

E-THERAPY

Lecture 4

Online counseling skills

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Lecture Four Outline

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4.1 Introduction

In this lecture, we will explore the various online counseling skills, such as online listening and attending skills. We will discuss online skills to address the absence of non-verbal feedback and elaborate on how one can fine tuning face to face in online counseling.

4.2 Expected Learning Outcomes

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

- a) Describe the various online counseling skills
- b) Demonstrate an understanding of online counseling skills by respond to a simulated email

4.3 Online counseling skills

Counseling skills are soft (interpersonal) and hard (technical) attributes that a counselor puts to use in order to best help their clients work through personal issues and overcome obstacles that are currently preventing them from being fully functioning persons. According to Wong et al 2018, the following skills are used by online therapist; rapport-building, use of emoticons, reflection of feelings and content. Other skills include; showing or expressing empathy through written words, asking questions (open-ended and close-ended questions), use of emotional bracketing, online communication skills (e.g. typing skills) and computer skills.

According to Holmes and Kozlowski (2016), the most commonly used online counselling skills include open-ended questions, paraphrasing, positive regard, demonstrating empathy and summarizing. These skills are also used in face-to-face counseling.

In the E-Therapy context initial online conversations may center on the client's familiarity and comfort with using internet facilitated services. Asynchronous online counselling occurs at a much slower pace than face to face counselling since more time is needed for the counsellor to respond to the client. It is in written form and it leaves less time available for small talk.

Online counselling may be a very new interaction for the client. The counselor should therefore center initial conversations on discussing and exploring the client's level of comfort with online counseling.

The online counsellor needs to be equipped with skills in order to cater for the absence of the non- verbal information. The following are the online skills to address the nonverbal feedback.

i) The counselor is expected to Model nonverbal behavior; the counselor therefore the counselor intentionally models the non-verbal behavior in the cyber space, by writing his or her thoughts and feelings and encouraging the client to do the same.

Affect can be conveyed with words and symbols. For example one can write; <<smiling>>, <<grinning>>, <<sad>>, etc. In other instances, the counselor can use symbols for example emoticons to express an emotion in the chat. For example;

Counselor: "Nice to meet you Joyce" * shake hands* my name is Jane.....how may I be of help to you today?

This way the counselor is able to convey a common expression of greeting that otherwise would have been lost online.

ii) Use of online language; there is need for counselors to familiarize themselves with common and popular online communication such as LOL (laugh out loud), AFK (away from keyboard), as well as emoticons or characters convey emotions such as; sadness, anger, happiness, etc. It is important to note that these expressions vary with age and experience. Among the young people you will find expressions such as, WU (what's up?) or POV (parent over shoulder). This portrays that the language of online communication is one that keeps on evolving and is unique for different cultures.

Often times, clients who are attracted to online counseling may be familiar with online forums such as chat rooms, online groups, and message boards. They may therefore communicate in the manner described above with ease and fluidity. There will be occasions when a counselor fails to

understand the meaning of an expression. It is always a good idea to ask for the meaning from the client.

Online terms and expressions come in and out of fashion and vary immensely depending on factors such as age, familiarity with mode of counseling and cultures.

iii) Effective use of questioning and probing; the way to gaining a deeper understanding of the client's stories is through effective questioning. Effective questioning also stimulates the client to think creatively about their concerns in counseling. The slower pace of online counseling however necessitates that the counselor asks minimum questions. This way the counselor avoids flooding the client with questions before he/she has time to respond to the previous questions.

Online counseling relies on well-paced questions much more so because of the focused nature of sessions. Given that typing is a slower process than talking, content that can take one hour in a face to face counseling session is usually condensed to 20 minutes in online counseling.

Questions are helpful in the therapeutic environment because they allow you to learn more about your client. The type of questions that you ask will set the tone of the session and the entire counseling process. Questions occur in two forms.

