

# INTRODUCTION

Welcome to *Online Counselling and Guidance Skills: A Resource for Trainees and Practitioners*. I hope that you will find this book and the companion website a valuable resource in understanding and applying online counselling skills within your sphere of professional practice. The book is not intended to direct practitioners in the practical use of the numerous variations in computer mediated communication (CMC) tools and resources which are available for engaging online with clients: the primary purpose is to provide guidelines on the underpinning skills. These are transferable across all such contexts of establishing an online presence and, as such, this book will serve as an ongoing resource and reference point regardless of new developments within online computer mediated technology and available online communication tools.

## Who the book is for

In order to point out the audience for whom this book will be a valuable reading resource, I consider it relevant to draw a distinction between the contexts of professional practice where counselling skills are utilised and are identified in two categories:

- *Group 1* Professionals who use counselling skills within an ethical and bounded framework, whilst working therapeutically with clients, and are defined as counsellors/therapists working within psychological services.
- *Group 2* A second cluster of professionals who are employed within allied health and social care, mental health, and guidance fields who use counselling skills within their work to enhance their relationships and communication with clients. Within this second group I would also include those based in an academic setting where the provision of online support and guidance to students is a feature of their work. An example of this would be a tutor providing online tutorial support, facilitating online discussion groups, and pod casts, or a professional who is interacting with and providing support to service users online.

## Counselling skills as an everyday communication tool

Even though we may not take time to reflect upon how the use of counselling skills features within our everyday activities, it is important to acknowledge

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that such skills are an integral aspect of our daily communication and support of others. It may be that we are listening to a colleague who requests information and guidance, or a friend who needs someone to talk to about an issue which is impacting upon their emotional wellbeing. In a professional context of providing support to others, counselling skills are in use throughout interactions with service users. In such instances we use basic counselling skills to aid our understanding and offer of support. It would therefore be appropriate to consider how our use of counselling skills can be effectively adapted to an online environment. This book will be a useful resource within all these contexts. It would therefore be appropriate for those who are working online in a counselling, support, or helping capacity to seek information and guidance which will develop and enhance online communication skills, whilst also recognising that the book can be a useful resource for those who are regularly interacting with others in an online context. This book will be a valuable resource in either context.

### **How the book can be employed by trainees and practitioners**

Working and interacting online in a counselling and support capacity takes a different guise to face-to-face working and therefore appropriate training is necessary, in addition to the traditional route of counselling skills study, to provide a professional and ethical presence online. This book is targeted at readers who hold an interest in online communication. You may be either embarking on training in this area of counselling skills use, or are interested in informing yourself, trainees, or colleagues of the skills required when working therapeutically or in a helping capacity online. The book can be used as guide in two ways:

- in the early stages of enquiry into understanding or learning online counselling skills; or
- revisited as a reference point when using online counselling skills within client work.

The book is written in a straightforward manner with references to historical evidence of using written therapeutic interventions in client work and the current development of typed text counselling practice being applied online.

The main body of the book focuses on the necessary practical skills for working online in a helping or counselling capacity. Examples provided demonstrate these skills being utilised in pieces of simulated client work. There are prompts for the reader to reflect on their understanding within each chapter and also encouragement to consider how they can then transfer this to their framework for working online. As a general rule there are distinct

differences within interacting online, predominantly, as usually both parties are required to communicate without auditory or visual cues. The practitioner and service user will be working to establish and maintain a relationship online and endeavour to express themselves effectively with an absence of certain communication aids which are normally at hand when interacting in a face-to-face setting. It is therefore important to consider how this can impact on the relationship and the manner in which a beneficial relationship and successful outcome is achieved.

There are currently many variations to the electronic mediums available for online interaction. The primary distinction of online communication is defined as interacting synchronously (in real time) or asynchronously (with a time delayed response). When communicating in each context there will be a requirement to consider slight adaptations to skills applied in order to achieve optimum results.

Within this book the term 'online interaction' will encompass all counselling skills communication which occurs using computer mediated technology, unless specifically differentiating on the method used to illustrate a difference which is pertinent to a point being made.

## **The purpose of the book**

There is no doubt that we are experiencing an increasing global awareness of the benefits gained from appropriate use of computers and the Internet. This may be for either personal, training, or professional purposes. The online Microsoft Press Centre (2006) found that communication methods changed considerably during the period of 1996–2006, highlighting that in 1996 24 per cent of the UK population owned a computer, compared to 62 per cent in 2006. Figures state only 6 per cent of UK households held internet access in 1996, compared to 58 per cent of UK households in 2006.

There are some who may still prefer the more 'traditional' medium for communicating, learning, and conducting business, such as letters and using the telephone. Nonetheless interacting with others via an electronic medium is increasing, and no doubt will continue to do so as it becomes a central interactive communication tool. eTForecasts 2007 as cited by Internet Statistics Compendium (2008) state that there were 1,173,109,925 global internet users in October 2007, with the UK being the highest users within Europe. Microsoft (2006) identified a membership of 270 million Hotmail account users worldwide in 2006. The introduction of email as a communication tool is now commonplace. Lago (1996) stresses that email counselling is a one-step extension to the most frequently used medium of accessing counselling support, that being telephone counselling.

