

# E-THERAPY

## Lecture 11

Starting and building an online practice

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# **STARTING AND BUILDING A PRACTICE**

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### **11.1 Introduction**

In this lecture, we shall focus on how to start an online counselling practice; we will assess the suitability of both therapist and client for online counselling. We will discuss how an online presence and online relationship is established, further we will identify the professional guidelines needed for online counselling practice.

### **11.2 Expected Learning Outcomes**

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

- a) Explain how an online counselling practice can be established
- b) Assess the suitability of both therapist and client for online counselling.
- c) Discuss how an online presence and online relationship is established
- d) Identify ethical and professional considerations and guidelines.

### **11.3 Considerations for starting an online counselling practice**

According to palmer and Bor (2008), when starting an online counselling practice it is your responsibility to generate sufficient income to survive and meet your outgoings, to build and sustain a credible and acceptable professional reputation. You will need to consider the risks of personal safety. You may need to hone your skills for dealing with paper work, record keeping and accounts. You will need to keep a balance between self-development, personal health and meeting the needs of clients whilst maintaining high standards and making a reasonable living.

**Register your company:** It is important to think of your website as your business address. If you want your business to be found online then your address has to be visible and accessible on the World Wide Web.

**Getting a domain name:** To set up an independent online practice, the first step is to register a domain name. A domain name is an internet address. Google.com, for example, is a domain name. A domain name indicates who the legal owner of that domain is. Once a domain is registered, a website is built on that internet address. To borrow from real estate terms, registration of a domain name is like getting the legal rights to own a piece of land, while a website is the store that is built on that property.

Choose a good domain registrar company and buy the domain name that will best represent your business. It is important to purchase all domain variations like; .net, .org, .biz, etc. to prevent cybersquatting. Subscribe to a good hosting plan and set up your website. If you do not know how to do this, many website developers offer packages, whom you can engage depending on your budget. Make sure your website has the basic pages; homepage, company profile, products/services, and contact information. Publish the most informative content as possible to let first-time visitors know who you are.

**Set up a Blog:** If your website is your home, your blog is your living room. This is where most of your visitors will land and where potential clients get a glimpse of who you are. Companies with blogs tend to exude a more credible, trustworthy and authoritative reputation in their respective industries. Just make sure you are keeping things fresh by publishing new material regularly for both your readers to consume and search engines to index.

Create an Email Address with Your Domain: Try to veer away from using free email addresses (@gmail, @yahoo, @hotmail). Having your domain name in your email address (i.e. yourname@yourcounsellingname.com) gives the impression that you are serious. Associating the name of your business to your email address also improves branding, which helps people remember your company better. It is also a lot more trustworthy to have a business email, as it shows that your emails are not coming from free, public accounts.

Choose a unique Handle: This is not always possible, but we highly recommend having a unique handle that you can use across all your online channels. This means choosing a social media handle that is consistent with, say, your URL or your online counselling name.

For example:

<https://www.zibiaonline.com/>

<https://facebook.com/zibiaonline>

<https://twitter.com/zibiaonline>

There are several reasons why you want to do this. First, it avoids confusion. Visitors can easily find you without confusing you with other similarly named brands. This is also handy for people who like cross posting across several social media channels. For example tagging you @ mybrand on instagram will automatically, tag you @mybrand on Twitter should you want to reshare your content.

#### **11.4 Therapist and client suitability for online counselling**

Here are some considerations to help you determine if you and your clients are appropriate for online counselling.

##### **Are you the right person for online counselling?**

Evans (2009) outlines a checklist, which seeks to establish therapist suitability for working online therapeutically. She asks counsellors to ask themselves these questions:

- Would I relate well to lone working using a computer as the vehicle for interacting with clients?
- What proportion of my work would I be comfortable in transferring to an online setting?

- Do I currently enjoy and feel comfortable when interacting with others through an online medium?
- Am I content in working without the actual physical presence of clients?
- Could I manage the administration and practicalities of an online office (more on that in a moment) with the associated responsibilities and appointment system requirements? (Evans, 2009, p 15).

