

E-THERAPY

Lecture 8

PROFESSIONAL GUIDELINES FOR ONLINE PRACTICE

Dr. Ngure Jane

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Lecture Eight Outline

- 8.1 Introduction
- 8.2 Expected Learning Outcomes
- 8.3 Ethical practice in counselling
- 8.4 The purpose of ethical code
- 8.5 Ethical guidelines in online practice.
- 8.5 Summary

8.1 Introduction

In this lecture, we shall discuss the ethical practice in counselling, considering what is ethical and what is not ethical. We will discuss the purpose of ethical codes. We will also outline the appropriate recommendations for organizing an online practice in a manner, which complies with the ethical guidelines appropriate to a practitioner application of online counselling and guidance skills.

8.2 Expected Learning Outcomes

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

- a) Discuss professional guidelines for online practice.
- b) Discuss the different professional guidelines available.

8.3 Ethical practice in counselling

Counsellors are expected to offer a non-judgmental professional service, free from discrimination, honoring the individuality of the client. Counsellors should respect the essential humanity, worth and dignity of all people and these should be reflected in their work (Kohli and Das, 2008). The following are the components of ethical practice in counselling:

- Understanding and implementing ethical codes.
- Doing what is best for the client.
- Practicing the four core virtues: prudence, integrity, respectfulness, and benevolence.
- Realizing importance of intuition, integrity, and honest self-evaluation in ethical decisions
- Placing client welfare as paramount (Jackson, 2013).

Below are some of unethical behavior in counselling;

- Violation of confidentiality.
- Exceeding ones level of professional competence.
- Imposing ones values on a client.
- Sexual activities with a client.
- Certain conflicts of interests such as a dual relationship, where the role of the counsellor is combined to another relationship either personal or professional.

Ethical codes are the agreed upon standards of aspirational and mandatory behaviors and practices by the members of professional organizations such as the American Counselling Association (ACA) or the American Psychological Association (APA). These standards guide and inform the professional practice of members and promote the expectation that counsellors will protect their clients' welfare and freedom. Morals are defined as behaviors or actions that are based on particular groups' culture and values. Hence, morals are more generally defined and culturally influenced system of beliefs.

8.4 The Purpose of Ethical Codes

Ethical codes are a set of rules that develop to guide a professional practice. In counseling, numerous organizations like the ACA, APA and BACP have established codes that educate all

members of the organization on expected and acceptable ethical practice. Yet, ethical codes have many purposes beyond education.

Researchers in counselling have noted that ethical codes protect the public by publishing the expected standards of behavior and practice of professionals. Second, ethical codes can protect therapist when their performance or behavior is called into question. If the behavior in question is compliant to the ethical code, the counsellor behavior is more likely to be viewed as conforming to the standards. The ethical codes are a form of professional self-regulation when enforced with fidelity and accountability, deter governmental regulation. Finally, the aspirational components of the ethical codes can serve as a catalyst for improving practice by encouraging counsellors to seek more sophistication and accountability in their practice. Ethical codes are the ember of a society since they regulate behavior.

8.5 Ethical guidelines in online practice

The following guidelines relate to asynchronous and synchronous online communication with clients. They include service delivery using resources such as forums, discussion boards, distance learning programs for E-Therapy, one-on-one online counselling, online group counselling, online supervision, information and guidance support, and additional further reaching professional activities. It is important to note that guidelines will differ from country to country, and from organization to organization. It therefore calls upon the therapist in most instances to consider and take account of how various aspects of working online relate to their ethical stance and so take action accordingly. The following guidelines are commonly cited by various counselling organizations.

i) Competencies of practitioners who adopt the use of online counselling skills

Adopting the use of counselling skills in an online context, necessitates specialist competencies and enhanced skills development. In order to work professionally and successfully with clients electronically the following recommendations enable counsellors to provide appropriate professional conduct. The counsellor should therefore possess the following competencies:

- Proficiency in information and Technology (IT) skills, resolving internet technological issues, possess sufficient knowledge in the administration and storage of electronic

information and data to achieve service delivery that complies with ethical and legal requirements.

