

E-THERAPY

Lecture 3

Online therapeutic relationships using asynchronous
and synchronous

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Establishing online therapeutic relationships using asynchronous and synchronous

Lecture Three Outline

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3.1 Introduction

In this lecture, we shall focus on how to establish online therapeutic relationship, identify the necessary conditions for establishing therapeutic relationship online. We will discuss the practicalities of establishing online therapeutic relationship and identify factors that can interrupt an online therapeutic relationship.

3.2 Expected Learning Outcomes

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

- a) Explain how online therapeutic relationship is established
- b) Discuss the practicalities of establishing online relationship
- c) Identify factors that are likely to interrupt online therapeutic relationship

3.3 What is online therapeutic relationship?

The therapeutic relationship can be broadly defined as the collaboration between client and therapist to facilitate psychological change (Leibert, 2011). According to Dowling, (2015), therapeutic relationship comprises of three components, these are; bond, task and goals. The term bond refers to the development of reciprocal positive feelings between client and therapist, while the term task refers to the agreement between client and therapist on the therapeutic interventions that will be used during the sessions. The term goal refers to the agreement between client and therapist on the intervention's objectives.

Establishing therapeutic relationship is essential for successful client outcomes in therapy. It helps to retain clients in the setting, it adds to their motivation, promotes their disclosures, and allows for a safe space to do the therapy work. Face to face expose clients to a therapeutic setting and office space, which provides the foundation for building a therapeutic relationship. But behind a screen can make both the therapist and client feel less connected or most distant during the therapeutic process.

3.4. Establishing online therapeutic relationship

Supporting clients in an online context is comparative to face to face working, when seeking to establish therapeutic relationship. It initiates the development of empathy and understanding which in turn facilitates the process of relating successfully and the achievement of a positive pathway for the interaction and online therapeutic relationship.

It is important to note that the potential for establishing and maintaining an online relationship can be largely determined by the length of time and the context in which the practitioner is working online with a client (chat, e-mail, video camera, or voice over internet), and also the duration of the on-going relationship. Some modes of online counselling are more interactive than others, for example the synchronous ones such as skype, video conferencing and voice over internet which enhances a richer relationship compared to an asynchronous mode such as e-mail and chat.

3.5 Necessary conditions for establishing a therapeutic relationship

As in all counselling relationships, the counsellor is guided by his or her theoretical orientation, following which the following conditions can be observed;

- i. Provide a therapeutic space- give the client a personal space so that he or she can feel safe and is able to explore their issues during therapy. This means that you allow the client to share that information which they feel comfortable sharing without feeling coerced or judged.
- ii. Make a commitment to being fully empathetic, and congruent. This causes the client to feel understood, valued and not judged.
- iii. Privacy and confidentiality; online counselling allows the client flexibility in that the client can choose to work from a location of his or her choice. This necessitates informing clients of their need to take steps to ensure their privacy regarding confidentiality of the content of an online interaction. When the client may not be able to feel relaxed and free to discuss their concerns from their chosen location; as a practitioner, you should offer support and guidance to help the client locate a more appropriate place from which to interact online. In a face to face set up, this would not be a challenge and would naturally be catered for.

3.5 The practicalities of developing an online therapeutic relationship

During this first meeting, it is crucial to explore with the client their level of comfort when it comes to online interaction. Some of the things that you may discuss with the client are his or her confidence in using the key board. Clients who chose to have counselling online are usually familiar with computer mediated technology.

What will be the initial greeting? How do you determine the words that you will use to open the dialogue? Will a formal greeting leave the client feeling inhibited? How about an informal one....will it lead to the client perceiving the practitioner as less professional?

It is beneficial to open with a greeting such as “hello” or “Dear” for instance if counselling is taking place via email and subsequently follow the client’s lead in their individual preferences.

With time, the client becomes more at ease and is able to adjust the greeting and communication style within the sessions.

Failure for the client to adjust may be an indication that the client may be experiencing some level of discomfort which could be due to a number of reasons, such as; the online interaction in itself, the process of counselling, the practitioner, or simply the fact that the client is more formal in his or her style of communication. These aspects should not be lost on the counsellor and should provide important insight which can inform the process of therapy, and also enrich the online relationship. Below are the practicalities of developing an online therapeutic relationship;

- i. Adopting an assessment process.
- ii. Agreeing a contract for the working arrangements which relate to an ethical and supportive relationship prior to commencing sessions.
- iii. Providing information regarding the extent of confidentiality within the relationship.
- iv. Providing access to client resources which offers guidelines and support relating to online interaction and professional relationships, including information relating to security and privacy of online interaction and data storage.
- v. Consistency in the professional manner and model of supportive interactions.
- vi. Reliability of the practitioner; giving adequate notification of pending absences due to holidays and so on, where cancellations are necessary, informing clients appropriately, being punctual and prepared for a session.
- vii. Accessibility of the practitioner: providing alternative contact details to clients in the event of a technology difficulty or unexpected absences of the practitioner.
- viii. Facilitating a sense of containment for clients where difficult emotions or experiences and memories are recalled.
- ix. Holding the information content of sessions with sufficient fluency that it can later be recalled, as required, to assist in an exploration of subsequent material presented by the client.
- x. Maintaining appropriate professional boundaries.

