

Online Counselling

With the beginning of the twenty first century, the Internet has quickly become part of our everyday life. The impact which it has produced, has been much bigger than one created by a telephone and a television in the twentieth century. Today the Internet is an integral part of our everyday life and it is used for communication and information in the field of business and education, for socializing and for all kind of activities in our free time.

Psychology has had a much more slower affirmation on the Internet. Only recently psychology has began to discover the full potential of the Internet. In fact, it has been used for education, for offering help through counselling, and for the supervision.

Terms Online counselling, Online therapy, e-therapy or e-counseling, all describe the same thing - counseling services provided online, through the Internet. The theory and methods of online counselling are based on the same theory and methods of face-to-face counselling.

As in face-to-face counseling, the counsellor and the client form a therapeutic relationship and through the dialog they work together to resolve the client's problems and to encourage his personal growth. Numerous studies done in United States and England show that online counselling has a big therapeutic potential, much bigger than that it was initially believed.

I have started my online counselling practice in 1999. Since then I have worked, through my personal website, with clients coming from all around the world: United States, Canada, Australia, England, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Hong Kong, Singapore and Yugoslavia. My clients ranged from teenagers, students, mothers and housewives, nurses, architects, businessmen, all the way to a university professor. Apart from this I have replied to hundreds of questions of informative /educational type. In my work I have always used only email as a way of communication.

Brief History of Online Counselling

It is interesting to know that as soon as the Internet was invented, its creators perceived its potential for the therapeutic communication.

The Internet was demonstrated to the public for the first time, in 1972. At that occasion, the big potential of the Internet was shown through a simulated therapeutic session where all the communications between the client and the therapist were done through two computers in two different cities in USA. However, from that first "online session", the therapists have began to approach the Internet with cautious steps.

The Internet became available to the public, in 1979. Curiously, that same year the first self-help groups appeared on the Internet, and from the beginning they became very popular. In following years, they affirmed themselves so much that psychologists and psychotherapists had began to take participation as guests.

But only in '95 the first personal websites opened by the psychotherapist began emerging on the Internet. Through these sites psychotherapists started to offer their services by email. At

the beginning, their services were in the form of an “advise” or an “information” in the field of psychology and mental health. This kind of service was similar to the classical ‘agony aunt’ answers published on the pages of magazines.

The true pioneers of Online Counselling were those few therapists who were able to establish a long-term, ongoing therapeutic relationship with the clients. The birth of websites offering psychological help clearly indicated that people were ready to reach out to therapists via the Internet.

Through years the number of therapists on the Internet have continued to grow.

- In '95 there were only 12 personal websites;
- today there are more than 1000 personal sites and numerous Online Clinics where more than 500 therapists take collaboration.

The growth in Online Counseling has led to the foundation of the International Society for Mental Health Online – ISMHO, in 1997. Its purpose is to promote the understanding, use and development of online communication, information and technology for the international mental health community. It has become the unofficial professional organization for online therapists, providing peer support and insightful discussion. For non-members, it also provides a public discussion forum. Perhaps its most important contribution is that it sponsors a clinical case study group that provides valuable insights to new clinical issues and intervention formats developing on the Internet.

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) recognises the importance of online counselling and its significant benefits to clients, especially those who have difficulty in accessing traditional face-to-face counselling or who find that they would prefer not to use it. In 2001, BACP published guidelines for the online counsellors, which have been recently extended to include guidance for providing online supervision.

Is Online Counselling Therapeutic

The most frequently asked questions about Online Counselling are: *Is Online Counselling Therapeutic?* or, *Is it possible to establish a therapeutic relationship in Online Counselling?*

To answer this question we will look at the main characteristics of communication via email in Online Counselling.

There are six main characteristics of communication via email in Online Counselling.

1. The communication between the therapist and the client is based on the written word.

As we all know, the written word has a big power. All the literature, from the classic to the modern, uses the power of the written word to express the depth and the richness of human experiences. In everyday life the letters and diaries are the forms mostly used for that purpose.

Written communication between a therapist and client is not a new concept. Sigmund Freud

utilized letters extensively to communicate with his clients.

Roberto Assagioli, in his book *Psychosynthesis – A Manual of Principles and Techniques*, recognizes the therapeutic value of the writing. He says that the technique of writing is useful: “1) for the assessment, (2) as a means of self-expression, and (3) as a technique of active training in concentration, attention and will”.