### **Assessing client suitability for online counselling**

Client assessment-suitability of the medium for the individual client online therapist 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. There may be a variety of reasons why assessment outcomes conclude that it would not be appropriate to support clients using computer-mediated support, and this may be based on one or more of the following factors;

- 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.

### **Which choices will be the best for you and your client?**

Many issues influence the choice of medium. Most therapists like to see their clients in order to pick up on some of the nonverbal cues; some will automatically be lost in video conferencing in that, typically, only the head and perhaps shoulders of the person on the screen are seen. Yet media with video content have more cues than mere audio means, such as telephone. Both video and audio/telephone sessions, in turn, provide more nonverbal information than asynchronous distance interaction (i.e., email or text) or synchronous distance interaction (i.e., chat-based media).

Most of the platforms coming on stream now have multiple options for communication, and so could accommodate the preference of either counsellor or client to see and be seen or not. This leads to the question of which platform which particular software or system is the “right” one to use, which we take up in a moment.

### **Which presenting issues should use online media?**

It is also important to consider which presenting issues can work with an online approach. The so-called “worried well” (clients who are essentially healthy but want to work on certain challenges) may be able to deal well with the therapist being only virtually present. Someone who is suicidal or psychotic is an entirely different circumstance; in all cases that assessment must be made early on, and safeguards put in place for the client if “on-the-ground” support is needed in an emergency situation. Whom should the client call? Whom should the therapist call if the client cannot be contacted and there is concern over their welfare?

## **11.5 Establishing online presence and online relationship**

Establishing a strong online presence is important and therefore having strategies that enhance online visibility is key. The following are strategies that may foster online presence;

First step you need to build a captivating website; every business needs a website. A great website should be user-friendly, aesthetically pleasing, and well suited to driving conversations. Using a qualified web developer will ensure that you create a platform that will attract the attention of the clients that are funneled into it.

While establishing the website, have your clients in mind and let the clients know the services you offer. You have a few precious seconds to connect with your website visitors and let them know that your therapy services can help them with the issues they are facing.

Base your content on your potential clients and their state of mind as they are searching for a therapist they can trust with their problem. A website is specifically the landing or home page where a therapist explains; whom you help and what you help the clients achieve. Your landing page needs to be like an elevator pitch, in order to quickly let the client know if they are in the right place. It is also important to include questions to connect with your visitors and let them know you can relate to the pain or challenge they find themselves in.

### **Five elements for website presence**

**Make it Personal:** By its nature, counselling is a very personal business. Any business that requires lengthy one on one interactions should reflect that level of intimacy within the website itself. It should have a page with full biography, contact information, credentials, treatment methods, and client testimonials.

**Use photos strategically:** Further exploring the use of photos, the pictures you choose and the message they deliver matters. Website photos should reflect the mood you hope to capture, showcase images of smiling, happy faces and this will set the stage for what a potential client believe could be the result of working with them.

**Make it real:** Websites are inherently impersonal; it is all digital information, almost conceptual. It is important for your webpage to make that connection to the physical world. This can be

accomplished by adding photos of your business, maps, and directions. Potential clients need to know that this place is real, that it exists, and that real people are there and ready to help.

**Social Proof:** A bit of a combination of “making it personal” and “making it real.” Real-life testimonials can reassure potential clients that they are in good hands. Social proof is all about presenting powerful words from real clients and sharing their unique experiences. You may also consider linking your Google Business reviews as a way to give insight into customer reactions.

**Answer Popular Questions:** Finally, consider answering all the questions a potential client may have before they even contact your counselling practice. Answering common questions upfront can serve a few different purposes. It could filter out some potential clients who are not a good fit or could reassure some that you are exactly what they are looking for. This saves both you and your clients a lot of time.

Secondly, create a social media strategy; getting your business online is the first step to create a presence on the internet. However, simply being active on platforms does not add much value. Creating a strong, clear, and visually enticing social media strategy is the best way to align your business goals with your online presence. The social media strategy should include; posting newsletters, mental health, content calendars, and more.

