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## Online Counseling and Its Effectiveness

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### Abstract

In this overview of recent research, the usage of online counseling is investigated. A variety of researchers sought to find the effectiveness of online counseling, to determine the clients most likely to utilize online counseling, and to investigate the ethical implications of the practice. Conclusive evidence illustrates that the predominant advantages of online counseling consist of the anonymity offered, the convenience of the practice, and the ability to reach clients who traditionally could not or would not attend a traditional therapy session. However, alarming disadvantages to online counseling include a poorly established therapeutic relationship, delivery of services by unqualified practitioners, and the limitations of confidentiality and privacy.

As society entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Americans began to rely heavily on the Internet. While traditional, Eastern cultures look to their elders for sage advice, Western culture can merely Google their questions over the World Wide Web. In this day and age, a person can shop for a car, look up a weather report, and even find a soul mate online. Newspapers and letters have not become obsolete; however, their infrequency can only be explained by news websites and email technology. With websites like WebMD.com offering medical advice, why should Americans not turn to the Internet for counseling services?

John Grohol, an early practitioner of online counseling (as cited in Young, 2005), defines the practice as a new way of helping people resolve relationship and life issues. He states that it uses "...the power and convenience of the Internet to allow simultaneous (synchronous) and time-delayed (asynchronous) communication between an individual and a professional" (Young, 2005, p. 173). Online therapists can communicate with clients via several synchronous methods including secure web-

based messaging, real-time chat, videoconferencing, and using an Internet phone; they can also use the asynchronous technique of regular or encrypted email (Young, 2005). Although online counseling offers many advantages and can reach more people than traditional counseling, the practice has also displayed several disadvantages, as well as a lack of appreciation for the ethical standards of the American Counseling Association (Shaw & Shaw, 2006). Shaw and Shaw (2006) state that despite the troubling evidence that many online therapy practices do not abide by ethical standards, online counseling will only continue to flourish; the researchers demonstrate the necessity of supervising online counseling to ensure that these services are consistent with the continual improvements made to the American Counseling Association's Code of Ethics.

### Literature Review

Online counseling has been a part of our society since 1993. It was then that Ivan Golberg, a medical doctor, began answering questions pertaining to treating depression

## EFFECTIVE ONLINE COUNSELING

over the Internet. He also acted as an unofficial advisor for an online depression support group called “Walkers in Darkness” (Young, 2005). As time went on, additional practitioners, including John Grohol, began distributing free mental health advice online. Eventually, fee-based mental health services were instituted, and by the late 1990’s, therapists began to use online counseling as a supplement to their current practices (Young, 2005). Rochlen, Beretvas, and Zack (2004) report that as of 2004, as many as 250 private online counseling websites existed, which were made use of by over 700 counselors. While some therapists used these websites to compliment their existing practices, other therapists solely worked online.

In an advantageous light, online counseling has the ability to reach clients that would not seek traditional therapy sessions due to the anonymity offered, as well as a perceived “less threatening” environment (Rochlen, Land, & Wong, 2004). Haberstroh, Duffey, Evans, Gee, and Trepal (2007) also report that the typing involved in an online counseling session mirrors the benefit of emotional healing that is traditionally achieved through journaling. Young (2005) discovered that online counseling can result in more impulsive communication that has the potential for unveiling more enlightening revelations, in addition to offering a clear schedule and description of sessions. Shaw and Shaw (2006) describe that online counseling has the potential of reaching clients who simply cannot access traditional therapy sessions, such as people with a physical disability or people who live in remote areas. Lastly, online counseling offers a straightforward system for record keeping, convenience, and the potential for reduced expenses (Rochlen, Beretvas, & Zack, 2004).