He sustains that writing other than helping catharsi, it has other benefits. He says: *'In writing both conscious and unconscious factors are active; therefore, it often happens that, while one starts writing down what he is consciously aware of, later on things come up which he had not thought of before and which sometimes surprises him...'*

In the same book Assagioli suggests writing a diary and autobiography as essential parts of therapy in order to orientate a person towards introspection. Indeed, many of my clients find Online Counseling similar to writing a diary.

From my experience, the full therapeutic value of the writing could be understood only when the communication between the client and the therapist is reduced only on the written word. However, the written communication in Online Counseling must have certain qualities in order to be considered therapeutic. And when we talk about qualities we need to consider two things: first - textual techniques, and second - therapeutic boundaries.

Textual techniques

Regarding textual techniques, one of the biggest tasks for an online counselor is to be able to 'see the world through the client's eyes' from the client's written words, and to reflect it back to the client with his own written words.

To achieve this the counselor has to use textual techniques paying his attention to the way the client communicates. In face-to-face counselling we have the body language and the tone of the voice. In Online Counseling these clues are *written words* and the *style of writing*.

- By paying attention to the client's words and to his style of writing, and by using the same words and the same style in his feedback the counselor can express his empathy. This gives the client a sense of support, of being understood, and of not being alone in his situation.
- The writing style is an important information which the counselor has from his client. It reflects the client's personality. Getting to know the client's writing style, the counselor will be able to get to know better his client.
- By paying attention to the client's style of writing, with time the counselor will be able to understand the significance behind the words and the things said between the lines, and to recognize the subtle changes in the writing style which will indicate that some interior change has happened in the client.

With the growing mutual trust, the client will begin to engage himself more and will try to

describe his feelings the best he can.

From my experience I can say that each person finds a way to overcome the limits of the written text. Some of them do it with drawings attached to the email, some with the poetry, and some of my clients even created their own web pages to illustrate their experiences – by drawing their sub-personalities, or to express their insights related to the psychosynthesis' exercises.

Anything that the client contributes to the work makes the online therapeutic work richer. However, the therapist must take all the responsibility and commitment to understand the true significance of the shared thoughts, feelings and experiences.

On the other side the therapist through his feedback expresses himself as a person and as a therapist. The way he expresses himself is very important for how the client will perceive him, and above all for the formation of an authentic therapeutic relationship.

Therapeutic boundaries

Regarding the therapeutic boundaries, we need to keep in mind that the biggest qualities of the Internet are simple and fast communication.

These qualities give a client the possibility to contact his therapist each time he feels a need. But, this freedom can also have negative consequences, in extreme frequency of emails.

In order to avoid non desired emails it is necessary that the therapists sets, together with the client, the frequency of writing email.

On the other side, giving to the client the possibility to write an extra email from time to time could be useful.

I always encourage my clients to write to me more than one email during the week, above all if they feel need for it, or when they experience some change, or have an insight. With time these emails take a form of a diary.

2. The second characteristics of email communication is that the written communication diminishes inhibition in people.

Roberto Assagioli, in his book *Psychosynthesis – A Manual of Principles and Techniques*, says:

'.... some people are freer, less inhibited in writing than in speaking about delicate subjects face to face with the therapist.'

In Online Counselling, it is common that a client, already in his first emails, writes in a direct and open way about himself, about his feelings, fears and wishes, and he concentrates on the mostly charged emotionally issues.

The fact that a client feels less inhibited, that he can express himself more openly and that he can present his true situation without shame and hesitation contributes not only to the therapeutic work but also to the formation of a sincere relationship between a counsellor and a client.

Naturally, it is important that a therapist is also open when he talks about himself. It is normal that a client is curious about his therapist and that from time to time he will ask a therapist some questions about his private life. The more sincere is the therapist in his answers, the more ready will be the client to share his emotions and thoughts.

3. The third characteristics regards one of the most interesting features of the Internet which is that the Internet gives the sense that the person we communicate with is physically present.

Studies show that when we communicate with another person we experience his presence mainly because we share the same space, whether that space is real or virtual.

In the case of the Internet, the space that people share is Cyberspace.

In Online Counseling, Cyberspace connects together the client and the therapist and gives the client a sense that the therapist is physically present.

4. The email communication is asynchronous, which means that all interactions between the therapist and the client do not happen in real time.

