

Review

Paper review on online counseling. The Kenyan experience

Janipher Ocholla^{1*} and Roselyne A. Odiango²

Abstract

¹Principal Lecturer HOD-Department of Education Migori TTC P.O. Box 123 Suna, Kenya

²Lecturer, Department of Health Promotion and Sport Science, Masinde Muliro University, Kakamega, Kenya.

*Corresponding Author Email: ocholajanipher@gmail.com
Tel:+254722453620

The objective of this study is to identify the benefits of online counseling, to discuss the limitations of online counseling and to discuss online counseling and confidentiality. The outstanding rapid expanding field of online counseling has aroused much discussion among the counselors who are quick to compare face to face sessions with the online counseling. The emergence of online counseling has been attributed to a number of factors, including the movement of psychiatric care from inpatient to outpatient settings, the availability of personal computers, Internet technology and the resourcefulness of health care providers in the application of technology to meet health care needs. Many organizations have sprung up in response to the needs of the clients even though many parts of the world including Kenya still lag behind in this practice. This document will focus on the benefits, limitations and confidentiality of online counseling.

Key words: Confidentiality, Counseling, Face to face counseling, Online counseling

INTRODUCTION

The speed at which technology has become an integral part of the modern day living is astounding. It is difficult to imagine a contemporary lifestyle without computers, mobile phones and the internet. Online counseling is crucial as Kenya is under pressure to use information communication and technology to sensitize the clients and counselors to underscore its significance in the 21st Century. Liebert (2006) pointed out that the emergence of online counseling has been attributed to a number of factors, including the movement of psychiatric care from inpatient to outpatient settings, the availability of personal computers, Internet technology and the resourcefulness of health care providers in the application of technology to meet health care needs. Kenya Psychological Association of counselors (2005) indicated that many Kenyans suffer from various forms of mental health related ailment that requires attention, most of these cases would have been prevented if online counseling was fully in operation. This document will discuss benefits

and critical areas regarding online counseling. It will also discuss online counseling and confidentiality, and recommend strategies that should be adopted to improve service delivery through online counseling.

Benefits of online counseling

McLeod (2009) proposed that online counseling should be considered a new style of therapeutic intervention, a distinct way of engaging therapeutically and therefore needing a different theoretical framework, from face-to-face counseling. From this perspective online counseling is considered versatile and available resource to complement and support other types of intervention. UNESCO (2005) as cited by Luo (2007) acknowledged that new possibilities are emerging which show a powerful impact on basic online counseling potentials have barely been exploited. These possibilities exist as a result of the recent by-products of the general

development process and the quantity of information available in the world, much of it relevant to survival and basic well-being is exponentially greater than that which was available only a few years ago (Maheu, 2003).

Sussman (2004) noted that one of the primary advantages of online counseling is its potential for increasing access to counseling services. It can bring services to persons in underserved or geographically isolated areas, as well as to those who cannot leave their home due to illness, physical limitations, transportation difficulties or family obligations. Hanley 2006 noted that it is beneficial for those who are socially phobic or are afraid to seek face-to-face therapy due to anxiety and stigmatization. Griffiths (2001) said that the use of computer-mediated communication may allow family therapists to engage absent family members in family therapy. Private therapists may offer online counseling services at less than the cost of a face-to-face therapy session, making online counseling services more financially accessible.

Murphy (2008) suggested that online counseling provides emotional bracketing which involves bracketing the emotional context behind the typed words to allow the client to hear the intended vocal tone in the words. He further argued out that online counseling provides descriptive immediacy which involves providing the client with images that will give him/her a context for understanding the counselor's words. Luo (2007) emphasized on the use of metaphor, story-telling and poetry which can be used to convey quality and intensity of emotion during the therapeutic relationship. He said that the client and the counselor can develop a set of standardized emoticons and acronyms to express nonverbal communication. To prevent misunderstandings, the counselor should check with the client to make sure that there is understanding between him/her and the client.

