

E-THERAPY

Lecture 1

Introduction to Online Counseling Skills Practice

Dr. Ngure Jane

INTRODUCTION TO ONLINE COUNSELING SKILLS PRACTICE

Lecture One Outline

- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Expected Learning Outcomes
- 1.3 Overview of the course
- 1.4 Meaning of E-Therapy and other terminologies.
- 1.5 Face to face verse E-Therapy
- 1.6 Is E-Therapy suitable to everyone?
- 1.7 Who may benefit from E-Therapy services?
- 1.8 Strengths and limitations of E-Therapy
- 1.9 Summary

1.1 Introduction

In this lecture, we shall have an overview of the E-Therapy course; we will define various terms in the context of E-Therapy and explore the difference between face-to-face counseling and E-Therapy. We will also determine the category of people who may benefit from E-therapy and those who are not suitable for online counseling. We will finally discuss the strengths and limitations of E-Therapy.

1.2 Expected Learning Outcomes

By the end of this lecture, you should be able to:

- a) Appreciate the concept of E-Therapy.
- b) Understand the online therapeutic process, skills and ethical considerations.
- c) Appreciate the unique features found in the online counseling practice.

1.3 Overview of E-Therapy

The following are the topics that we will cover in this course; introduction to online counseling skills practice; establishing an online presence and online relationship; online therapeutic relationships using asynchronous and synchronous computer mediated communication; online

counseling skills; online assessment and contracting; types of E-Therapy; professional consideration for online practice; Professional guidelines for online practice; ethical issues in online counseling; using online group modalities; starting and building an online counseling practice and online counselor supervision.

1.4. Meaning of E-Therapy.

With covid-19 pandemic, internet and technology have now become an essential part of all individuals. Everything people do involves the use of technology, for example online teaching and learning, learning new skills, meeting people, developing relationships and shopping online to mention but a few. The counselling field is benefitting from the use and integration of internet, communication and technology (I.C.T) and the world wide web. (Sanchez, 2014; Foon etal 2020). Online counselling is considered to be cost effective, highly accessible and convenient method of providing basic counselling and mental health services.

E-therapy has now become an attractive an alternative method to the traditional face -to- face counselling (Wong, Bonn, Tam and Wong 2018). The commonly used terms for E-therapy include; online counselling, cyber counselling, web -based counselling and web therapy.

E-therapy it takes place when a trained counselor or psychotherapist holds a counseling session with a client over the internet with the objective of providing emotional support. Provision of mental health advice or any other professional service in this area also qualifies as online counselling when done through the internet. Internet-based therapy, utilizes the power and convenience of the internet to allow simultaneous (synchronous) and time delayed (asynchronous) communication between a client and a counselor.

E-Therapy is the use of electronic media and information technology to provide services for participants in different locations. It is used by skilled and knowledgeable professionals to address a variety on individual, family and social issues. E-Therapy is also defined as any delivery of mental or behavioral health services, including therapy, consultation, and psycho education by a licensed practitioner to a client in non-face to face setting through distance communication technologies.(Mallen etal 2011)

E-Therapy is delivered through chat, email, video or even internet voice (e.g., Skype). E-Therapy is a viable alternative where the face-to-face therapy is not available.

Definition of Terms

The following terminologies are important as we discuss processes of E-Therapy:

Internet; this refers to a system of interconnected computer networks that carries various information and services, such as electronic mail(email), online chat, and the shared web pages.

Online; the term online refers to anything that is based in the internet. Web-based is another term used to refer to anything online.

Computer mediated communication (CMC), online communication and internet based communication; this refers to communication that takes place through the internet via computer.

Email; this is a message sent from one person to another through the internet.

Website; this is an internet based space where individuals can read and write messages. They can also post pictures, and exchange information.

A message board; this is a part of the website where individuals read messages left by others and write messages to others. A message board may be accessible to everyone who has access to the internet, or it may be password protected and only available to those with access.

A thread; this is one part of the message board containing a single conversation.

Message/post; this is a single message within a conversation thread.

Chat; this is a conversation where messages are written and received in real time. This type of a conversation can only be seen by those in conversation.

Synchronous communication; this is communication that occurs in real time. For example messages are read as soon as they are received and the response is made immediately. Chat is a synchronous communication and also video. Skype is also an example of synchronous communication.

Asynchronous; in this mode of communication, messages are left and responded to at a later time. The conversations thus occur intermittently. Message boards and emails are a good example.

1.5 Difference between face to face counseling and E-Therapy?

The face-to-face counseling widens the therapeutic frame because it includes the journey to and from the session. By attending in person, all clients know they come to a safe and dependable address and to a familiar room which they come to as routine. For some clients, this provides their only place of safety.

Face-to-face counseling draws on all the senses, allowing for the full potential of non-verbal communication between two people; the interaction with space and objects; the temperature in the room; smells and outside noises; the silent language of entrances and exits.

While E-Therapy relies heavily on the internet, it requires different kind of listening and a different kind of intensity. The senses are reduced to one or two: to sight and sound in video. It can take a slight adjustment, but being online is no barrier to the access and containment of thoughts and feelings, to understanding, and to being understood. It offers the potential for greater flexibility in terms of scheduling. It is completely accessible and inclusive in bringing the therapy to an individual, whatever the circumstances and no matter the distance.

