

HEALTHY MINDS
A WEEKLY COLUMN ALL ABOUT MENTAL WELLNESS
Elliott B. Sewell, MAE, LPCC, NCC

E-Counseling



Online Counseling is a term that refers to the delivery of professional mental health services using current internet communications. It is also called e-therapy, etherapy, e-counseling, or online therapy; the meaning can be extended to include the delivery of services via telephone, although counseling services are often offered by email, real-time chat, or audio or video conferencing. It is a means of providing therapy that, as a therapist, I find very effective.

Some client-therapist relationships are strictly by electronic communication, though it is sometimes used as a part-time check-in between client and therapist, who usually have a face-to-face psychotherapeutic relationship. e-Therapy or e-Counseling - also known as on-line therapy or on-line counseling - has become a tool for mental health counselors in the last several years, allowing an individual to talk to a professional from the comfort of their own space - home, office, or even vehicle (hopefully while pulled over to the side of the road) – virtually any location worldwide where the internet or a telephone is available.

People seek counselors online for the same reasons that they might seek a person-to-person relationship. However, the qualities or characteristics or specialties of the counselor they seek do not have to be limited to who is available locally. For those in rural areas, where traveling is time-consuming or difficult, an online counselor makes the distance and travel time and costs irrelevant. As long as electronic services are available, bad weather is never a factor. For those on a busy schedule, or who are not available during normal business hours, or who are caring for children, the infirm, or the elderly, e-therapy is a viable or even preferable alternative.

For those with social phobias who prefer to stay at home, for those who are shy or do not want to reveal their emotions in public, or who wish to remain anonymous and private, e-therapy is a discrete and more acceptable alternative to face-to-face counseling. Having this anonymity helps client lose their inhibitions about discussing their problems; this is called disinhibition.

For those who feel more comfortable having a meeting with their therapist while they remain in the comfort and safety of their home, and at times when most professional offices would be closed, e-counseling is a great blessing.

It is very effective for many problems, such as stress, anxiety, family and relationship problems, grief and loss management, anger management, phobias, abuse, divorce, job loss, and most major life changes. It is not, however, recommended for serious situations like suicidal or homicidal thoughts, psychotic delusions, and other problems needing immediate, critical, hands on intervention. Nevertheless, I have been faced

with such crises and have managed to find a resolution and have helped ease my client past their harmful thinking.

There are some downsides to e-therapy, especially when it is done with the written word. Verbal cues, revealing voice tones, pauses and hesitations, cannot be experienced by the therapist, nor is his or her response able to add those verbal subtleties. Live audio or phone mostly solves these difficulties; the visual elements, eye movements, nervousness, and other non-verbal cues cannot be seen, although video conferencing addresses this adequately in most cases.

Face-to-face counseling can work better in some regards. Clients who purposely avoid social contact might benefit from being “in-office”, although this kind of intimacy can, in my experience, be achieved remotely. Nevertheless, some clients need to practice real interaction and may need an alternative, if this avoidance of social contact is at the heart of the clients’ problem. In the off-chance that the electronic communication is disrupted, the counseling session can become disrupted.

Despite some drawbacks, online counseling is growing in popularity and acceptance. Using such free online services as Yahoo Messenger or Skype, individuals can communicate between friends, family, and their counselors; with an inexpensive “web camera” (about \$40), a person can have live chats with video with anyone else in the world with a web camera and logged into the same free service.

A recent survey by the University of Toronto showed that Canadian women may be using online counseling four times as much as men. The trend is towards more e-therapy and it is increasing as a means of providing mental health services to those who might otherwise not seek the help that will improve the quality and functionality of their lives.