Online counseling: risks, benefits, and future development

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Abstract
Online counseling started becoming popular in the mid-1990's and is a popular source of debate right now. There are a number of risks and benefits that need to be evaluated by both the counselor and client when determining the appropriateness of online counseling. There seems to be a lack of research regarding how effective online counseling is, but preliminary research seems positive in supporting the argument that relationships can be formed when using online counseling. Some individuals may be more appropriate for online counseling and some problems may be helped more effectively. Clients and counselors need to be educated about the use of online counseling before beginning counseling using this particular medium.
Online Counseling: Risks, Benefits, and Future Development

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Abstract

Online counseling started becoming popular in the mid-1990’s and is a popular source of debate right now. There are a number of risks and benefits that need to be evaluated by both the counselor and client when determining the appropriateness of online counseling. There seems to be a lack of research regarding how effective online counseling is, but preliminary research seems positive in supporting the argument that relationships can be formed when using online counseling. Some individuals may be more appropriate for online counseling and some problems may be helped more effectively. Clients and counselors need to be educated about the use of online counseling before beginning counseling using this particular medium.
Online Counseling: Risks, Benefits, and Future Development

More people have access to the internet each year and many people spend a great deal of their time engaged in online activities. People have taken a number of activities and made them computer based. Individuals can now pay bills online, shop, communicate with friends and family, get medical advice, and conduct business meetings. Almost everything can be done on the computer to some extent. It is nearly unheard of for an individual to go a full day without utilizing a computer in some way. The field of counseling has had to adapt to the use of technology in administering services to clients.

"Online counseling is defined as “any type of professional therapeutic interaction that makes use of the internet to connect qualified mental health professionals and their clients.” (Rochlen, Zack, & Speyer, 2004, p. 270) Online counseling may also be referred to as e-therapy, e-counseling, internet therapy, or cybertherapy (Elleven & Allen, 2004). (For the purpose of this paper, the definition of online counseling does not include the use of videoconferencing interventions.)

Online counseling is not the first form of counseling in which the counselor and client do not engage in face-to-face interaction. Freud communicated with some of his clients via letters as did many other professionals in the mental health and medical fields (Recupero & Rainey, 2005). The use of counseling over the phone has been utilized in the past and is still popular in many settings today. Suicide and general therapy hotlines continue to be a popular way to reach a large number of clients who may not otherwise seek or receive help. Lee (1998) suggests that the use
of the telephone in counseling was once debated much like the use of online counseling now (as cited in Shaw & Shaw, 2006).

Online counseling for financial means was first established in the mid-1990's (Shaw & Shaw, 2006). At that time, there were only twelve websites that offered individual online counseling (Ainsworth, 2002, as cited in Shaw & Shaw, 2006). The number of online counseling websites has since grown considerably. Shaw and Shaw (2006) conducted a study in which they assessed one hundred sixty six online counseling websites, a small sample of the number of online counseling websites available. The results of their study found California to be the state with the most online counselors with nine online counseling web sites followed by New York with eight, Texas with five, and Arizona with four (Shaw & Shaw, 2006).

Online counseling may be used as the sole method of communication between the counselor and client, or may be additive to other forms of communication (Recupero & Rainey, 2005). For example, homework assignments may be e-mailed to the counselor between face-to-face sessions or the use of the computer may be the sole method of communication between the counselor and client. Counselors may use e-mail, chat or instant messaging, or videoconferencing to provide services to clients via the internet (Robson & Robson, 2000). The most commonly used counseling practices include using e-mail or chat which provides an almost immediate response between counselor and client (Robson & Robson, 2000).

Online counseling comes with a unique set of risks and benefits. Many ethical dilemmas may be encountered that do not have a clear cut answer. There are also a number of benefits that can be provided by online counseling. Professionals seem to
be divided on whether or not they approve of the use of online counseling. Many professionals seem to support the use of online counseling and an equal number seem to oppose the use of online counseling in any form.

Benefits

The need for mental health services continuously increases as does the need for more mental health professionals. Online counseling has a number of benefits for meeting mental health needs for a larger number of individuals. Online counseling may also have benefits for individual clients.