Maheu (2003) argued that online counseling is a convenient services which can be provided at any time of the day and clients can send messages whenever they feel most in need for therapy. Yager, (2003) established that online counseling can be accessed from anywhere in the world using internet access. He further argued that online counseling allows more flexibility in the counselors' work schedules. Suler (2009) stated that there are no difficulties in having to schedule a particular appointment time because the therapist and client do not have to be sitting at their computers at the same time. Leibert (2006) recognized that the flexibility of electronic communication can also increase a therapist's accessibility, especially for clients with erratic and demanding personal schedules.

Tsan and Day (2007) proposed that online counseling allows both the counselor and client the time to compose a thought or question that precisely reflects the concern, there is no pressure to think quickly, the client can reply when he/she is ready to do so. They acknowledged that

the value of online counseling is in its ability to provide a permanent and tangible record of counseling sessions. It gives clients the ability to re-read e-mails to look for approaches that they have used to overcome previous problems and to review positive and encouraging comments that their therapist has made about them. Maheu (2003) expressed that emails can be used to remind both clients and therapists of issues previously expressed. This aspect allows both the client and the therapist time to fully reflect on issues discussed in previous correspondence and to explore the client's progress at various stages in the course of treatment. Oravec (2000) proposed that record keeping provided by online counseling can also hold clients and therapists to higher standards of accountability.

Schultze (2006) observed that the act of writing itself can be therapeutic. It can be viewed as a mechanism that facilitates self-disclosure, ventilation, and externalization of problems and conflicts that promotes self-awareness. Online therapists suggest that some individuals are more honest, uninhibited and more expressive in writing than in face-to-face sessions. Yager (2003) mentioned that writing can reduce the emotional burden on patients by enabling them to say whatever they want to say. Furthermore computers accept whatever patients care to reveal without interrupting them, including all confessions and admonition.

Suler (2009) explained that anonymity provided by online counseling may also be beneficial. Thus, a client can eliminate the stigma associated with seeking counseling services. It may also be easier for patients to disclose information about themselves via the computer since certain social markers such as age, gender and ethnicity are removed (Tsan and Day, (2007). Hanley (2008) noted that honesty and candor may also increase as clients feel less defensive and vulnerable as they do not have to contend with the therapist's immediate emotional feedback signals. They further argued that the anonymity of online counseling may also ease the discomfort and potentially embarrassing and stigmatizing disclosure of behaviors and thoughts.

Yager (2003) realized that online counseling also has the potential to enhance patient's autonomy in the therapeutic relationship, thus decreasing the power differential between client and the therapist. He emphasized that e-mail therapy, in particular, empowers clients by allowing them to transmit their unique ideas without interruption by the therapist's premature interpretations and perspectives. She notes that this may be particularly beneficial for clients who have been frustrated by the lack of sensitivity of therapists to their unique concerns. Murphy (2008) pointed out that gaining the trust of adolescents and establishing a therapeutic alliance requires specific techniques and creativity on the part of the therapist. He suggested that e-mail may function as an innovative hook to engage clients in a

therapeutic relationship.

Schultze (2006) pointed out that e-mail increases the amount of time of contact for therapeutic processes and lets the client know that the therapist is present, listening and thinking about the sessions. He argued that e-mail contact can allow clients to raise forgotten issues during the session, it can be used for self-monitoring and the client's accountability between sessions. Tsan and Day (2007) noted that e-mail provides another opportunity to build the working alliance with patients who are reluctant to self-disclosure. Yager (2003) points out that e-mail is helpful with patients who easily become inattentive to therapeutic expectations between office visits.

Suler (2009) found out that chats and instant messaging provide a feeling of presence created through spontaneous interactions which may result in more uncensored disclosures by the patient. Making effort to be with the client for a specific appointment may show commitment and dedication, pauses in the conversation are psychologically significant cues. Sussman (2004) explained that chat and instant messaging enable more direct and immediate communication and they also provide for continuous and immediate feedback.