As growth in technology and computer usage continues to expand, traditional routes for accessing support will naturally be facilitated by engaging

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with clients through CMC. The movement is accelerating further by the demand from clients as the younger generation of today and tomorrow (who will already be familiar with, and favour, electronic communication) naturally progress into the age bracket of the counselling and support user group. At the time of writing there is evidence to suggest that online interaction and communication is a resource which is more widely used by females than males (Mindlin, 2007). With the traditional leaning towards this being apparent within face-to-face support, mental health, and therapeutic services, there is a requirement for online service providers to consider how males can be encouraged to engage in computer mediated support and identify current potential barriers.

The rapid development of online counselling and support services within diverse areas such as higher and further education, careers guidance, mental health services, and so on further supports the argument for providing such a resource. Research and project evaluations which have been conducted within this context of online practice have not been widely disseminated or publicised outside of this sector to assist in the promotion of such adjuncts to face-to-face provision. Wherever possible I would encourage organisations to broaden the scope of publishing such information as this will assist in raising the profile and outcomes from online service delivery. The book's companion website includes hyperlinks to such available reports and articles.

Evidence to substantiate confidence in the potential for online therapy and support services proving beneficial to service users can be highlighted by SAMHSA (a division of the US Health and Human Services) awarding a grant of 6 million dollars to four US e-therapy projects in 2007 (<http://etherapylaw.com/?cat=6>).

This book is aimed at those professionals who are already working online with service users as well as those who are seeking information and guidance on how to apply online counselling skills. As already stated, there are differences which naturally occur in online working and the book illustrates this in a manner which encourages the reader to consider how effective practice is achieved, whilst also provoking thought on variations within theoretical orientation which individual practitioners may wish to reflect upon when considering how their online practice can be developed.

### **Current movements in delivering counselling and support services using the Internet**

The Internet provides a platform for social networks and interactive meeting places for people of all generations, using a vast catalogue of resources such as

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myspace.com and facebook.com, and is proving to be a convenient tool for communicating positively with others in a global capacity. The advent of the Internet has revolutionised many people's personal lives, work, and commercial activities as it holds the capability to transform the nature of traditional written correspondence and verbal interaction which is required to conduct everyday aspects of our life. However, it is not detrimental to the quality of communication achieved. There is some scepticism that electronic communication does not hold the potential to convey verbal or written narrative in the same meaningful way as traditional communication due to a belief that the personalised style and physical characteristics of an individual are not present or conveyed in the same manner. One significant area of online activity has been the emergence of providing therapeutic support to service users where once the traditional route of face-to-face support has been the most common preferred option.

It is my aim within the book to illustrate how individual personality and forms of expression, alongside clear relational features, combine together when working online to create a robust relationship with service users and clients where successful therapeutic or support outcomes can be achieved.

In a work and commercial context, email has become a preferred mechanism for informing and making requests of colleagues or associates, whilst also used extensively for personal interaction with friends, family, and so on. Utilising internet technology can speed up the process of giving or receiving information. There is the added advantage of being able to access this facility from within our office or home and make contact across a global setting.

The purpose of this book is to assist practitioners across a global setting in considering the appropriateness of transferring into or adopting an online practice, whilst also offering guidance in effective use of counselling skills during communication with clients. I do hope that this book serves to address some of the skepticism which is evident amongst professionals who are reluctant to acknowledge the place of online support and therapeutic services. There is a wealth of available discussion on the subject in conjunction with research evidence indicating success in areas of online therapeutic interventions to a level over and above that which is achieved in the more traditional resources available to clients. Research evidence indicates that theoretical modalities such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) are transferable to computer mediated interaction for clients suffering with anxiety and depressive disorders. cCBTLtd (2007) claim to achieve significant outcomes with their online products, equivalent to face-to-face therapy, whilst also increasing access to mental health support for clients who may not otherwise come forward due to reasons such as stigma. The overall success of the project is no doubt influenced by comparative costs involved in health services maintaining equivalent face-to-face service provisions, in conjunction with the potential for cCBT to reduce waiting lists for CBT treatment.

### **Excitement versus skepticism**

The movement towards developing and implementing an online service delivery will be governed by the relevance, benefits, and suitability to the particular client groups with whom professionals currently work and seek to serve. Where organisations are not offering the facility of synchronous or asynchronous resources, there is usually a website presence where information and assistance can be accessed or downloaded. The general public readily engages with such facilities, and one could assume there could be a general preconception that information and support should be readily available by conducting an internet search for available support and guidance resources. With such a potential welcoming and captive client base it is appropriate for service providers to consider how they might develop online services to clients where there are obvious advantages in doing so. In retaining a closed mind to such opportunities, professionals may lose the potential to increase access in areas where their online presence could be beneficial to both clients and themselves. This is particularly so as there is a general acceptance of counselling and mental health facilities being traditionally more accessible to those who are advantaged in social and financial position, therefore increasing their potential above others to secure the emotional support they need. Online support is not a less equivalent service and can provide an alternative which is potentially within the financial resource availability for those who cannot afford to access a face-to-face service.