- Sufficiently competent in maintaining electronic records and client information to avoid the possibility of compromising confidentiality and security of data in relation to online practice.
- Experience and competence in the process of assessment and contracting with diverse client who present range of counselling issues.
- Sufficiently competent to consider the implications of appropriate assessment procedures for engaging with clients when transferring counselling skills to computer mediated services.
- Having the ability to effectively communicate online with clients, be aware of the dynamics in the online relation therefore provide a sense of containment for clients whilst also facilitating a positive outcome.

ii) Online practitioner skills training

According to BACP, practitioners should undergo further specialist training in online therapy such training should incorporate theoretical, practical and ethical considerations of online work and include experiential elements using at least email, forums and Internet Relay Chat (IRC). Experiential elements of any course should be conducted entirely online for the therapist to fully develop the ability to work with only an online presence. There are also differences between face-to-face and online contact with a client outside of a contracted relationship.

Because of the lack of visual and auditory cues, there are key theoretical and experiential concepts when working online that therapists need to consider beyond those involved in face- to -face therapy, areas that should be covered in any training includes:

- Assessment issues and skills when working online for example establishing the suitability of the service for the issues presented by clients and the transactional limitations of online provision.

- The "disinhibition effect", which is the ability for the client to reveal much more when working at a perceived distance and which also means that the level of disclosure occurs at a much faster pace.
- The use and abuse of "netiquette".
- The importance of greater clarification to avoid misunderstandings. The "black-hole effect" when the client "disappear by changing contact email addresses and user identities.
- The concept of "presence" and its role in building and maintaining a therapeutic relationship.
- Ethical implications related to dual relationships caused by online presence in social networking sites and virtual reality.

iii) Conducting professional practice using online counselling skills

The absence of a physical presence within online exchanges reduces the potential for a therapist in having indications or observations of a client's physical and emotional wellbeing. Therefore, a therapist pays attention to the content, variations in a client's online presentation, and the potential implications relating to duty of care. The nature of online practice places an emphasis on the therapist to clarify and support clients with the aim of minimizing the potential impact of the following circumstances;

- Misunderstandings and conflicts which may occur during the initial stage, assessment, contracting, ongoing stages, and termination of the online relationship. Guidelines regarding resolution of potential misunderstandings and conflict should be outlined within the initial contract.
- Online inhibition by a client which may influence disclosure and therefore affect the emotional stability of a client, positive outcome of the online interaction, and the client's wellbeing.
- Incidences related to the loss of contact with the therapist through equipment failure, or inability to gain access to online communication resources, therefore preventing scheduled meetings or appointments taking place or being completed.
- Providing appropriate onward referral where necessary and conveying information to clients with regard to additional, reliable support resources available through the internet or face to face services

- After termination of sessions, provide support for clients and additional follow-on resources that suitable for progression to further systems of support.

Careful consideration and planning should be given to introducing a system of service delivery where any evident negative impact of occurrences, such as those identified above are minimized. Below are the requirements for effective online service delivery;

iv) Requirements for effective online service delivery

There are several factors underpinning considerations for online service delivery which should be in place and conveyed to clients by the therapist on the onset of service delivery:

- Offer guidance and give information related to potential for misunderstandings that may arise and provide systems to address such incidents.
- Give clear guidelines relating to access and use of online service. Such information should highlight what the online service expects of them as clients of the service. These should include the subject of maintaining privacy of material generated in the course of the relationship with a therapist. The guidelines on access to online services should be made available in form of electronic booklet or within the service provider's web pages.
- Inform the clients of the structure of appointment system and any apparent flexibility within. Clients should be guided on what do in case of delayed, cancelled, or missed appointments.
- Give clear guidelines regarding the limitations of confidentiality.
- This being an online service, it is pertinent to provide information which is visible and therefore accessible to potential clients through web-based communication, such as a service provider's website.
- Provide details regarding maintaining contact with a therapist in the event of a technology issue or other loss of contact. For example, giving alternative contacts such as email and telephone contact.
- Giving clear information regarding payment for appointments.

In circumstances where a practitioner has to cancel pre-arranged appointments due to technology issues or ill health, it is strongly recommended that systems be in place including:

- Clients being notified in advance of their appointment time.
- Appropriate consideration being given to adopting systems which alleviate anxiety experienced by clients who are anticipating a scheduled appointment and subsequently cannot be fulfilled.
- In circumstances where a continuing inability to deliver online appointments occurs, a suitable alternative provision should be offered to clients. Alternatives may include suggesting a referral to a face- to- face adjunct of the service or referral to an alternative online practitioner during the absence of the designated therapist.

v) Administration of an online practice

Prior to launching an online practice, it is essential that the practitioners fully consider procedures for the storage and security of data. It is important that therapist should check whether they require data controller status.