It is important to note that there may be variations depending on the area of specialization the practitioner is working in.

3.6 Online counselling therapeutic process

In online counselling, just like in face to face counselling, to achieve therapeutic relationship a structured process is important. It enables counsellors to conduct every session with clear goal in mind on aspects such as building rapport, identifying issue and developing intervention plan. By

following step-by-step process of counselling, counsellors are able to conduct sessions more effectively and with clear direction. A literature review that was conducted on the various counselling process used by online counsellors, identified several online counselling processes utilized by counsellors (Asri, et.al (2020). The process included; Cyber-counselling process that was introduced by Salleh et al. (2015), it involved five main themes and their subsequent subthemes. These themes includes; the initial establishment of a virtual relationship, structuring, the development of a text relationship, text reinforcement, and termination of the process.

For the first theme, entailed, receiving and reading clients' first emails which are reviewed few times before replying to these emails and the counsellor introducing themselves to clients.

The second theme includes the counsellors beginning to explain the general view, process and rules of the counselling sessions as well as to retrieve informed consent from clients. The third theme begins with two major themes which are developing therapeutic client-counsellor relationship and focusing on written email (or chat) texts. Various counselling skills such as paraphrasing and open-ended questions are utilized in this stage which are incorporated and adopted from face-to-face counselling. Then for the fourth theme, text reinforcement; counsellors begin a plan of actions and interventions after identifying main problems. Finally, for termination theme, the counsellor concludes sessions by reviewing the whole session from the beginning, making clients aware of the goals agreed and achieved, as well as the progress and signs of changes observed.

The second online counselling process was introduced by Amichai-Hamburger et al. (2014). The study incorporated the counsellors' utilization of the Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) in face-to-face counselling in online therapy. The process is divided into three broad phases which are; initial phase, middle phase and termination phase. The initial phase involves the therapist assessing client's clinical status that also includes motivation and expectations for treatment, whereby treatment contract is set. During the middle phase, the client's unhelpful thoughts, emotions, behaviours and interpersonal relationships are explored and addressed by the counsellor. Finally, the termination phase of CBT online therapy involves the clients gaining new skills, and learning methods in preventing relapses.

The third process was introduced by Chardon, Bagraith and King (2011), the counselling process in virtual setting is adapted from the Egan's Skilled Helper Model. The process involves five stages and eleven steps. The five stages are; orientation, problem clarification, goal exploration, action planning, and termination. The orientation entails introducing a client to service and counsellor's role is defined. The clients' past history of being helped is explored. Stage two problem clarifications; story telling stage where the client is invited to talk and spell out problem situation in detail. In this stage emotions and feelings are explored. The next stage known as challenging, the counsellor assists clients to become aware of their blind spots in their mind sets, thinking or behaviour, lastly, leverage stage where on issues are chosen for client to work on. Third stage is goal exploration where possibilities for a better future are explored for the client to develop a sense of direction, what follows is crafting goals; specific goals are formulated, refined and reviewed. The client commits to a plan is explored and incentives are found to commit to a better future. In the fourth stage action planning, where the counsellor helps client identify possible strategies to accomplish goals. Finally, termination of the counselling session is summarized, future contact discussed.

3.7 Factors influencing the potential to demonstrate interest and attention when interacting online with a client

These factors fall into the following categories; environmental, personal and technological

1. Environmental factors; the environment from which a practitioner operates determines to a great extent the level of interest and attention that the client will receive during an online interaction. The counsellor needs to create an environment where he or she is not influenced by personal and external distractions. The counsellor needs to clear his or her mind of any personal issues that may interfere with counselling in a process known as "bracketing". This should be done before and during counselling. As a result, the counsellor is able to fully be present with a client without distractions. There is proper engagement with the client and the focus is on the content within the session.

2. Personal factors; to ensure that the session will not be disrupted; the online counsellor should adopt a work environment similar to the face to face one. This will ensure that throughout the

counselling process, the counsellor will be fully engaged with the client. Distractions may occur from the client's end. To avoid such, the counsellor may consider establishing certain boundaries with clients at the onset or provide written guidelines outline how the client can avoid or manage distractions during counselling.

3. Technological factors; the electronics used during online counselling should be in a good condition to avoid interrupting the flow and continuation of a session. Such disruptions impede the ability of both parties in engaging in a manner that can allow for an online relationship to develop.

3.8 Summary

In this lecture we have focused on establishing online therapeutic relationship. We have looked at the meaning of therapeutic relationship from E-Therapy context. We have identified the practicalities of developing an online therapeutic relationship. We have explored the various processes used in online counselling and finally, we have discussed the factors that can interfere with an online therapeutic relationship.

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