

Providing Counseling Online: Because We “Can”, Should We?

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The technology revolution has dramatically expanded the capacity for person-to-person communication than spans time zones, geographic location, convenience, and time gaps between sending and receiving messages. At the same time, the counseling professions have ventured into the computer mediated world of online counseling leveraging the potential to extend access to counseling services. Foundational to the traditional model of the counseling process, however, is the face to face encounter between client and counselor. How can this qualitative element of human interaction be duplicated in a virtual environment? While the real time personal meeting that has represented an unquestioned forum in which to conduct counseling has not been replaced by online counseling, issues have been identified that speak to controversies about the efficacy of online counseling as a helping process and legitimate form of providing mental health services.

As online technologies have facilitated increased communication and work management, they simultaneously have led to a redefinition of counseling, and how counseling can be practiced, in ways not imagined a generation ago. To understand the appeal of online counseling, it is essential that counselors understand client characteristics of those who are most likely to use online counseling services; have a solid understanding of the appealing qualities of computer mediated counseling; be able to identify the core issues that must be carefully evaluated by counselors contemplating providing online counseling services; and finally, carefully consider the issues of access to online counseling by underserved cultural

and ethnic populations. A final question that each counselor is challenged to consider as these complex issues are evaluated is: “Because we ‘can’ offer counseling online, should we?”

Online Counseling as a Contemporary Issue

Online counseling is variously referred to as internet counseling, e-counseling, e-mail counseling, e-therapy, web counseling, e-psychotherapy, internet psychotherapy, or online counseling/psychotherapy (Heinlen, Welfel, Reynolds, Richmond, & Rak, 2003; Patrick, 2006). The multiplicity of terms speaks to the lack of clarity about how to label a professional activity delivered through a medium that can be used in a variety of ways. As computer technology has become the “norm” in offices, homes, and as wireless transportable devices, the extension of the potential uses of internet capabilities has expanded at an astounding rate. Within counseling, however, the extension of counseling delivered through computer technology has had mixed results.

The counseling profession has addressed aspects of the importance of technology supported or delivered counseling through the development of standards of practice (ACA, 1999; NBCC, 1997) that have had varying levels of compliance. As reported by Heinlen, Welfel, Richmond and Rak (2003), low levels of compliance by webcounselors with the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) Standards of Practice for the Ethical Practice of Webcounseling was found in a recent study reported in the *Journal of Counseling & Development*. A third set of standards of practice for internet delivered counseling is available through the International Society for Mental Health Online (ISMHO) and are available on the web (<http://www.ismho.org>). In addition, at this site, research into the efficacy of internet counseling is pursued through a case study method involving practicing internet counselors. In recognition that online counseling may well represent a semi-paradigm shift within the field of mental health care, it is essential that core issues be explored by potential providers prior to entering an arena that is qualitatively and quantitatively different than traditional models of providing counseling services.

Characteristics of the Online Counseling Consumer

Central to the appeal of online counseling to consumers of mental health and well being services are a set of characteristics that can be linked to decision making about entering a potentially challenging method of practice. A number of assumptions can be made about the characteristics of users of online counseling services.

Access to technology. The individual who elects to use online counseling services must have a knowledge and availability of computer technology that will support communication with the provider. In addition, a degree of comfort in using computers is essential.

Comfort with online communication. Foundational to effective use of online communication is facility with text-based interaction most typically activated through typing on a keyboard or through voice activated software.

Ability to express feelings and ideas in text format. The benefits of expressing feelings and thoughts in text format, at a distance, and outside a face-to-face encounter are well described by Wright (2002). Clients can compose thoughts, review the text, revise if so desired, and “pause” between writing and sending messages to the counselor. The time to privately think through expressions before communicating them to the therapist may be a significant attraction to online counseling, especially for individuals who desire greater control over the process of interaction or who may be struggling with issues of shame, perceived stigma, or embarrassment about the topics being discussed.

Disinhibition of online interaction. In the online counseling context, the level of disclosure by clients to the counselor can be remarkable (Alleman, 2002). The anonymity (i.e., not real time, not face to face) of the interaction seems to facilitate a sense of personal freedom and privacy that frees the client to talk to the counselor with a sense of personal safety and security.

Convenience of online interaction. Time constraints and geographical barriers are removed with online counseling. It truly can be an any-time, any-place activity that is supported by portable technology (e.g., laptop computers) and additionally is based on the capacity of the internet as a 24/7 access channel to send and receive communications.

