Applying Technology to Online Counseling: Suggestions for the Beginning E-Therapist

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This article briefly outlines online counseling for readers who may be interested in delivering therapy via the internet. The article should very much be understood to be a beginner’s primer based upon research literature and the personal recommendations of the authors. Readers will also benefit from several online resources for counselors mentioned throughout the article.

In a just a few short years there has been a growing amount of discussion and literature focused on online counseling (Laszlo, Esterman, & Zabko, 1999). This type of counseling goes by names such as etherapy, ecounseling, cybertherapy, and telecounseling. For this article we will use the term online counseling to refer to counseling which does not occur in an office setting with both counselor and client in the same room or office but across some distance (Nickelson, 1998).

What was once termed as an “alternative” to traditional therapy is now becoming more commonplace and possibly reimbursable (Laszlo, Esterman, & Zabko, 1999). Computer technology continues to rapidly advance and allow for further innovations within the mental health fields (Barak, 1999). Many social workers and other therapists have adopted the technology (Giffords, 1998) and it may indeed be the case that counselors who are slow to incorporate available technologies are left behind in an increasingly competitive field (Grohol, 1998). Many believe there to be fewer and fewer boundaries to effective online counseling (Fenichel, et. al, 2002).

To be effective, counselors should be technologically well informed (Gale & McKee, 2002) and be able to build a website that is easily understood and navigated by the client (Torres, Maddux & Phan, 1999). As the general populace continues to increase its knowledge of technology, counselors will be required to keep pace (Gutterman & Kirk, 1999).

Online counseling has also proven to be a viable option for many clients (Cook & Doyle, 2002) and sometimes allows clients a different and stronger voice (Shuler, 2002). In addition, online counseling may allow better access to multicultural counselors and allow clients more therapeutic choices (Guanipa, Nolte & Lizarraga, 2002).

Suggestions
In an effort to inform counselors of the potential of online counseling we offer several suggestions below. These suggestions and this article should not be construed as sufficient for a counselor to begin an online practice tomorrow. The suggestions are merely meant to pique the reader’s interest and allow them a place to start before beginning further study and reflection regarding the topic.

Besides technological tools and helpful organizations found below, we also recommend finding someone to partner within your technological growth. Much like a work out partner, your technology buddy will assist

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the beginning online counselor to high success. One must not incorporate all of the suggestions below in order to grow from a beginner to a veteran online counselor. However, the more options you can offer clients the more possibilities you will encounter for attracting clients.

It should also be noted that what we suggest are often merely tools. Just like a new hammer will not make a good carpenter, these tools will not make good counselors. The tools, however, have the possibility of enhancing the counselor's effectiveness and outreach for certain clients.

**Online Tools**

We believe counselors must meet the client where she is technologically. By that we mean the counselor's use of technology must not supercede, at least initially, that of the client. For instance, if the counselor attempts to engage the client with video conferencing and the client does not have the equipment nor the inclination to pursue this option there may be more than an electrical disconnect. The client may indeed be uncomfortable with the technological application. It may even be the client prefers the inability of the counselor to visually connect with her.

For this reason it is important the counselor offers several options for clients to engage and contract for services. What follows below is a brief explanation of each of these tools and what may be perceived as benefits and difficulties for each.

**Synchronous vs. Asynchronous Tools**

These terms are used to distinguish between times of delivery. For instance, the description of using email below is categorized as asynchronous. This means the instruction does not occur in real time. After an email is sent by the client or by the counselor, there is a period of time before a response is delivered. A telephone or video session would be synchronous meaning the session occurs in real time. There are advantages to both types of tools.

**Telephone**

While not often viewed as online technology, we believe the telephone is often a wonderful option for both counselors and clients. The telephone is widely available to most clients. It is familiar technology and may provide the client with a level of ease that is lost when using different and more advanced technologies.

The counselor will have the benefit of hearing the client's tone of voice, possibly her hesitancy in responding to inquiries, and other verbal cues that may lead to a more clear understanding of the client. At the same time counselors may need to invest in a toll-free number in order for clients outside their immediate area to feel unencumbered by additional costs. It may also be necessary to enable three-way calling on the counselor's telephone in order to assist couples who, for various reasons, are not at the same location with one another. These two items may be additional costs for the counselor.

**Email**

Email is extremely prevalent today. It is now sometimes difficult to imagine how the human species survived before the advent of email communications. This mode of communication can be very efficient and is available to virtually every client who may seek online counseling services.

However, counselors must be aware of the risk to confidentiality with email correspondence. Unless the counselor registers and uses email that is specially encrypted, such as ZipLip or ZixMail, there is a possibility of others viewing the emails in cyberspace. Clients should be made aware of this possibility. Clients should also be made aware of your typical response time for email correspondence.

