to their courses, or during vacation periods. They can also fit counselling around timetabled classes.

Particularly popular in the USA are websites that allow clients to access a counsellor directly for immediate help, or to post a message for an email response. These 'one-off' interventions can lead to an ongoing contract if the client chooses. Often these sites also offer information pages for visitors or clients on specific themes such as depression, stress, anxiety, or eating disorders.

Some organizations that were formed to help people with a particular issue, illness or disability have begun to offer an online counselling service alongside other support and information. Clients indicate to an administrator that they wish to engage in counselling and are allocated to a counsellor, who then makes contact with them. There is the opportunity to work either by email or through live chat. Whichever option the client chooses, the work takes place through the website, with clients and counsellors posting their emails to private message boards on the secure site. If live sessions are planned, a diary shows counsellor availability, which enables clients to book the session. This session also takes place through the website. This way of accessing counselling seems particularly appropriate for the client group, as it enables them to work when their illness or disability allows them to do so. They may also feel encouraged to engage with a counsellor who has some understanding of their illness and the issues that surround it.

Currently it would be fair to say that the volume of clients engaging in working online shows some marked differences across countries. In the USA and in Australia, it is more widely used than in the UK, for example. There is no research to suggest reasons for this. It may be due to the more recent introduction of training for online counsellors in the UK, and provision of online services. It could be that the use of the internet for other provision (such as for schooling in Australia) has made the population more ready to use it for other services, such as counselling. Perhaps it may simply be due to national characteristics – do people in the USA engage more readily in all forms of counselling than in the UK, for example? However, it is a counselling medium that is growing worldwide. Recent discussions have suggested that in some countries in Africa and Asia, where there has been a drive to provide more remote villages and areas with access to the web, there may also be a future increase in the use of internet-based counselling.

WHY MIGHT COUNSELLORS BE ATTRACTED TO ONLINE COUNSELLING?

So far, the discussion has centred on the reasons *clients* may choose to engage in online work. Why do counsellors choose to work in this medium? Probably there are as many reasons as there are counsellors working online. It may be that:

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- they are curious about ‘new ways’ of working
- they wish to increase their client base
- they wish to use existing office skills in a different arena
- they want, altruistically, to make counselling available to as many people as possible, and the recognition that this is one way of doing so.

Perhaps there is also an awareness that this form of communication is here to stay, and if counsellors do not look at ways of joining the technological revolution, they may gradually become extinct like the dinosaur of old, or, less emotively, will not benefit from the opportunities it provides.

Counselling online also allows a certain amount of freedom that is not possible with f2f sessions. For example, Anne regularly spends time in France, and can continue to work with online clients, both by email and live sessions, when based there. (There are certain legal and professional indemnity issues with doing this that will be discussed later in the book.) At a simpler level, email responses can be written at times of day to suit ourselves. So if something crops up during a day, or during a week, as long as we remain within the contractual time of response, we can vary when we choose to work more easily than when we have set times to see f2f clients. In writing this, we are aware that we may be drawing disapproving comments from readers about commitment to clients, or to the profession. However, we would challenge you, if that was your immediate reaction, to think back to times when you have had to wrestle with a decision between going to an important meeting or interesting and useful workshop, and cancelling a client’s f2f session. Online work often gives you the ability to do both.

‘Carer’ roles, disability and geographical location were cited as reasons that clients might consider this way of working, and these may apply equally to counsellors. While acknowledging that many counsellors do not enter the profession for economic reasons, but from a desire to enable people to live more effectively, or to resolve issues, nevertheless many of us also need or wish to earn a reasonable living. Working online, we are not limited by whether we can fit sessions around childcare provision, for example, or whether we can only take on clients with access to a car, as public transport does not fit around 50 minute sessions in our location. Counsellors with a hearing impairment may find that text based communication is a useful addition to other work.

Online counselling also offers practical advantages in that we can have all our work available to us to reflect on later. We can go back more easily

to notice emerging themes, or spot nuances that we missed. In email exchanges, there is more time to consider what the client is actually saying, and how we might respond. These themes will be picked up again in more detail in the following chapters that deal with the nuts and bolts of working with clients.

WHY MIGHT COUNSELLORS CHOOSE NOT TO ENGAGE IN ONLINE WORK?

Perhaps the most common reason is a belief that online work simply does not work, and that a real relationship cannot be developed solely through text. Readers who have had 'pen friends' will be able to testify that very real relationships emerged, although they never met the other person. Indeed, although such relationships are often begun in childhood, there are numerous examples where they have been carried on successfully into adulthood. Maybe the sense that it cannot happen is a product of an age in which we write fewer letters of a personal nature, and forget that this was the preferred or only way of communicating in the past, before even telephones allowed more immediacy.

Another major concern is the technology itself. Is it safe? Is it reliable? The answer to both questions must be a qualified 'yes'. The practical considerations for making online counselling 'safe' and confidential for both clients and counsellors are dealt with in depth in later chapters, as are ways and means of working around occasional technological problems. As long as the counsellor can overcome fears of working with technology and become reasonably proficient in using it (as well as having quick access to support if needed) then using a computer to communicate can be relatively stress-free.

In addition, when considering absolutely valid questions of protection of client confidentiality and safety, it is worth reviewing our f2f work. Can we actually do more than give a qualified 'yes' here too? Even locked files can be broken into; if someone was really prepared to devote the time and energy to accessing our records or notes, could they work out the cross-referencing systems and discover who our clients are? Are we sure that all our walls are sufficiently soundproofed? Might clients be aware of who our other clients are because we work in an organization with a waiting room? What is being emphasized here is that no online counsellor can ever give a cast-iron guarantee that it is impossible for things to go wrong, and neither can an f2f counsellor.