Limitations of online counseling

Schultze (2006) expressed concerns about the limitations of online interventions with respect to the lack of accessibility to nonverbal behaviour of patients, difficulties establishing working alliances, and the lack of legal guidelines for online therapy. According to him, efficient communication exchange is often difficult to achieve due to prolonged and inexplicable pauses in client text responses. He explained that maintaining an empathic connection is also affected by the speed and quality of text exchange, while delayed responses from client make it difficult for the counselor to feel engaged in the counseling relationship.

Griffiths (2006) surveyed 2,098 social workers, psychologists, and other professionals regarding the use of the Internet as part of professional mental health practice. When asked to select from a list of concerns regarding the provision of mental health services over the internet, participants noted three primary areas of concern: confidentiality, liability, and misinformation being provided by clients. Hanley (2006) highlighted concerns such as reduced emotional proximity and absence of non-verbal cues that make it difficult for online counselors to accurately assess the severity of clients' emotional issues. He identified difficulties in establishing a working alliance and communication problems provided by clients.

McLeod (2009) expressed the gap between e-mail

from client, response from therapist and difficulty expressing emotions through text communication. He emphasized that lack of emotional connection and lack of privacy and security challenged online counseling practice. In addition he observed concerns about being caught by spouse of employer and problems with technical abilities of the participants. Tan (2008) argued that computers do not offer the human interaction and this may reduce the sense of intimacy, trust and commitment to the therapeutic relationship. He observed that online counseling may only be relevant to those who have access to the internet and have knowledge and skills to operate ICT equipment.

Online counseling and confidentiality

Ricky (2011) revealed that client's information can be kept confidential by limiting access of information to the counselor and the client. This can be done by having personal computers for sessions fixed with passwords that are changed regularly. He observed that information can be kept confidential by the counselor by using external storage devices that are separate from the networks or computers used during the counseling sessions. In addition he explained that system vaults can be set up by server administrators to keep the data secure and also enable both counselor and the client to converse without any restriction. According to Child (2011) data can be encrypted so that only the client and counselors understand the counseling conversation and the therapeutic relationship. He argued that encryption could be in form of acronyms, abbreviations and pseudonyms used to keep the counseling information confidential. Ainsworth (2002) noted that anonymous identification helps in keeping the hackers from tracking the user's habits and digital identity to enhance confidentiality.

Ybarra (2005) proposed legal and ethical considerations to protect information from cyber-crimes such as hacking and blackmail. He emphasized the use of firewalls and corporate perimeter firewalls which can be used to help manage the entry and exit of information exchanged between the counselor and client. Alleman (2002) identified scanning of the system regularly for virus to ensure that data is not lost or made available for other users. He explained that personal information should not be stored in devices that are exposed to the public and untrusted parties. Suler (2009) documented that disposal of any information should be done by using a program that overwrites the entire hard drive and leaves no trace of information behind. He emphasized that before disposing a computer one should check on how to save the information, how to delete information permanently from the device and how to transfer the saved information to a new device.

CONCLUSION

This document is significance for future use in that; the study will add to the knowledge base of counseling profession, specifically the study will provide information on benefits, limitations and security of online counseling. While there appears to be abundant publications on the topic, there are not many examples of Kenyan scholarly writing on the area, the study therefore may add to the body of knowledge on benefits, limitations and the art of confidentiality regarding online counseling. From this study there could develop an awareness of significant weakness in face-to-face counseling, as a result, a synthesis of ideas in the integration of online counseling could develop for future implementation and practice. The generated database can provide information with regard to planning and implementing appropriate methodology for professionals in service programs which might be beneficial to the practicing professional counselors. All professional counselors at all levels of training might obtain valuable insights for formulation of online counseling policy framework. Research on online counseling focuses primarily on self-help interventions with little therapist involvement and there is limited conclusive empirical evidence with respect to the efficacy between the therapist and the client. All appropriate safeguards must be in place and the suggestions for practice outlined clearly, as well as the codes and guidelines to guide the online counseling.

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