Social platforms should include; instagram, facebook, linkedIn and twitter accounts which will benefit from a strong visual strategy.

Thirdly, create high quality content that search engines and your target audience will be interested. Search Engine Optimization (SEO) will help your online counselling website rank high in search engine results. When clients are trying to find counselling services, they usually turn to the internet for help.

Fourthly, get to know your neighborhood; you do not have to be active on all social networks if you know which ones you want to prioritize. See where your audience is and establish an online presence on those platforms. For instance, the professional business community more likely frequents LinkedIn.

Lastly, engage, interact, and nurture relationships; the next phase of establishing and maintaining your online presence is to devise a solid online marketing strategy to attract, engage, and build meaningful relationships with your target audience.

## **11.6 Professional guidelines for online counselling practice**

### **Managing an online practice**

The management principles of an online practice are similar to those used in a real office. After an initial assessment is completed and an agreement to start the therapy process exists, a therapeutic relationship is legally established. Once this happens, therapists have certain case-management responsibilities. As in a “real” office, clients’ treatment records are kept safely and profits from online counselling services need to be reported as income.

Client’s information can be stored in electronic files that are secure and passwords can be used to protect against unauthorized entry to the file and computer, and when files are kept on CDs. Therapists need to become familiar with the privacy regulations concerning their practice. State boards as well as professional organizations publish their rules online, and compliance with these is very important.

A review of the HIPAA regulations can aid better understanding of how to maintain clients’ privacy when records are managed online (<http://www.hhs.gov/ocr/privacy>). A few basic principles may help with improving record privacy:

- Do not keep sensitive material in unprotected hard drives or files.
- Use email encryption or password-protected webmail programs.
- Review sensitive information before you put it online.

Prior to launching an online practice, it is essential that you fully consider procedures for the storage and security of data. You will need to check whether you require data controller status. Due to potentially sensitive nature and volume of material generated when working online with clients, you should be particularly mindful of how you store client’s work while in progress. This includes being alert to ensure that computer is not accessible or viewable by others while engaging in client work or online meeting. Ensure that all spam blocking software, anti-virus software,

encryption software, firewalls, pop-up blockers, and anti-tracking/marketing devices remain up-to date.

Ensure that you have encryption packages and privacy tools. Also, ensure that all hardware, software and communication bandwidths are up to date. Set to run with optimal stability, and as bug free as possible.

### **Requirements for effective online service delivery**

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

- Guidance and information relating to the potential for misunderstandings to arise and systems available to address such incidents.
- 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, including the subject of maintaining privacy of material generated in the course of the relationship with a practitioner. This can be made available in electronic booklet form or within the service provider's web pages prior to commencing online interactions with clients.
- The structure of the appointment system and any apparent flexibility within this. Clients should also be informed of procedures in the event of delayed, cancelled, or missed appointments.
- Clear guidelines regarding the limitations of confidentiality
- Due to the physically distanced relationship, it is pertinent to provide information which is visible and provides reassurance of a credible and professional service. Such information must be accessible to potential clients through web-based communication, such as a service provider's website.
- Provision of details regarding maintaining contact with a practitioner in the event of a technology issue or other loss of contact. This is particularly relevant where a practitioner has stated that they would attempt to make contact with a client by telephone or alternative means in such circumstances

- Clear information regarding payment for appointments where applicable.

### **Competencies of practitioners who adopt the use of online counselling skills**

The British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) notes that “all practitioners should be sufficiently competent in the use of technology in their work to be able to provide reliable and adequate services to clients and colleagues” (BACP, 2019). The BACP goes on to state that this means having alternative ways of providing services for communicating with clients promptly if the primary method of communication fails. Competence also includes having access to technological support that respects the confidentiality of the work being undertaken.

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 enables counselors 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 clients who present a range 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 relationship therefore provide a sense of containment for clients while facilitating a positive outcome.

