

# E-THERAPY

## Lecture 5

Online Assessment and contracting

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## **Online assessment and contracting**

### **Lecture Five Outline**

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### **5.1 Introduction**

In this lecture, we will gain insight into; the process of assessment, contracting, and confidentiality. We will discuss client suitability for online counseling and explore the details of an online agreement form.

### **5.2 Expected Learning Outcomes**

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

- a) Determine client suitability to online counseling.
- b) Discuss the benefits of contracting.

### **5.3 Online assessment**

Assessment is the process by which counselors gather the information they need to form a holistic view of their clients and the problems with which they present. It is an initial session which is an important part of the therapeutic process and will help the therapist make an assessment of the client's circumstances.

In the context of E-Therapy assessing a client's suitability for online counseling is important. Conducting an assessment without the physical presence of a client brings additional considerations due to;

- Potential difficulties in substantiating background information
- Systems required for determining the authenticity and suitability of an applicant for online support.

Online practitioners have a responsibility to establish clear criteria relating to assessment procedures and identifying appropriate circumstances where online arrangement is suited to their client needs and presenting issues.

### **5.4 Client suitability for online assessment**

Client suitability refers to a variety of factors, including the person's preferences regarding online therapy, how suggestible the person is within a particular communication modality, his or her skills in communicating within that modality, and the potentially therapeutic aspects of that modality for the person.

Online practitioners have a responsibility to establish clear criteria relating to assessment procedures and identifying appropriate circumstances where online arrangement is suited to their client needs and presenting issues.

#### **What to consider when assessing the client's suitability for online counseling.**

According to Suler (2001), an online therapist may need to consider the following questions to determine client suitability for online counseling.

1. What communication methods are adequate or preferable for assessing the client? The therapist has a variety of communication methods for conducting the initial assessment of the client; in-person, video-conferencing, phone, email, and instant messaging or chat. Clients may have a preference for this initial contact, which may in itself be of diagnostic significance. Clients interested in online therapy may prefer a text-only setting for this first contact. They may feel more comfortable in that setting, be more able to express themselves, or wish to maintain some anonymity.

2. How might the person's computer skills, knowledge, platform, and internet access affect the therapy?

The ability to benefit from online therapy will be partly determined by the client's computer skills and knowledge, especially if the communication setting involves installing and learning new software and/or hardware. If the person seems to be communicating efficiently and accurately within the setting of choice, no further assessment of the person's skills may be necessary.

3. How well is the person suited for the reading and writing involved in text communication (email, chat)?

If the therapist will be working with the client via typed text, assessing the client's experience with reading and writing is important. A person's reading and writing skills may not be equivalent, but both are necessary for text-based therapy. Some people may prefer reading over writing, or vice versa, which could have a significant impact on text-based communication. Assess the person's motor and cognitive skills for reading and writing, as well as the person's psychological experience of these activities.

4. How might previous and concurrent mental health treatment affect online therapy?

If the person has been in therapy before, this will have created some impressions and expectations of what therapy is like. It is important to assess how these impressions and expectations are influencing the person's attitudes about online therapy, especially if the communication method will be different than that used in the previous therapy.

5. How might personality type, presenting complaint, and diagnosis influence the person's suitability for online therapy?

Diagnostic testing can be valuable in assessing the psychopathological factors that might influence the efficacy of online treatment. If it's not possible to arrange in-person testing, online tests could be an easy-to-access supplement to the assessment interview. Hopefully, in the near future, professionally managed web sites will become available that offer diagnostic tests as an aid for online therapists. When using online tests, consider such factors as accessibility, affordability, user-friendliness, security of test results, compliance with ethical principles, reliability, and validity.

6. How might physical and medical factors affect online therapy?

Does the person have any visual, auditory, speech, or motor disabilities, or any chronic medical condition? Is the person on medications? If so, how might these disabilities and medications affect the person's motivation for and ability to utilize online therapy? Some people are drawn to text communication, where there is no face-to-face contact, because they prefer to hide their physical appearance.

7. How might cross-cultural issues affect the therapy?

It is very likely that the online clinician will receive requests for therapy by people from other countries and cultures. In these cases clinicians must determine whether communication will be significantly hindered by differences in language, and whether they are familiar enough with the person's culture in order to effectively conduct psychotherapy. Although cross-cultural issues are also important in in-person therapy, such issues may be unique and magnified in an online therapy when the client is living in a country that is geographically distant from the therapist.