*Individuals in Rural Communities*

One way online counseling may be beneficial is by reaching a number of individuals in rural areas who are unable to make a trip to visit a mental health professional (Rochlen et al., 2004). There may be a lack of mental health professionals in a certain area or an individual may not have access to an expert who could best meet their mental health needs (Schopp, 2004). Online counseling may also be helpful if clients move to a different area and want to continue counseling services with their current mental health provider (Rochlen et al., 2004).

Individuals in rural communities may feel isolated by their lack of contact with others. Providing online counseling to these individuals may be very helpful in cases where resources and assistance are a great distance away (Robson & Robson, 2000).

*Individuals with Disabilities*

Individuals with disabilities may benefit from using online counseling (Rochlen et al., 2004). Many people with disabilities are unable to leave their homes
easily, if at all. Many housebound individuals could greatly benefit from participating in mental health counseling from their homes.

Individuals who are hard of hearing may especially benefit from the use of online counseling. Only a very small number of mental health professionals are familiar with American Sign Language (ASL) (Leigh, Corbett, Gutman, & Moree, 1996). It may be uncomfortable for counseling sessions to be conducted with the use of an interpreter. It is important for mental health professionals to be aware that ASL grammar often differs from that of English, so written communication with deaf individuals can be difficult at times (Leigh et al., 1996).

Decreased Inhibition

Certain individuals may be apprehensive about seeking counseling because they are nervous about making contact with and talking to a stranger (Mitchell & Murphy, 1998 as cited in Rochlen et al., 2004). Online counseling provides them with a medium in which they can disclose personal information in a way that may feel more comfortable for them.

Clients may feel they can be more honest when communicating with their counselor online (Rochlen et al., 2004). It may be easier for a client to disclose information he or she feels is shameful or inappropriate. Disclosing this type of information in a setting where the client doesn’t have to see the reaction of the person he or she is talking to may feel more comfortable.

Clients can participate in online counseling from their home. Clients may feel more comfortable sharing intimate details in the privacy of their own homes.
Online Counseling (Sampson & Kolodinsky, 1997). Clients may feel less inhibited when in comforting surroundings.

Individuals with motivational problems or problems with relationships may be willing to participate in online counseling than face-to-face counseling (Caspar & Berger, 2005). These individuals may not be reached in any other way.

**Writing as Therapy**

Online therapy most often includes the use of writing to communicate. The process of writing can be very therapeutic to a number of individuals as is evidenced by the common practice of journaling in addition to therapy (Atkins, Adams, McKinney, McKinney, Rose, Wentworth, & Woodworth, 2003). Some individuals may prefer writing as a mode of communication and may feel they are better able to express themselves through writing. Writing provides a medium in which clients are able to creatively express themselves and may share things they wouldn't otherwise share with the counselor (Atkins et al., 2003).

**Online Assessments**

A number of assessments and psychological tests can now be completed online. It may be helpful for a client to take these assessments online, saving both the client and counselor time. Online assessments may be easier to fill out and are generally less time consuming when completed online (Epstein & Klinkenberg, 2001). Few psychometric differences have been found when comparing computer assisted assessments versus assessments given by a live test administrator (Epstein & Klinkenberg, 2001). Computer assisted assessments remove biases of the test
administrator and help to increase the consistency of test administration (Epstein & Klinkenberg, 2001).

Supplemental Support

Some clients may need supplemental support between sessions. It may be more practical and cost effective for clients to communicate online with their counselor between sessions (Oravec, 2000).

Family and Group

Family and group counseling may be more easily done with the use of a computer. Families and group members may be separated by great distance or time constraints and it may be easier to conduct counseling online (Oravec, 2000). It is important to be sure that all family or group members feel comfortable using the computer before moving forward with online counseling (Oravec, 2000).

Attractiveness vs. Unattractiveness

A study conducted by Snyder, Tanke, and Berscheid (1977) demonstrated that perceived physical attractiveness versus unattractiveness may have an effect on the judgment of the mental health professional (as cited in Caspar & Berger, 2005). By conducting counseling online, the physical attractiveness bias is removed from the relationship between the counselor and client.