E-therapy is different from face-to-face counselling in many ways. These includes; the settings. Where E-therapy requires computer mediated technologies while face to face counseling requires a physical room with chairs and table. An online therapist will require basic technological competences to handle and manage technological and technical aspects of the online medium such as; confidentiality of online sessions, internet or connectivity issues and the security of clients' data and records. The online counselling skills differs from face to face counselling for instance some skills such as observation of the nonverbal cues and SOLER may not apply in the online therapy. SOLER refers to attending skills where the therapist is supposed to sit squarely with an open posture, leaning forward, maintaining eye contact with the client and being relaxed.

Online counselling processes are different because they entail initial establishment of initial relationship, initial reading of the client's first email, orientation to online counselling, structuring via website and emails. Sometimes these processes can be slower than face to face counselling. One of the common theories is cognitive behavioral theory.

1.6 Is E-Therapy appropriate for everyone?

It is important to note that E-Therapy is not appropriate for everyone and some examples of such cases are as follows;

i. If someone is already in face-to-face counselor, they can only turn to E-Therapy with the same counselor. If one is presently working with another counselor or therapist, it would be important to discuss with him/her the motivation for trying out alternative service.

ii. Clients that are suicidal or that are in a crisis may not be appropriate for E-Therapy. This is because they may need help immediately. Most online counsellors may delay to respond to an email, and this may take long for someone in crisis. In most cases such clients are retained in a counselling facility until help is found either in a hospital or family support.

iii. Those with severe and enduring mental health conditions. For example cases of schizophrenia, depression, personality disorder, etc. Such clients are not in touch with reality and may not benefit from online counselling.

iv. Those under the age of 18. Often times they may need parental consent which sometimes is a challenge to obtain online or even tell its authenticity.

1.7 Who may benefit from E-Therapy services?

Just as there are individuals whom are not appropriate for E-Therapy, there are those who may benefit more from this mode of counseling, compared to the face to face one. These include;

i. Those who may be worried about seeing a counselor face to face, or may not want to wait longer for an appointment

- ii. Those who are very busy, working long hours or travelling a lot and are unable to commit themselves to regular face-to-face appointments
- iii. Those who may be housebound for some reason, perhaps with a disability, or caring after people they can't leave behind, for example small children or the elderly just to mention but a few
- iv. Those who may be in isolation due to corona virus infection and are in a stable state to hold a conversation.
- v. Those who are deaf, online counselling saves the need to seek an interpreter, and may also be useful where both the counsellor and the client do not use sign language.

1.8 Advantages/Strengths and Disadvantages/Limitations of E-Therapy

Strengths

E-Therapy is convenient, it has increased accessibility and it is affordable. one can access counseling right from home or a convenient place for him or her. One does not have to travel so it saves on commuter fee. E- Therapy also has the potential to serve people with limited mobility, time restrictions, and limited access to counseling services. It can also benefit people living in remote locations or areas that lack access to an appropriate therapist.

Unlike in face to face counselling where a client is limited to one or two counselors in the facility it allows clients to choose from a larger pool of counselors and ensures they find one best suited to their needs.

With online counseling, there are no concerns that one will be seen walking to a counselor's office which means some kind of privacy.

Online therapy communications may have the potential advantage of enhanced self-reflection and ownership of the therapeutic process gained through the act of writing. Once ongoing contact between client and therapist has been established, there is an opportunity for both parties to enter what Suler (2002) called the "zone of reflection." For example, in an asynchronous e-

mail exchange, the normal process of therapy is mediated by the text, allowing both writers to pay close attention to their own process while still engaged in a dialogue.

Writing is therapeutic, this blends well with journaling when under pressure or have faced a stressful situation. Encouraging a client to write and re-write his/her feelings and express them is a great experience. He/she can write emotional experience on an e-mail and reflect on what he/she has written this is helpful. There can also be an enhanced sense of emotional containment, because the client is able to set up the pace, tone, volume, and parameters of self-disclosure (Suler,2000).

A therapist can take advantage of available informational websites, therefore one can refer a client to documents which contain helpful information relevant to the client's issues, an example of such issues includes; self-esteem and anger management therefore the client becomes more knowledgeable and also get new ideas on how to deal with the situation.

E-Therapy may cause disinhibition effect to a client; where the clients feel free to express and disclose their issues. It encourages client's therapeutic expressions and self-reflection. There is also a high level of honesty and self-disclosure, an example is where one is bullied leading to low self-esteem and he/she is wondering will the therapist handle me like the bully? The online counseling enhances sharing since there is no physical contact.

The communication can be recorded and one can retrieve the information with ease. Unlike what one experiences in the face to face counseling, one will have to recall what they said in a session.