With the increase in support and guidance providers embracing the opportunity to move into securing an online presence with clients find that online communication creates a potential networking opportunity to raise the profile of such activity, provide reassurances in effective practice, and form a voice to encourage professional bodies in considering how such services can be more appropriately regulated and sit alongside face-to-face services without the hindrance of being viewed by some as a second best option for clients, or a 'stop gap' for face-to-face resources.

I express the importance of those professionals and services who offer an online resource to clients to ensure that they guide their service users towards validating the authenticity of both the online service and the professionals who practice within it. In this way clients have the opportunity to confirm the validity of a service and gain reassurance that they are being supported by bona fide professionals, in conjunction with enhancing the profile of this feature of professional practice. There are many online directories where professionals or services can be listed following certified evidence of their credentials and then have this information available to potential clients.

Whilst acknowledging any apparent resistance or scepticism, the opportunity of communicating and interacting with others in an online perspective is becoming firmly established within the global psyche and requires

consideration as to how this influences the way in which counselling skills can be transferred to an online setting. There are many groups of professionals who are transferring aspects of their practice to establish an internet and computer mediated presence, both for the benefit of their service users and for achieving a more accessible and flexible service. The book will serve as a valuable resource where this is the case.

### **Historical research evidence relating to internet and narrative therapy**

When reviewing the historical evidence of counselling and psychoanalytical practice and research it became apparent how significant a part both verbal and written narrative has played in establishing counselling practice as we know it today. The face-to-face aspect of counselling hinges in the main on working with the client's verbal narrative, with written narrative being utilised as an adjunct to practice in areas of counselling theoretical modalities. There is strong research evidence which indicates that therapeutic practice using written narrative as its primary focus has achieved positive outcomes for client work (Pennebaker and Beall, 1986, cited by Baum, 1997).

Pergament (1998) discusses in detail how Freud, Kleine, and Winnicott can be defined as antecedents of internet psychotherapy by introducing deviations to the settings and parameters of traditional therapy and subsequently were defined as 'masters and mavericks' within their field for adopting such creativity in their client work.

It could therefore be deemed as completely appropriate to move what has been a more traditional aspect of written narrative into the medium of online work and develop online counselling skills practice from this stance. Suler (2003) indicates that self-expression through an electronic medium such as an email is representative of a constructed aspect of self which is conveyed through a more visible, permanent, concrete, and objective format than that available in speech.

There have been numerous studies which have investigated the effectiveness of Internet-based counselling and support in a global context. Within specific areas of symptom presentation it has proven to be affective. These include depressive disorders (Christensen et al., 2004; Robertson et al., 2006), anxiety disorders (Kenardy et al., 2003), and some somatic disorders (Strom et al., 2000).

In the research undertaken by Christensen et al., patients suffering with depression were offered online support for the condition backed up by professionals who monitored their progress. There was evidence of between 53 per cent to 84 per cent adherence to the programme, with severity ratings for the disorder reducing from mid to mild when patients reached their eighth session.

### **Available choices in computer mediated technology for online interactions**

There are numerous options available to online practitioners in available CMC tools. If choosing webcams or video conferencing facilities, both the client and practitioner may feel a stronger sense of being face-to-face. The use of encrypted synchronous chat, internet forums, or web conferencing facilitates gives the question of online meetings where distance is an obstacle for all parties to be synchronously engaged within one physical locality. Such meetings can be a useful supplement to email exchanges or telephone/Skype exchanges. Synchronous resources can also prove to be a complimentary adjunct to forum groups. Developments in existing resources and tools for engaging online with clients will continue, but the core online counselling skills required for effective service delivery and establishing a presence and online relationship with clients will remain pertinent within any such processes of development and change.

### **About the author: Jane Evans MA BACP (Accredited Member)**

The author has extensive experience of designing and delivering student training programmes, counselling, online counselling, counselling supervision, and counselling consultancy, spanning 23 years. Her professional roles as trainer, counsellor, supervisor, and consultant have been based within such settings as the voluntary sector, local government, private practice, university and college counselling, youth work, education, and counselling services. Since 2003, Jane has piloted and developed online counselling services within a university setting, whilst also establishing her private online counselling and online supervision practice and the provision of certificated Online Counselling and Guidance Skills, Online Supervision and other online counselling skills courses through her website [www.ocst.co.uk](http://www.ocst.co.uk). There are currently a broad range of services available to members of the public, trainees, practitioners, lecturers, and organisations via the website. In addition, Jane has written articles for the AUCC journal which have provided illustrations of how online counselling can be developed and managed within a university and further education context. She has also written a pull-out guide which directs practitioners to the ethical, legal, and professional considerations when developing and delivering online counselling skills using computer mediated technology. Writing *Online Counselling and Guidance Skills: A Resource for Trainees and Practitioners*, and the companion website content, is a culmination of her knowledge and experiences within the broad range of professional activities that Jane has been engaged in since 1985.



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