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So it does not appear that we are dismissing these concerns lightly, Anne relates how she came to be involved in online work.

In early 2002, I was known as a ‘luddite’ by friends and colleagues. I did not actually smash computers, but might have liked to, and certainly refused, as far as possible, to have anything to do with them. The old tried and tested ways of communicating and gaining knowledge were the best for me. My counselling practice would never include anything to do with computers. Then a friend, who was undertaking training as an online counsellor, asked for volunteers to work as clients with other people in her training group. This seemed an ideal opportunity to confirm my prejudices – things would go wrong at a practical level if I tried to email a counsellor, and even if that did not happen, there was no way in which a therapeutic relationship would develop. As I write this, there is a vision of what a potentially nightmarish client I might have been, and not only because I was not expecting this to be useful. Although I do not recall being disinhibited when working online (for example when a client says much more than they may have intended to say very early on in a relationship), I know that I wrote very long emails to my poor counsellor. From my current position as an online counsellor, this was useful as it alerted me to the possible need to give some guidance on length of emails, or think about my charging policy. [These points will be discussed in more detail in Chapters 3 and 4, and also issues concerning boundaries in Chapter 11.]

However, to my amazement, and also to my consternation, it was not quite like that. I managed the technology adequately, and did a very good piece of work with my counsellor on an issue that had been ‘stuck’ for some time. I had to reconsider where I stood, so began my own training, much to the amusement of my friends.

So for the counsellor who has doubts, perhaps a useful way of confirming or overcoming these might be first to become an online client. Then, if it is not for you, you have the experience to offer others. Check out the background of the counsellor before you do this – what are their qualifications, and are they trained in working online? As with f2f counselling, it is important to protect yourself as a client. If your experience as a client convinces you of the value of this way of working, and if you want to go further as a counsellor, it is advisable to undertake some form of training

online. This has the advantage of allowing you to become more familiar with what is involved, and also to make mistakes and to discover or evolve your own style of working in a relatively safe environment. Most training courses are designed for counsellors who are already professionally qualified, so it is an additional rather than a first counselling qualification, although of course this could change in the future.

One other question often asked by counsellors wondering about working online is whether their particular orientation or approach will translate to this medium. We have yet to discover any counsellor who has been unable to do this. Chapter 9 explores a number of approaches in detail. The more cognitive theories adapt very easily as they generally use a rather more questioning than reflective approach. One common issue for counsellors from other approaches is how to rephrase online questions in the more reflective manner they use in f2f work. We hope our examples of counsellor responses throughout the book will demonstrate how we think this can be done. The tasks that a cognitive counsellor uses with clients between sessions are well suited to working online, as is the use of such techniques as scaling. Indeed, clients often find it easier to scale when they can actually see the grid on their screens than when introduced to it face to face.

Transference can and will arise online as it does in f2f work. If you undertake training in an online group that holds meetings in real time as part of the course, you will quickly be able to spot the possible transferences, counter-transferences and projections. They are also present in email communications. It is helpful to have experienced this before working with 'real' clients, as it can feel even more powerful when it is expressed through the written word.

Initially it may be difficult to envisage how you can use your more creative approaches online – with no stones, puppets, or drawing materials to hand. Chapter 7 explores many ways of using creativity. Clients may use creative writing, images they have found on the web, and images or photos they have created themselves and scanned in. In live work, it is possible to make use of a whiteboard to draw or write on during the session, depending on the package the counsellor uses.

In all approaches, difficulties may arise with a client who writes very little. This mirrors the f2f situation where the client is either temporarily or always somewhat inarticulate. In online work, this may feel harder to handle, as the counsellor cannot reflect back body language, for example, to try to help communication. Process can still be reflected back, of course,

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and the counsellor may also consider the benefit of using more but shorter email exchanges, or shorter live sessions. As in f2f counselling, some clients may find it just too difficult to engage, or are not yet ready to explore their issues.

An ethical as well as practical consideration for those contemplating working online with clients is the matter of supervision. This is discussed in detail in Chapter 8. If supervision is not mandatory for qualified counsellors in the country in which you work, you may not see this as a problem. However, in some ways, it can be akin to going back to basic training, where in most countries supervision is a requirement. Practitioners starting in this field may find that they want and need the back-up of a good supervisor. The question then arises of how to find a suitable one. Is it more important to work with someone who knows you and your work, and with whom you are already comfortable, or should you seek a supervisor who also works online and therefore has an understanding of the issues involved? In our view, there is no right answer. It may depend on whether you can find an online supervisor with whom you feel you can work. It does seem fundamental, however, to work with someone who is not antipathetic towards online work, even if they do not have the experience themselves, otherwise the supervision work feels doomed from the start.

This chapter has highlighted some of the issues involved in working online. In those that follow, we discuss these issues in more depth. You will be able to consider how to build a working alliance in this medium and how you might work both synchronously and asynchronously. Contracts, supervision, boundaries and ethical issues are explored, as well as how to work creatively using text and images. We also look at how therapeutic approaches may translate to online work, and other ways of using the internet for counselling. Before reading these chapters, you might like to try out some of the activities that given below.

Practice activities

- 1 Fill in the chart below concerning working online. As you go through the book, revisit this chart and see whether your hopes are upheld and your concerns diminished.

Hopes and expectations	Fears and concerns

- 2 Consider your current and past client group. Are there any clients with whom you feel you could work online? What would be the benefits for them? Are there any who would have been totally unsuitable? Note your reasons for both groups. Once you have finished reading the book, come back to this list and see if you would still place clients in the same groups.
- 3 What particular aspects of this chapter (for example the history, making therapeutic relationships, training) are you interested in? Research these further online.

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