

Psychology

Northern communities benefit from cyber-counselling

There was a long pause. I waited for her reply.

She told me she had been crying but that she was ready to proceed now. Later in the conversation she had a good laugh. I had hoped she would. But I only knew of it because she typed the message on her keyboard. Our session lasted an hour and a half and I had to end it because I had a face-to-face client waiting to see me.

I had been sceptical about counselling over the internet. Much of our communication is non-verbal. If a person's expression does not match their words, that says something. If the mention of a topic causes pain it shows on his or her face. Progress in counselling can be monitored by body language and facial expression. Similarly, I communicate support, interest, respect and caring to the client by how I sit and the expressions I show. How can this be done on a computer screen?

Then I read an article in the March/April, 2001 issue of Psychotherapy Networker that convinced me to add a private chat room to my website. According to psychologist Michael Freeny this is the treatment of choice for many clients.

Freeny began doing on-line counselling in 1998 at the suggestion of a client. He had to travel to the United Kingdom for two weeks and the client was dealing with an immediate crisis. She suggested e-mail. He found that he could review her words for any hidden meanings or messages. She found that she had a sense of immediate access and that she could print out and review his words as needed.

Freeny has discovered that many clients "open up" more easily on the internet than in person. Clients appreciate the privacy, the convenience and the freedom of not having to "perform" in a therapist's office.

Another U.S. therapist was "turned on" to the values of cyber-counselling by accident. Jeff Gazely was conducting an addictions group when a lightning strike took out the power. In the darkness group members began to speak with more candour and risk-taking. Altho their voices could be easily recognized they valued the sense of anonymity that the darkness gave. Gazely has since found the same sense of anonymity using an on-line private chat room.

Some therapists create a "virtual office" with webcams and videophones that allow the client and therapist to see each other while communicating through their computers. British psychologist Adam Joinson suggests this technology may actually hinder communication. He found that a sample of students revealed four times as much about themselves when they typed their comments over the internet than when they talked "face-to-face" in a virtual office.

On-line counselling offers obvious benefits in the north. Most of our northern communities do not have resident therapists or counsellors. On-line service is more immediate and avoids travel costs.

On-line counselling is not for everyone. Much depends on the nature of the issues to be discussed and the personality and abilities of the client. Most formal assessment work cannot be done on-line. It lends itself more to supportive counselling and cognitive- behavioral therapy.

I interview each potential client before we jointly agree to use cyber-counselling. That interview, which may be conducted in person or by telephone, is used to determine whether the individual will likely benefit from the process. We then discuss measures that have been taken to ensure client confidentiality. Only then do we proceed to my chat room.