8. What other online resources might be appropriate to incorporate into a treatment package?

Online therapy will not be appropriate for all people seeking help. In these cases, the online practitioner should have the skills and resources to make appropriate referrals. When the practitioner determines that high risk or other factors indicate that a person is best served by seeking immediate treatment within his or her locality (e.g., for suicide prevention, medication assessment, etc.), such a referral or assistance in finding an appropriate referral should be provided.

## **5.5 What would disqualify a client?**

There may be a variety of reasons why assessment outcomes conclude that it would not be appropriate to offer online counseling services to clients and this may be based on one or more of the following factors. If a client;

- Possess an insufficient level of computer literacy to gain the required input from the service or achieve a positive outcome.
- Have limited use of the language in which the service is offered.
- Present with disabilities which restrict effective access to support through an online medium.
- Demonstrate reluctance or show unwillingness to comply with contractual requirements of the service.
- Present to the service in a manner which indicates that appropriate duty of care cannot be provided.
- Present in a therapeutic context with personal issues, mental health issues, or disabilities which show contra-indications to online counselling being conducive to their emotional well-being or stability.
- Present to a service where legal stipulations indicate that client confidentiality could be compromised by the nature of presenting issues, or the practitioner may find themselves breaching legal requirements by proceeding.

In certain instances, assessment will feature as an ongoing process during the early stages of engaging with a client. For example when there are indications that the medium of communication being used is unsuitable at contact. It is important to inform the client that a process of continuing assessment is occurring and may lead to a referral if online exchanges are concluded to be unsuitable. Where an assessment decision is formed and concludes that online support is unsuitable for a client, an appropriate referral point should be offered and a full explanation provided to the client.

## **5.6 Online risk assessment**

In a face to face context, there is the obvious advantage of gaining visual and auditory indicators which highlight where a client may be entering a phase of instability. When conducting an online practice, the practitioner is reliant on the client to provide indicators of this during an online exchange, in conjunction with drawing upon their online attunement with the client and online counseling skill expertise to determine where a process of risk assessment is required.

In a therapeutic context, many counseling and mental health services utilize a risk assessment model at the point of a client entering into the service, and can draw from the results of this to assess the level of risk at varying points of therapeutic relationship. For example CORE system (Clinical Outcomes Routine Evaluation).

CORE provides the opportunity for client and therapist to determine risk in the pre-therapy stage and throughout the course of a contract, while at the same time being utilized as a tool for measuring clinical outcomes. Sometimes a client may disclose or give indications that they or other people are experiencing risk or are in danger. Upon such, the therapist can refer the client for face to face counseling. It is important to have risk-management plan which is also known as an 'intake form', allows you to identify any risks in advance, and so to help manage any clients who may be in danger. This should form part of your online counseling contract.

It is best practice to revisit the risk-management plan regularly (as part of your reviews), but always to keep previous versions too, so that you have a complete audit trail of your actions. This helps protect both the client and you as a professional. The information provides the basis of a risk assessment if you need to decide whether or not to break confidentiality.

Areas to ask the client about are:

- Current medications (researching these if you are not familiar with them)
- Underlying health issues
- Involvement with mental-health services
- Suicidal thoughts/plans/intent

The questions needed to elicit this information may feel very invasive, and it is therefore important to approach these in the right way, paying attention to your tone, and reminding the client of confidentiality and its limits. It also helps to explain why you need to collect this information. It can be helpful to use standard mental-health questionnaires. As well as providing evidence-based information to support your decision-making on whether or not it is safe and ethical to work with a particular client, using a standard tool as part of your assessment for all clients can help reduce the feeling of invasiveness.

As an online therapist, you may want to use one or more mental-health questionnaires as a tool in assessing risk and thus suitability for online therapy. The tools come in various forms, measuring depression (e.g. PHQ-9 and Beck's Depression Inventory), anxiety (e.g. GAD-7), stress (e.g. PSS) and overall mental wellbeing (e.g. CORE and WEMWBS).

Many of these include questions that relate to suicidal tendencies (e.g. in PHQ-9, there is 'Thoughts that you would be better off dead or of hurting yourself in some way', assessing suicidal ideation; and in CORE-10, there is 'I made plans to end my life', assessing suicidal planning). There are then specific instruments available to measure suicidal ideations for example, the Beck Scale for Suicidal Ideation. These assess how far along the suicidal continuum the client currently is, and so whether it would be more appropriate to see the client face-to-face (if possible) or to refer them to other services (the Samaritans, their GP, acute mental-health services etc).