Risks

There are a number of risks associated with online counseling. There are a number of ethical issues as well as client safety issues that must be examined before determining whether or not online counseling is appropriate.
Confidentiality

One of the most helpful and reassuring things counselors can offer to clients is the promise of confidentiality in treatment. The threat of compromising confidentiality is one of the greatest risks associated with the use of online counseling (Mallen, Vogel, & Rochlen, 2005). There is no guarantee that information transmitted online can be completely safe. The threat of information being misdirected or being intercepted by a hacker is great (Mallen et al., 2005). A typo in entering an e-mail address may mean that confidential information is sent to the wrong person (Mallen et al., 2005). Data encryption is a security device that is commonly used and can limit the threat of data being intercepted by a third party (Mallen et al., 2005).

A client’s confidentiality may be impeded by other individuals within the home or office at which they participate in online counseling. Other people may have access to the client’s computer and others may see counseling information the client may not want to share (Mallen et al., 2005). It is important that clients safeguard their information on their personal computers.

Clients can be unsure that the information they send to their counselor is not being viewed by other individuals on the counselor’s end (Mallen et al., 2005). Unscrupulous counselors may allow information to be seen by others wherever they are practicing online counseling.
Informed Consent

It may be difficult to gain appropriate informed consent via the internet. It may be better, if possible, for the client and counselor to meet face-to-face at least once before starting the counseling process online (Elleven & Allen, 2004).

Another issue is the consideration of how much information to divulge to clients about the online counseling process. Barthelmeus (2000) conducted a study in which participants were asked to evaluate the informed consent statements for three different online counseling websites. The results of the study showed participants found the website with the most informed consent information to be the least desirable (Barthelmeus, 2000).

The American Counseling Association (1999) standards for online counseling list a number of things that should be disclosed to clients when discussing online counseling. Some of the American Counseling Association’s suggestions for informing clients about online counseling include: confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, counselors must present themselves and their backgrounds honestly to clients, counselors must be able to contact their clients in the case of an emergency, and counselors must refer clients they feel may not be appropriate for the use of online counseling (American Counseling Association, 1999).

Client Safety

It may be very difficult or impossible for a counselor to intervene when a client discusses suicidality during online counseling (Rochlen et al., 2004). The counselor may not have time to contact authorities in the client’s area or may be unsure of the client’s address to send help.
It is important that clients participate in online counseling in a safe environment. An individual in an abusive relationship could be put at great risk if the abuser finds documentation of the client’s sessions on the computer (Robson & Robson, 2000).

The duty to warn others may also be difficult with online counseling (Shaw & Shaw, 2006). Counselors need to be aware of these limitations and aware they may be held responsible in the case a client decides to harm others (Shaw & Shaw, 2006).

Counselor Credibility

It may be difficult for clients to determine the credibility of their counselor. Individuals may present themselves as counselors without any training or without the appropriate training (Shaw & Shaw, 2006). Most individuals seeking counseling do not require documentation of credibility from their counselor in any setting. However, it may be even more difficult to determine credibility from an online source. Certain clients, because of their issues, may be even more vulnerable and more easily taken advantage of by a dishonest individual presenting themselves as a professional mental health provider (Shaw & Shaw, 2006).

Individuals may pose as counselors in order to financially exploit clients (Robson & Robson, 2000). Clients may feel safe giving credit card information to a counselor over the internet. If the counselor is not trustworthy they may take advantage of the client without the client’s knowledge.

Credential Check was a program that helped verify the credentials of online counselors (Shaw & Shaw, 2006). It was developed by Martha Ainsworth and John Grohol in 1997 (Shaw & Shaw, 2006). Unfortunately the service went out of
operation in 2001 (Shaw & Shaw, 2006). There is a need for more programs such as Credential Check where potential online counseling consumers can determine the credibility of their counselor.