A closed question is the practice of asking a question that can be answered as a 'yes' or 'no'. Closed questions should generally be avoided in the counseling relationship, as they do not encourage deeper exploration. An open question is necessary to gather information. An open question is one that cannot be answered with a simple 'yes' or 'no' and it requires reflection or exploration on the client's end. Every open question should be intentional and therapeutic.

iv) Reflection of feelings is used in the counselling process to communicate understanding of emotions. When combined with a paraphrase, confirms the accuracy of, encourages discussion of feelings. Reflections allow clients to hear the feelings they have just expressed. Sometimes you have to look for the descriptive feeling in a client's statement.

Use of reflective online counseling responses are essential because clients perceive that the counselor understands them. Since online counseling denies the counselor the opportunity to express warmth through body language and eye contact, online sessions cover small amounts of

material. Well-placed reflective responses are therefore critical to this practice. The clients and the counselors should feel free to check the accuracy of their statements and modify them as needed. Even if the client and the counselor were interacting miles apart with no body language to guide the session, the counselor is still able to convey an understanding of a range of emotions from the client.

v) Active listening skills; this is the ability to capture and understand the messages clients communicate as they tell their stories, whether those messages are transmitted verbally or non-verbally. Clients want more than the physical presence of the counsellor; they want the counsellor to be present psychologically, socially and emotionally. Active listening involve listening to and understanding the clients' verbal messages and also listening to and understanding the client in context: People are more than the sum of their verbal and non-verbal messages. Therefore, the counselor should listen to the whole person in the context of his or her social settings.

vi) Empathy is the ability to recognize and acknowledge the feelings of another person without experiencing that same emotions it is an attempt to understand the world of the client by temporarily 'stepping into his or her shoes.' (Dyk, 2005). Empathy means placing yourself in the client's situation while remaining objective. It requires the counselor to be sensitive, understanding and non-judgmental.

According to Egan (1998), basic empathy involves listening to clients, understanding them in such a way that they might understand themselves more fully and act on their understanding. In order to do this, the counsellor must set aside his or her own frame of reference and try to see the world from the client's point of view.

vii) Reflective skills; can be defined as mirroring or reflecting back to the client exactly what he or she is conveying to the counsellor. The reflective comment includes not only the specific content of the message but also the implied, stated or underlying feelings. In order to reflect, the counsellor needs to listen to the feelings behind the words of the client, and not only to the words. The reflective comment facilitates an atmosphere of understanding and makes clients feel heard, valued, and safe enough to share more of themselves often on a deeper level.

These skills include:

1. Restatement is simply playing back to the client what they have said word for word. It acts as a mirror. It can build a stronger client therapist relationship. Restating a client's statement allows the counselor to better understand what a client has just said and to gain further clarity, if counselor has gotten it wrong.
2. Paraphrasing means saying the same thing in your own words. You summarize what has been said in your own words. This is especially helpful if the client has given a lot of information or is upset and incoherent. You can help clarify what has been said by paraphrasing the most important part of what the client has said.

3. Summarizing is the process of putting together all that has been talked about during parts or all of the counseling session. It attempts to draw together the main threads of what has been discussed. It clarifies what has been accomplished and what still needs to be done. It serves to; organize the structure of the interview and check the accuracy of understanding. Summarizing enables the counselor to get a better understanding of the things, and enables the client to see what progress has been made.

viii) Genuineness; being genuine is creating congruence between yourself and your words. Every therapist is different and will provide a different therapeutic process. It is important to remain genuine in all counseling techniques.

ix) Unconditional Positive Regard; this is accepting your client for who they are. It is a means of expressing warmth and respect.

x) Closing the session; to effectively and smoothly close an online session requires that counselors be aware of time constraints and to allow for ample processing at the end of the session. One needs to begin closing 10-15 minutes before the session is scheduled to end if not earlier.

Illustration

Counsellor: it was nice working with you this evening and I look forward to our next session on Wednesday and hearing about how you are progressing and hopefully further exploring this concern.