Efficiencies of online counseling delivery. The management of personal time away from work or family is central to the decision to access mental health care for many online counseling consumers. Being able to engage in a counseling process at any time of the day or night avoids delays due to traveling to an office and may be cost effective as well.

Online counseling has a significant number of attracting qualities and characteristics for the consumer. Many of these same qualities and characteristics may attract the counselor professional to explore this

innovative method to engage in counseling practice. Before considering this option, however, it is essential to consider the risks or drawbacks associated with online counseling.

Risks Associated with Online Counseling

Prior to initiating entry into a practice specialization or method of providing counseling, the counselor professional engages in a methodical investigation of the benefits, drawbacks and challenges associated with the new venture. While online counseling holds the potential to provide high quality mental health and wellness care, it also represents a vehicle through which consumers can access counselors who are unlicensed, unregulated, and who may or may not have the training and education that is essential to ethical practice (Alleman, 2002; Robson & Robson, 2000).

While considering the pros and cons of adding online counseling to one's practice or to initiate online counseling services as a sole practice delivery method, the professional must consider seek answers to a host of questions:

1. How does online counseling differ from traditional counseling? Specifically, is my primary mode of treatment conducive to online delivery? Am I philosophically inclined to use an innovative counseling delivery system while retaining my theoretical framework?
2. What skill sets do I have and what skill sets do I have to acquire in order to venture in to online counseling as a provider?
3. Who will be my consultation/supervision resources while practicing online counseling? How can I establish these relationships before implementation of online practice? What is the nature of the professional support resources available to providers of mental health counseling services (Elleven & Allen, 2004)?
4. What are the ethical guidelines that I must be mindful of when practicing online (e.g., ACA, 1999; Hsiung, 2001)?
5. How will I ensure that ethical guidelines for practice can be implemented in a consistent manner using the technology at my disposal?

6. Do I need to acquire advanced training in order to practice online? Where are those resources(e.g., NBCC, 1997)?
7. Who can I talk to about initiating an online practice; e.g., professional association resources, current and former practitioners (e.g., Elleven & Allen, 2004)?
8. What are the start-up, recurrent, and practice development costs associated with maintenance of an online counseling website; e.g., secure payment methods, webmaster expenses, business knowledge and skill preparation to manage an e-business?
9. I am now a licensed counselor professional in my state of residence. What legal and regulatory issues must I consider before I decide to offer online counseling services to consumers from other states; e.g., does my state proscribe out-of-state counseling service by in-state licensed providers?
10. What are the parameters of online counseling practice that I must be cognizant of prior to initiating an online practice? What kinds of psychological, emotional or health presenting complaints should I address or exclude?

Online counseling is more than a “fad”. It is not the “next best thing” in mental health care. Computer technology, however, *is* increasingly extending into work, home, family, and community life accompanied by significant benefits and challenges. Within the counseling professions, online counseling does not appear to be poised for a takeover of psychotherapy, general counseling, marital, couple and family counseling, or other forms of helping consumers address mental health and wellness issues. As a different delivery system and a different application of counseling, however, the online method of providing psychological and emotional care is here to stay.

“Because We Can, should We?”

The original question posed by this discussion remains essentially unanswered. However,

1. Counselors who are qualified to do so can establish online counseling practices that meet the identified needs of a segment of the consumer population.
2. Other well qualified counseling professionals will avoid this opportunity for a variety of philosophical, practice, and personal reasons. Professionals who have carefully and thoughtfully considered all aspects

of this opportunity are not obligated to extend service delivery through the Internet.

3. Those who wish to do so should be viewed as well meaning, well intentioned, and committed to upholding the ethical and legal standards of practice for their discipline.

It is evident that significant issues associated with online counseling remain to be resolved; e.g., regulation and oversight of the inter-state commerce aspect of online counseling; review of violations of ethical standards of practice within an honor system Internet environment; outcome research that demonstrates the value and efficacy of online counseling; non-licensed practitioners offering web-based online counseling.

Finally, the issue of access remains at the core of the debate, the success, and the longevity of online counseling. How consumers who are representative of all diversities and cultural backgrounds will gain access to computer technology and the internet in greater numbers than currently reported will continue to inform this debate. If online technology is about access, and many would argue that it is, online counseling may well hold more promise for outreach of mental health care to individuals, families, and groups who currently are not able to access such care. Perhaps the question then can be asked of those innovative counselor professionals who seek to advocate and provide avenues of access more broadly, creatively, and based on contemporary technology: "Because we can, will we?."

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