## **Confidentiality**

This will be discussed under the following subtopics

I. Confidentiality of client data; there is a responsibility on the part of the practitioner to inform clients of security and privacy issues and providing guidelines on how to ensure the privacy of both synchronous and asynchronous exchanges. In these exchanges, it is necessary to adopt an encryption facility at the same time re-iterating guidelines where relevant regarding the maintenance of privacy and security.

II. Confidentiality of material relating to online exchanges; It is also essential to plan for administration, management and storage of client data in accordance with the legal and ethical requirements that relate to the sphere of practice and the country where the practice is based. This also holds the potential benefits of having a full record of online exchanges.

III. Sharing of client information and the content of online exchanges with other professional colleagues; where professional guidelines and contracts agreed with clients include the sharing of information and material generated from online exchanges, it is relevant to consider how such material will be disseminated. This could involve printing of material in a written format and forwarding on, or mailing electronically to a recipient. It is strongly advised to check all content of material sent for dissemination, and remove data which could compromise the boundaries of confidentiality agreed with clients.

## **5.7 Online Contracting**

In the context of E-therapy, the term contracting is viewed as a process that provides clarity and information during the initial stage of forming an online relationship with a client, whilst also establishing the responsibilities and adherence to service delivery by each party. In all areas of practitioner's engagement with online clients, there is a necessity to introduce boundaries which form the basis of a contract for the exchanges that will follow, including the issue of informed consent (Anthony and Goss, 2003). Such boundaries may include the frequency of exchanges available, number restrictions on word content in email exchanges, privacy and confidentiality issues, and so on. In addition to boundaries, there is a requirement for practitioners to provide information to clients which refers to their responsibilities as the professional delivering of service. The word contract can seem formal and off-putting for some. It may therefore be preferable to title this as an "online agreement" for work undertaken with clients. This can be posted on an online facility like the website, with clients being directed towards reading and acknowledging the requirements of both parties.

The benefits of contracting

The potential benefits of contracting are:

- Providing clearly defined boundaries on the limitations of service provided.

- Outlining any restrictions on the distribution of content from online exchanges by either party or the implications for breach of compliance.
- Identifying agreed alternative channels of communication that can be utilised in the event of technology or personal circumstances preventing contact through online exchanges.
- Providing a defined channel for addressing any misunderstandings or conflict which may arise in the course of online exchanges. In instances where conflicts or misunderstandings cannot be resolved, providing guidance on procedures to follow where external mediation or grievance resolution is sought.
- Stipulating the jurisdictional restrictions regarding the hearing of any complains, or grievances arising from the content of online exchanges.
- Clarification regarding appointment arrangements and payment (where applicable).

### **Example Client Contract Agreement – Therapeutic Context**

Online Counselling Agreement should comprise of;

About me:

My name is .....

What is online counselling?

What sort of issues can I contact you about?

*I am not able to provide online counselling to any person who is under the age of 18. If this applies to I can help with information on referral to other agencies providing face-to-face counselling services or online work which is specifically directed to a younger age group.*

What does the online counselling service offer?

What happens if I have to cancel the appointment, or I have computer/connection problems which prevent me keeping the appointment?

About the way I work

Confidentiality and Security

*For security reasons I would not advise that you send any therapeutic content in an 'open email'. I would recommend that you send it as a Word document attachment to your email using a password for further protection.*

Maintaining the privacy of your online exchanges with a counsellor

*Please ensure that you secure your computer and emails against unauthorised viewing by third parties. This may include adopting the use of password protection for all personal email accounts and documents etc. It is recommended that you do not engage in online counselling using a public computer where the content of exchanges could be viewed by others in the close proximity.*

**Guidelines for emergency contact**

Online counselling cannot provide an emergency service for clients.

Reasons for seeking online counselling?

What are you hoping to achieve from online counselling ?

How have you been coping with this problem until now?

Is there anything else that you think is important which we should know?

Please complete the following information below and return the agreement to me as an attachment if you would like to proceed with online counselling:

Full Name.....

Emergency contact number (in the event of technology breakdown):.....

GP's name and address: (contact is only applicable for situations where clients agree that contact is relevant due to emergency situations rising).....

.....

.....

Please 'sign electronically' here with your name if you both agree to working to the points within this agreement:.....

## 5.8 Summary

We have discussed the concept of online assessment, what to consider when assessing a client's suitability for online counseling. We have discussed online contracting and the benefits of contracting. We have studied how an online agreement form looks like.

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