Client: all right.

Counsellor: End of session*

Another way of ending the session is to give the client the opportunity to share any thoughts about concerns that may have emerged during the session that may need attention.

Developing and maintaining attunement with a client.

In a face to face exchange, a counsellor would be observing the client and noting the following;

- Verbal content
- Pitch of voice
- Fluidity of speech, pauses, or gaps in between subject matter or feelings expression

- Pacing of verbal dialogue

Some of these skills cannot translate into online working for obvious reasons, nonetheless it is possible to 'fine tune' those skills which are adaptable into online work. As skilled listeners, we have more than auditory senses to utilize when 'listening' to a client.

Verbal content; this becomes the presented 'written narrative'. In as much as the counselor will not, hear the client's voice (except in the use of an online microphone system, or videoconferencing), there is the opportunity to read and 'hear' the verbal content through the conveyed written narrative.

Pitch of voice; pitch of voice can be experienced in an online context as a feature of a client presenting written words in different font or colours, highlighting words in bold using exclamation marks and question marks. For example, HELLO!!!oooooooo.....the use of fullstops can signify a sense of the other's online voice becoming fainter.

Words can be adapted in this manner to illustrate a written pitch, depth, or quality and provide an indication of what the sender is trying to convey, either consciously or unconsciously. It is vital not to make assumptions that an absence of written narrative indicates the client is not experiencing a range of feelings.

Fluidity of speech and pauses or gaps in between subject matter or feeling expression; when working in the context of asynchronous exchanges, the writer may punctuate a break or ending in the flow of a subject area by beginning a new paragraph, and may even leave the previous subject matter incomplete or with an abrupt ending. This may provide an indication of where it has been difficult to continue or complete an area of thought or discussion, which could relate to the level of disturbance the client is experiencing while communicating. This may also indicate that the client has a learning difficulty or mental health issue which affects the flow of their thought process. Still one should avoid jumping into conclusions. Full stops (.....), may also be used in the middle of a sentence to signify pauses in thought or a change in the flow of content during one line of text.

Pacing of verbal dialogue; in online counselling, this aspect of face to face translates to 'pacing of narrative'. This however varies between synchronous and asynchronous communication. In

synchronous communication, the pacing of narrative is clearly more apparent as both parties are communicating in real time. In asynchronous communication, sometimes client's presentation may signify aspects like detachment where there lacks opening greetings. Lack of opening greetings could also be an indication of the hurried nature in which the mail was written.

Simulated client email

Using the online counseling skills, respond to Job's email.

Greetings,

My name is Job.

I have been currently going through a lot at my work of place. 2 months ago, I got a promotion at my place of work and I happened to have been moved to another department. Immediately issues began at my the new office. My assistant manager who had eyed my current position for a long time started fighting me and even framing me for things I have not done. This has affected me soooo much! because most of my juniors in the office have teamed up with this guy and are working hard to see me removed out of my position.

Because of this, I am not able to meet my department goals. This has led me to doing all the work by myself because the company has to run and perform as it ought to. Because of my long working hours in the office and the stress I am facing at work, its affecting my marriage and relationship with my children.

How can you help me?

Job.

Initial conversation; extract from a synchronous counseling session

Juliet says: Hi Joseph.....are you okay to begin our first meeting..... and is there anything that you would like to discuss before we start?

Joseph says: Hello. I would like to ask a couple of questions first if that's alright. I am still a little concerned about the confidentiality of online counselling. Can you confirm if anyone else would have access to my session content?

.....

Juliet says: Would you like to start by saying a little about what has brought you to counselling and anything that feels particularly relevant to talk about today?

Summary

In this lecture we have discussed the online counseling skills, we have looked at the online skills that a therapist can use in the of non-verbal feedback; we have explored how a therapist can develop and maintaining attunement with an online client. Finally, we have applied online counselling to a simulated online client email and have familiarized ourselves with a synchronous extract.

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