The asynchronous communication has the advantage of offering more time to the client to think and write things he want to talk about, but also it gives time to the therapist to reflect on the significance of the client's words and to compose an adequate feedback.

Although the email communication is asynchronous, it has a form of a dialog.

- The style of email communication is narrative and informal, without strict grammatical rules and it looks more as a live dialog than a written letter.
- Sharing the experience gives the most profound significance to the written communication.

While we write or read email we share thoughts and feelings with the other person. And in spite of the physical distance, each email exchanged between the client and the therapist creates one single thread which takes a form of an authentic and significant dialog.

5. All the correspondence, word by word, is saved automatically. This has its advantages:

- The saved correspondence gives to the client a feeling of continuity of the therapeutic work, and of a stable support from his counselor.

- The saved correspondence gives to the client the possibility to return to the same material and reread it again and again.

Apart of facilitating the catharsi, this also creates the right conditions for the process of dis-identification where what the client have written becomes an object to be analyzed. Rereading the same text, with time, the client is able to distance himself from his story and to take a role of an observer.

- Generally when we read a written text, we usually give voice inside us to the written words.

In the same way, the client reading the feedback, gives voice to the words written by the counselor. If these words are the words which reflect his own truth, with time the client begins to feel these words as his own words. At this point his dialog with the counselor, starts to be his interior dialog with his Self.

- With time the saved correspondence takes a form of an autobiography. This gives to the client the opportunity to see his life in a more organized way and from a different point of view.
- Finally, for the counselor the possibility to have all the interactions in a written form is a great help to follow better his work, and to take it in its authentic form to the supervision. Having all work in a written form is also very important feature for the purpose of study and the research work.

6. The sixth and the final point is the accessibility and privacy which the Internet offers. The following facts may be of interest:

According to statistics, nearly 70% people, who contact an online counselor, have never been in therapy before. From this data it can be understood that many people choose Online Counseling because for them face-to-face therapy is not accessible for some reason.

The motives can be various, but the most frequent are:

- when somebody lives in a small place and far from any counselor.
- when a person for work reasons travels frequently.
- when a person cannot rich the practice of a counselor for physical disability. This is also the main reason for people who suffer from anxiety, panic attacks, and agoraphobia.
- when a person can not afford the costs of face-to-face counseling. It is important to note that the fees for Online Counseling are much more affordable.
- or, the most common reasons are fear, shame and stigma about psychotherapy.

Although the psychology is more and more diffused in our culture, even today exists a feeling of shame about psychotherapy. For people who fear to be judged, or who are ashamed to see a therapist, the Internet is the easiest way to contact a therapist. The Internet gives them a feeling that their privacy is protected. And this gives them a courage to share their most

intimate emotions and thoughts with an online counselor.

The advantages of the accessibility and privacy which the Internet offers should not be undervalued. For many people Online Counseling is the only way to ask for help.

However, a counselor has a task to find out why this person has not turned to the traditional counseling. Understanding motives is very important, above all if the reasons are fear or shame. In such cases Online Counseling can have a big value as the first step towards face-to-face counselling.

For me, during all these years, the biggest reward for my work has been when a client wrote to me that he decided to find face-to-face therapist, or to join some therapy group. My sense of accomplishment was the same as in cases when a client was able to end online therapy and take responsibility for his life.

To conclude, I am pleased to say that my work as Online Counsellor is continuing to be a very positive experience. At the beginning it was almost a step in the unknown territory. It has been a great commitment, but also a big stimuli for me to learn and understand dynamics of Online Counselling.

In all these years the greatest help was the support from my supervisor and my experience in face-to-face counselling. I think that without a face-to-face experience, the online work is not possible.

From my own experience I find the psychosynthesis model as the most adequate and versatile for Online Counselling, compared to other schools of therapy and counselling which have already found their places on Internet.

Psychosynthesis techniques and exercises use the imagination and creativity, and bring the liveliness and the experiential aspect into the online counselling work. In that way the email communication between a therapist and a client does not remain only on the cognitive level.

The Internet has already made a great impact on all aspects of our life. I see that its use and applications can only grow with time. I have a strong belief in its potential in the field of psychology and counselling. For that reason I wish that psychosynthesis becomes more present on the Internet, both in educational and therapeutic form. The Internet is a good opportunity to spread psychosynthesis in the world, and we should not undervalue it.

Thank you.