**Licensure**

It is important for the practitioner and client to know that issues may arise due to licensure risks (Recupero & Rainey, 2005). It may be necessary for an online provider to be licensed in all areas clients reside (Recupero & Rainey, 2005). It is also important for a counselor to determine if their malpractice insurance will cover clients in different states (Recupero & Rainey, 2005).

Counselors need to be well informed about the differences in laws and jurisdiction depending on the state that the client and counselor are in (Shaw & Shaw, 2006). Different states have different laws regarding counseling as well as general behaviors. Following ethical guidelines becomes essential in these cases because guidelines by national associations are applicable in all states (Shaw & Shaw, 2006).

**Loss of Face-to-Face Contact**

A large number of things can be determined about a person based on their body language and facial expressions as well as tone and voice inflection. These observations get lost in the use on online counseling. Important cues such as crying or extreme anger are missed in online interaction (Recupero & Rainey, 2005). Emotions can be communicated via online counseling using emoticons, but these are still a poor replacement to counseling in person (Robson & Robson, 2000).

Statements can be easily misinterpreted when participating in online counseling. A common online communication phenomenon is referred to as
‘flaming’ (Oravec, 2000). ‘Flaming’ occurs when emotionally charged messages are sent between individuals online (Oravec, 2000). Counselors must be aware of ‘flaming’ and be able to tell the difference between ‘flaming’ and emotional interactions that are related to the issues currently being evaluated within the counseling.

Here and now interactions can be an important part of the counseling process. In the use of online counseling, the counselor is not able to comment on here and now interactions because emotion and body language can be lost (Recupero & Rainey, 2005).

_Technological Mishaps_

There are a number of issues that may arise with the use of computers in counseling. An individual’s computer service may crash or internet capabilities may be cut off in the middle of a session which can be disturbing to clients and counselors. There is the possibility that messages may be sent to the wrong individual (Sampson & Kolodinsky, 1997).

Reliability is important in the client counselor relationship. It may be difficult for counselors to provide reliable counseling to clients if they are struggling with technological mishaps (Robson & Robson, 2000).

_Effectiveness_

The use of online counseling in practice is a relatively new phenomenon. There are few studies to determine how effective online counseling is. Many studies have determined that online counseling has been effective in symptom relief (Rochlen et. al, 2004). The lack of research at this time may make it impossible to truly
evaluate the use of online counseling (Maheu & Gordon, 2002). Some research has
been conducted but sample sizes and poor controls are common (Skinner & Zack,
2004). Most of the research to this point has focused on case studies to help
understand the process of online counseling (Kraus, Zack, & Stricker, 2004).

One study has attempted to focus on the development of an effective
relationship in online counseling. Cook and Doyle (2002) conducted a study in which
they compared the working alliance in online counseling compared to face-to-face
counseling. They compared Working Alliance Inventory (WAI) scores between
fifteen online counseling clients and twenty-five face-to-face counseling clients
(Cook & Doyle, 2002). The results of their study revealed higher scores in the online
therapy sample suggesting that online therapy can be conducive to the establishment
of a working therapeutic alliance (Cook & Doyle, 2002).

Client Appropriateness

Counselors must carefully determine who they feel would be appropriate for
the use of online counseling. Online counseling may be inappropriate for individuals
with severe psychiatric disorders and those individuals with suicidal ideation or
histories of suicide attempts (Rochlen et. al, 2004).

Online counseling may be especially beneficial to individuals suffering from
anxiety, body image issues, adult children of alcoholics, and individuals who wish to
work on general self improvement (Rochlen et. al, 2004). Individuals suffering from
social phobia issues may be attracted to online counseling and more likely to seek
help if services are offered to them online (Schopp, 2004).
Caspar and Berger (2005) argue that online counseling may be appropriate even for more severe client issues. Online therapy may be appropriate for individuals suffering from multiple personality disorders or for clients with severe agoraphobia (Caspar and Berger, 2005).

Clients’ level of comfort with using computers must be evaluated. Clients must be comfortable with the functions involved in online counseling (Elleven & Allen, 2004). It is important that counselors are aware of the client’s level of competency and make efforts not to perform functions online that go beyond the client’s scope of expertise in using the computer (Elleven & Allen, 2004).