## **Online therapist skills training**

The BACP considers it “good practice” for practitioners to have at least some of their supervision in the same medium in which they are working online. The ACA argues for specialist training in online counselling due to the numerous issues beyond mere competence in providing face-to-face therapy. These include:

- The shift from verbal to written communication skills (for some of the technologies)
- The challenges of building/maintaining an adequate therapeutic alliance online
- The greater potential for miscommunication; thus, the concomitantly greater need to identify misunderstanding
- The ability to do assessment online and to establish the suitability of a client and his/her issues to be addressed online
- Adequate understanding of appropriate administrative practices concerning legal obligations and data storage
- Adequate knowledge about technical issues related to security and privacy in online work (BACP, 2019; ACA, n.d.)

## **Membership of professional organizations**

There is an obvious advantage for practitioners 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
- Training and professional development opportunities
- Support in circumstances where a client wishes to proceed with formal mediation or complaint process against a practitioner
- Providing practitioners 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 practitioner is both credible and professional within their service delivery.
- Providing an additional space where practitioners and services can promote themselves to the wider public
- Practicing online is a specialist area and therefore brings its own challenges and rewards. Being affiliated to an organisation specialising in online practice provides the opportunity to remove the sense of isolation which can be apparent within this sphere of professional practice while at the same time constructing a more prominent voice for this area of professionalism.

### **Online practitioner professional responsibilities**

In the context of online counselling, a counsellor should be aware that they are likely to work with clients from across the globe. Therefore, there will be diversity of issues and cultures which may impact on the online counselling relationship and therefore a counsellor needs to be aware of online professional responsibilities. These include;

#### 1. Working online and encompassing diversity and related factors which may impact upon an online relationship

Delivering an online practice provides the opportunity for practitioners to work across a global canvas and greatly increases the potential for encountering clients from a broader spectrum of diversity compared to the face- to- face interaction. The following points are key features in the process of enhancing communication and understanding diversity issues across a global platform.

- Considering and assessing the impact of personal communication style when interacting with a diverse spectrum of clients.
- Consciously working towards identifying and seeking a positive resolution in potential and actual communication gaps in the online interactions with clients, and inviting discussion with clients where it becomes apparent that there are differences in perceptions in helper-client relationships.

- Seeking ways to assist clients where it becomes evident that they are experiencing difficulty in communicating their intended written narrative and dialogue.
- Proactively seeking to enhance skills which can assist in the process of communicating more effectively with language and cultural difference
- Maintaining a commitment to self-exploration in areas where personal beliefs/ stereotyping create barriers to interacting with positivity and congruence, including where cultural or diversity issues become apparent in client work.
- Consciously endeavoring to understand and develop empathy regarding the impact of values and beliefs from diverse cultural context

## 2. Verification of practitioner and online service identity and credentials

When a client enters a face- to- face service, they have the advantage of being able to form an assessment of the credibility and validity of the provision based upon certain factors. Online practitioners can achieve this in a variety of ways;

- Submit hard copy qualification certificates to online directories that authenticate and publish the details on their website. This information is accessible to a global public and clients can access the information to verify the authenticity of the practitioner's credentials. They can also information or a hyperlink for clients to directories where you are listed.
- Affiliate yourself, and your service, to professional organizations specializing in your sphere of practice and that have an online interface where clients can access directories or registers which provide authenticating information of their members.
- Provide details of accreditation with a professional body for your service and yourself on the website. Displaying logos provided by training organizations upon completion of a certified online counseling course can also be useful in providing reassurances.
- Where you have written articles or other material which have been published and are online, provide a hyperlink to them for your website.

- Some clients prefer to see a photographic image of the online practitioner included on the website, as opposed to working without a physical representation of the practitioner. This may serve to enhance credibility.
- Website presentation; the manner in which the website is presented will influence a client's preference in contacting one practitioner or online service in comparison to another. However, this on its own may not be sufficient.

Where valid reassurances can be provided, this will assist in giving credibility to online service in general, also it assist in promoting a positive image and reputation of online professionals and services.

### **Summary**

In this lecture, we have focused on how to start and build an online counselling practice; we have assessed the suitability of both therapist and client for online counselling. We have discussed how an online presence is established, further we have identify the professional guidelines needed for online counselling practice.

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