Despite the benefits that can be derived from online counseling, the practice

can be problematic as well. Rochlen, Beretvas, and Zack (2004) note that challengers of online counseling are concerned about therapy sessions conducted online by untrained practitioners, the limitations of confidentiality, and the powerlessness to mediate in an emergency. Additionally, Haberstroh et al. (2007) discovered in their study of counseling students playing the roles of counselors and clients, that technological problems can occur, disrupting the session. In the same way, Rochlen, Beretvas, and Zack (2004) noted that different demographic variables can disrupt the productivity of online counseling due to the need for technological competence. In their study, Haberstroh et al. (2007) also noticed two additional disadvantages to online counseling: lack of visual cues and trust issues. Participants responded that without a counselor/client sitting across from him/her, interpretation of actions and thoughts became more difficult. Callanan, Corey, and Corey (2007) note that practicing over state jurisdiction lines can become an issue in online counseling. An example includes establishing jurisdiction in a malpractice suit, should one arise. Lastly, all research concludes that online counseling sessions have difficulty establishing a strong, therapeutic relationship because the client and counselor never view each other face-to-face.

In an effort to determine the most popular clients of online counseling, Young (2005) collected data from 48 “e-clients” and assessed their reasons for using online counseling over traditional counseling, their concerns regarding online counseling, and their demographic variables. Young discovered that middle-aged Caucasian males who had earned at least a Bachelor’s degree were among the most frequent users of online counseling. Clients’ reasons for using online counseling over traditional counseling included the access of counselor

qualifications, convenience, and anonymity. The clients cited their main apprehensions regarding traditional counseling as being caught in a therapist's office by an acquaintance and having a loved one discover that they were attending therapy sessions.

Shaw and Shaw (2006) conducted a study that evaluated 88 online counseling websites according to a 16 item ethical checklist derived from the American Counseling Association's Ethical Standards for Online Counseling. Researchers hypothesized that licensed practitioners would have a higher mean score on the ethical checklist versus unlicensed practitioners. Shaw and Shaw also felt that counselors who held memberships in professional associations, counselors who reported an identifiable state of practice, and counselors who provided a contact address and telephone number would all have higher mean scores than counselors who did not display such qualities. Researchers discovered that less than half of online counselors were practicing 8 of 16 items on the ethical checklist. One third of the online counselors necessitated an intake procedure and an electronically signed waiver that illustrated the limits of confidentiality in an online counseling session. One third of counselors stated the requirement that a client must be 18 years old or have the consent of a legal guardian. Less than half of the online practitioners requested the client's full name, address, age, or date of birth.

Researchers also found that only one third of counselors disclosed the fact that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed due to the lack of security over the Internet. Shaw and Shaw (2006) also revealed that 20% of the websites assessed had vanished in a two month period, illustrating the issue of abandonment. In the end, the study showed that many online counseling websites do not follow the first standard of American

Counseling Association's Code of Ethics, which outlines that a counselor's first and foremost responsibility is to promote the welfare of clients (American Counseling Association, 2005).

### Conclusion

It is unfortunate that online counseling is a practice that has such advantages, like reaching physically disabled clients or clients who are too shy to attend traditional counseling, and yet has such shortcomings that plague the profession of counseling in general, like practicing outside the realm of one's competence. Society has rules and professions have ethical standards for a reason: to promote the welfare of others, as well as to protect from harm. Therefore, with precision in creating a counseling website, displayed by disclosures of confidentiality limits and electronic waivers, online counseling would be more productive. However, until the Internet is a secure place for communication, privacy and confidentiality will always be an issue in online counseling.

Callanan et al. (2007) feel that online counseling could be beneficial if used as a supplement to traditional counseling. If a client required six counseling sessions, three of those sessions could be used in a traditional setting for informed consent and assessment. Therefore, the remaining three sessions would be more productive, and both the client and the counselor would be more cognizant of the situation. Due to the fact that technology will only continue to change and lifestyles will indeed speed up, society should get accustomed to the Internet as a counseling modality. In any event, though, Callanan et al. urge users to conduct practices legally, ethically, and competently.

## EFFECTIVE ONLINE COUNSELING

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