It may be important to make sure clients are not overly dependent on computers (Oravec, 2000). It may be best for individuals who spend a majority of their time on the computer to be seen in a face-to-face counseling environment (Oravec, 2000).

It is important that counselors have detailed discussions with clients before using online counseling. Clients must be made fully aware of the hazards that may be encountered and what harm may be done. Each individual client is unique and the counselor and client must ultimately examine the appropriateness of online counseling for each individual separately (Oravec, 2000).

Future Development

Technology continues to change by the minute. Just as individuals are getting used to the idea of online counseling, things within the field are changing.

According to Elleven and Allen (2004) online counseling will be dominated by video conferencing in the future. This method of online counseling provides an
experience that can be very much like counseling in person. Videoconferencing is a technological medium that allows the client and counselor to both see and hear each other in very close to real time (Elleven & Allen, 2004).

A number of professional mental health organizations have developed ethical guidelines or standards for the practice of online counseling. The National Board for Certified Counselors was the first organization to develop standards for the use of online counseling in 1997 (Shaw & Shaw, 2006). The American Counseling Association also has standards for online counseling that can be found on their webpage (Elleven & Allen, 2004).

There is also an International Society of Mental Health Online (ISMHO) whose organization is solely devoted to online counseling (Elleven & Allen, 2004). The standards developed are similar to those of other organizations, but are suggested practices instead of required practices (Shaw & Shaw, 2006).

One key aspect in improving the risks associated with online counseling is education. Clients need to be educated about the risks and benefits associated with online counseling and need to make an informed decision about the process (Recupero & Rainey, 2005).

It is also important to educate mental health professionals about online counseling. Master's level programs may include courses on ethics in online counseling in future curriculum (Shaw & Shaw, 2006).

Online counseling can help us learn a great deal about traditional face-to-face counseling. Benefits and risks of online counseling can help mental health professionals learn to evaluate the same things within face-to-face counseling (Caspar...
& Berger, 2005). It is important to think about the lack of relationships in online counseling and how traditional relationships in face-to-face counseling can sometimes impede the counseling process (Caspar & Berger, 2005). Caspar & Berger (2005) give the examples of individuals with borderline personality disorder or counselors who are unable to establish appropriate boundaries with their clients.

There will be a need in the future for supervisors appropriate to supervise online counselors. There will also be a need for these supervisors to reach an agreement of what is appropriate in online counseling (Trepal, Haberstroh, Duffey, & Evans, 2007).

One of the largest obstacles to the increasing popularity of online counseling is the lack of payment by third-party providers (Skinner & Zack, 2004). The lack of coverage for online counseling by third-party providers has prevented online counseling from expanding more than it already has (Skinner & Zack, 2004).

There is a great need for research to focus on the ethical standards, appropriateness, and effectiveness of online counseling (Mallen et al., 2005). Multicultural issues in relation to online counseling must also be attended to in the future (Mallen et al., 2005). At this time, there is little known about how multiculturalism is affected by the online counseling process (Mallen et al., 2005).

Conclusion

Online counseling is becoming an increasingly popular form of counseling. Counseling may be conducted online only or the computer may be used as a supplement to face-to-face counseling interactions.
There are currently a great number of risks and benefits that need to be evaluated when considering online counseling. Not all individuals may be appropriate for online counseling and it is important to evaluate each client individually for their appropriateness for counseling online. Mental health professionals also should be aware of the personal risks involved in the practice of counseling online.

Whether or not an individual counselor chooses to use online counseling in their practice, it may be useful to have information about online counseling. Online counseling can provide different perspectives of the counseling process even to counselors who chose to use only face-to-face counseling (Oravec, 2000). Online counseling can be useful to learn about nonverbal cues as well as other aspects of counseling (Oravec, 2000). For example, issues that come up in the evaluation of online counseling may be issues that also need to be addressed in face-to-face counseling.

There is a serious lack of research that evaluates the effectiveness of online counseling (Mallen et al., 2005). Preliminary studies seem to show online counseling can be beneficial, but there is a great need for more research.
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