Due to potentially sensitive nature and volume of material generated when working online with clients, therapist should be particularly mindful of how they store client's work while in progress. This includes being alert to ensuring that computers are not accessible or viewable by others while engaged in client work or online meeting. It is the responsibility of the therapist to ensure that all spam blocking software, anti-virus software, encryption software, firewalls, pop-up blockers, anti-tracking and marketing devices remain up-to date.

The clients should be informed of any system requirements and warned of the possibility of technological failures, limitation and risks, and assisted in taking appropriate steps. Thus, therapist should ensure that their clients have an adequate understanding of technological issues as part of their assessment process.

Encryption packages and privacy tools are essential. Encryption platforms are private communication systems that are either web-based or that may require a secure server or a specific download. Encryption is a procedure used in cryptography to convert plain text into cipher text in order to prevent any but the intended recipient from reading the data. Unencrypted email is wide open to hackers or anyone who has a vested interest in accessing the communications. Therapist need to be committed to adapting to the client's preferred software and also help the client

understand any security issues inherent in the software. The use of unencrypted software if requested by the client should be discouraged.

The therapist should ensure all hardware, software and communication bandwidths and tools are kept as updated. They should be set to run with optimal stability, and as bug free as possible. All technologies offered by therapist should be adequate for the task.

vi) Online client assessment

In the course of an online service delivery, there may be instances where assessment conclusions reveal that the available support is not suitable for issues presented by individual clients. It is advisable to consider how instances such as this may be resolved. Where assessment is a feature of service provision, it should be conducted in adherence to the ethical guidelines of the professional body the therapist subscribes to.

The assessment procedure of any service provision is one of the most important facets of therapeutic work. If such work is to be offered online a clear, criteria need to be determined by the therapist to identify clients who are suitable to proceed to a contract stage. Clients who are identified as unsuitable for online counselling, or at risk, or are beyond the therapist's area of competence should be referred to more suitable help.

The therapist needs to decide where their competencies lie in being able to work online with a client or client group. For example, some online practitioners have a policy of referring on clients with alcohol or drug addictions to offline services. The lack of physical presence does not allow them to assess whether a client is actively "using" during sessions. Psychosis and severe personality disorders can also be unsuitable for online work and are particularly difficult to assess online.

vii) Membership to professional organizations and peer support

There is an obvious advantage for therapist in seeking support and guidance from organizations and individual professionals in this area. Affiliation with professional organizations can bring advantages in the following areas;

- Subscribing to defined ethical practice guidelines which offer direction in conducting appropriate professional practice.
- Opportunities for training and professional development in counselling.
- Receive support from the professional body in circumstances where a client wishes to proceed with formal mediation or complaint process against a therapist.
- Providing therapist with opportunities for online discussion forums where professional practice and development themes can be shared and discussed.
- Identifying professional affiliation can reassure clients that online therapist is both credible and professional within their service delivery.
- Providing an additional space where therapist can promote themselves to the wider public through networking.
- Practicing online is a specialist area and therefore brings its own challenges and rewards. Therefore, being affiliated to an organization specializing in online practice provides the opportunity to remove the sense of isolation and at the same time constructing a more prominent voice for this area of professionalism.

viii) Supervision arrangements for online practitioners

Clinical supervision is a requirement for an online therapist therefore, the supervisor should be competent and experienced to a degree where one can offer appropriate support and guidance which is specific to this field of practice, particularly so when a therapist is developing skills while engaging online with clients.

Online counsellor should receive clinical supervision or clinical support from professionals who are fully familiar with the medium and the potential implications of the work with clients. A supervisor needs additional skill to practice ethically and professionally with their supervisees.

Where therapists are adopting to the use of online counselling skills as a new addition to their professional practice, it is strongly recommended that professional support for peer supervision is sought to assist in the process of meeting service delivery, in conjunction with any ethical and legal requirements specific to their online practice.

Therapist should ensure that their supervision arrangements are adequate to support their online work. They should consider carefully how they could best receive supervision for their online

practice. There is need to ensure that the supervisor is experienced and trained in online work and has a full understanding of the issues and its inherent ethical concerns. Therapist should also consider the issues surrounding client such as informed consent, confidentiality and data protection/storage when using online supervision.

Since online counselling has unique pressures of responding to online clients, the therapist should pay particular attention to their own self-care and they should ensure that they receive adequate support from appropriately trained supervisor, and use peer support opportunities where available.

8.6 Summary

In this lecture, we have discussed the ethical practice in counselling and guidelines for online counselling. We have also discussed the guidelines related to; therapist's competencies, required level of training, administration of online practice, requirements for effective online service delivery, membership to a professional body and online supervision.

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