**Chat**

A chat room is set up so that two or more users may communicate together at close to real time (synchronous). This type of com-
munication might be used for couples who are in different locations or an individual who enjoys receiving a quick response from her counselor. These sessions can be utilized in the standard time frame of face to face counseling sessions.

Chat rooms have the same confidentiality issues as does email. As with email, there are secure alternatives available for online chat.

**IM**

Instant messaging (IM) is widely used by young people. These are basically chat rooms and have the same advantages and disadvantages as listed above. Both Yahoo and MSN offer free IM software that can be used by both you and your clients. There is now a secure and encrypted messenger from Hushmail.

**Video Conferencing**

In our opinion, video conferencing will be the wave of the future for online counseling. This technology is rapidly improving and will soon provide most of the advantages realized through traditional face to face counseling. This application of technology allows the counselor and the client to see and hear one another in close to real time.

Counselors who are going to use video conferencing must have a high speed connection to the internet. Dialup connections will not usually serve this type of communication well. There will also be an expense for the camera and software required to video conference with clients. More and more clients will have the necessary equipment to communicate via video.

**Helpful Organizations**

The organizations listed should prove to be helpful for, and familiar to, counselors attempting to become proficient in online counseling. These organizations have Codes of Ethics or Suggestions for Practice that will serve both the counselor and client well. Website information for each of these organizations follows this article.

**ACA**

The American Counseling Association has a Committee on Cyber-Technology. We suspect ACA will increase its research and outreach in the area of online counseling in the future. The ACA has researched and disseminated their Ethical Standards for Internet Online Counseling. We believe the ACA website (see address below) to be a bit difficult to navigate. It may be easiest to use the site’s search function in order to most quickly find the ethics document. The document was approved in 1999.

**iSMHO**

The International Society of Mental Health Online is a new resource for technologically advanced counselors. The organization has a number of position papers regarding online counseling and serves as an avenue through which counselors can support one another in their efforts, organizationally defend the practice of online counseling, and has researched and disseminated Suggested Principles for the Online Provision of Mental Health Services. The document was approved in 2000. We believe this organization may prove to be most helpful for counselors who intend to practice online. Their entire organizational effort is devoted to online counseling.

**NBCC**

The National Board for Certified Counselors makes it very easy to find their ethics document, The Practice of Internet Counseling. Just go to their website (see address below) and click on “Ethics” from their main page. The document was accepted in 2001.

**Ethical Considerations**

The organizations listed above do a good job in guiding counselors toward ethical online behavior with clients. There is a
good deal of information between the three documents. If you are contemplating entering into the field of online counseling we strongly suggest that you read each of the three ethics documents disseminated by these organizations and any others you may find appropriate. These documents will do a great deal to protect you and your client.

We do believe the ISMHO to be superior in one aspect. The ISMHO document does a better job in recognizing that counselors should inform clients of the benefits and risks of online counseling. The document goes on to make helpful suggestions as to how one might make these benefits and risks known to the client. The other two documents undoubtedly recognize this concern as well, but do not as thoroughly cover the area.

Find a Techno-Buddy

One of the suggestions we cannot stress enough for counselors desiring to apply technology to their counseling practice is to find a techno-buddy. Both you and your buddy should be interested in learning these different technologies and how they can be effectively and ethically used with clients.

Your buddy does not have to be a technology expert but someone, like you, who is interested in these applications. At the same time, if you are able to garner a buddy who does have a great deal of technological knowledge your learning curve will be much shorter.

We suggest that you have a techno-buddy meeting at least once each week using a different application. It might be best to start with the simpler technologies before attempting those that may be more difficult for you. We suggest building up your confidence and competence before ever attempting to use these applications with clients.

Your buddy should also tend to be a person who will assist you in staying on the cutting edge of technology. Once online counseling catches on more predominately there will be many new innovations and consumers will have a plethora of options. What you read, even this article, can be quickly outdated. You and your buddy should vow to stay on top of, if not in front of, the technological curve.

Summary

This article is but a brief paper that will, we hope, encourage you to look more closely at the possibilities of online counseling. We have presented you with a number of technological tools, helpful organizations, ethical considerations, and training opportunities with a techno-buddy.

We believe those counselors who adopt online counseling first will be more successful later in the online practice. If you want to go to one place in the web and read more about online counseling, we suggest Metanoia (web address below). There you will find an abundant amount of time and energy devoted to this topic from an online counseling watchdog.

Links

We believe an article such as this would be incomplete without a number of links so that readers might investigate further.
American Counseling Association - www.counseling.org
Hushmail - http://www.hushmail.com
International Society for Mental Health Online - www.ismho.org
Metanoia - http://www.metanoia.org
National Board of Certified Counselors - www.nbcc.org
ZipLip Encryption Services - www.ziplip.com
ZixMail Encrypted Email Services - www.zixmail.com

References