Limitations

i. There is reduced interpersonal quality, a most strong argument against online counseling. One frequently noted challenge to the process of online therapy is the missing non-verbal cues. There is no access to the nonverbal behaviors apart from what a client would report; that are undeniably important ingredients in the counseling process. This limitation may rule out highly experiential therapeutic approaches that necessitate face to face counseling.

ii. Physical closeness is lacking in online counseling. This takes away a significant component necessary for therapy. Physical attachment enhances therapeutic relationship for example warmth, safety, presence, and support.

iii. E- therapy creates a potential for misunderstanding in the absence of spontaneous clarification especially in the asynchronous communication. One can misread or misunderstand the content. Clients with poor ego strength or paranoid tendencies may suffer from the loss of reassuring visual and auditory cues. For therapists lacking appropriate training in text-based communication, important information about the client may remain “between the lines,” with the real issues evading assessment. The increased room for error in online assessment makes traditional diagnosis virtually impossible and limits the therapist to making provisional hypotheses.

iv. Personal information can fall into the wrong hands through hacking sites that are supposedly secure. Majority of the people who oppose online counseling cite this as a major concern. The confidentiality of communications and client records may not be secure. Without special precautions, there are a number of key security issues in the process of online counseling (Zack, 2004). Technology has the potential to keep client records more secure than conventional systems, but without awareness of Internet protocols and utilization of encryption solutions, online therapists may inadvertently increase the risk of divulging sensitive information.

v) Time delay is a technical challenge if the online therapy is conducted via e-mail. Clients may wonder about the meaning of unexplained delays in a therapist’s response. Ultimately, although time delay can be good (time to think about and digest responses), it also can increase anxiety, leading to “black hole phenomenon.” Suler (2002a)

vi) Skill deficiency this applies to both therapist and client must be reasonably good writers and typists, and need to be computer literate to manage the medium (Stofle, 2001; Zack, 2002). The effectiveness of online therapy could be lost on those not comfortable expressing themselves in writing. The medium appears best suited to those who value written self-expression and have the creative independence it takes to hold up their end of the written dialogue.

vi) Crisis Intervention; in the context of asynchronous there are significant problems that can surface when a client becomes suicidal/homicidal or the therapist is otherwise concerned about the client's safety. There can be no certainty of an immediate e-mail response from the therapist, so the ability to reliably deal with crisis is challenging.

vii) Cultural clashes; due to technology, the world has become a global village E- therapy can be affected by crossing of cultures, time zones, and social systems. If it appears a therapeutic relationship is prone to conflict of interest, misunderstanding, or compromises the client's needs, then ease of access may prove to be a secondary consideration.

viii) Verifying clients' identities can be a challenge for online therapy. This is another reason why professional online therapy often makes identifying and emergency contact information a prerequisite for intake. Most Web sites require a password before the client can access the Web-site's interactive communication system.

1.9 Summary

In this lecture, you have had an opportunity of see all the aspects of the course; you have been introduced to the foundation of the course. We have discussed the key terminologies in the context of E-Therapy. We have differentiated between face-to-face counseling and E-Therapy. We have also identified a category of people who may not benefit from E-Therapy and those who may benefit.

References

Core Textbook:

Evans. J. (2009). Online Counselling and Guidance skills: A practical Resource for Trainers and Practitioners. London. SAGE Publications Ltd.

Kraus, R., Stricker, G. and Speyer, C. (2010). Online Counselling: A Handbook for Mental Health Professionals. Academic Press.

Other References:

Anthony, K. and Nagel, D.M. (2010). Therapy Online: A practical guide. London: Sage.

BACP Good Practice in Action 047: Ethical Framework Supplementary Guidance: Working Online (2015) Lutterworth: BACP.

- Bond, T. (2015). *Standards and Ethics in Counselling in Action*. 4th ed. London: Sage.
- Buckingham, D. (2013). Making Sense of the ‘Digital Generation’: Growing Up with Digital Media. *Self and Society: An International Journal for Humanistic Psychology*, 40(3), 7–15.
- Dowling, M., & Rickwood, D. (2013). Online counselling and therapy for mental health problems: A systematic review of individual synchronous interventions using chat. *Journal of*
- Jones, G. and Stokes, A. (2009). *Online Counselling: A handbook for practitioners*. Palgrave Macmillan. 2009. *Technology in Human Services*, 31(1), 1-21.
- Dowling, M., & Rickwood, D. (2014). Experiences of counsellors providing online chat counselling to young people. *Australian Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 24(2), 183-196.
- Grohol, J. M. (1999). Best Practices of e-therapy. Definition and Scope of e-therapy. <http://psychcentral.com/best/best3.htm>.
- Jones, G. and Stokes, A. (2009). *Online Counselling: A handbook for practitioners*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mallen, M., Jenkins, I., Vogel, D., & Day, S. (2011). Online counselling: An initial examination of the process in a synchronous chat environment. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 11(3), 220-227
- Suler, J. (2004). The online disinhibition effect. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 7(3), 321-326
- <https://www.theraplatform.com/blog/266/how-to-build-the-therapeutic-relationship-in-the-teletherapy-modality>.
- Rochlen A, Zack J, Speyer, C. (2004). Online therapy: review of relevant definitions, debates, and current empirical support. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 60 (3):269-283.
- Wong, K., Bonn, G., Tam, C., & Wong, C. (2018). Preferences for online and/or face to face counselling among university students in Malaysia. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9(64), 1- 5.