

# What is Online Counselling?

## **About Online Counselling**

Online counselling provides an alternative to traditional face to face therapy. It can be a beneficial option for many people who have a need for counselling. Many who like to have time to think and reflect find that counselling online can help them work through their thoughts and feelings more thoroughly than just talking about issues. Those who have difficulty talking about their concerns face to face may find that it is possible for them to write about such things, and sharing this with a counsellor online can give them feedback to help towards resolving the issues. As well, online counselling is a way in which help can be easily provided for those who wish more anonymity than they can receive in going to a counsellor's office, for those who are shut in, for people who live at great distances from qualified counsellors, or for those who simply want more options. Online counselling can be done in several ways. One way is for a client to write to the counsellor regarding his or her situation or problem, via email or a message board format, and the counsellor can then reply with insights regarding the issues to assist the client to discover a solution. The benefit of this method is that it slows the whole process of counselling down, allowing for time to consider issues and solutions more thoroughly. Also, it can be done on one's own time. There is no need for an appointment.

Another method of online counselling is through real time interactions in a chat room environment. A client books a time with the counsellor, then they meet at that time in the online private chat room. The benefit of this is that the client can receive instant feedback, much like in a face to face session, as well as having time to think through what is being said, since everything is written down. The main difference between this method and face to face sessions is that body language and tone of voice can not be observed, so it is important that the client openly communicates through words to the counsellor what is being experienced in the session. This can help the counsellor be aware and understand the situation better, and the client can benefit more from the session. Technology is improving all the time, and now it is possible to add voice and/or video to chat, depending on which messenger system is used. This is helpful, as the client and counsellor can both get some enhanced communication, through hearing tone of voice and/or observing body language.

Online forms systems can also be used to enhance the counselling process, as they can provide a simple way of presenting homework and self-help exercises for a client to use to assist them in working through issues in a focused manner. This is similar to email counselling, in that the client can work at their own pace.

Online courses can also be presented and completed through the use of forms. Through the use of online courses, a person can receive the assistance of the counsellor as a teacher or coach, and get feedback as they work through their issues, while learning some self-help tools.

## **Security and Ethical Issues**

Some people express concerns that the nature of the internet does not allow for adequate security and privacy for counselling people. Although it is true that sending messages over the internet often tends to be much like sending a postcard in the mail, or like talking on the party lines of the past when anyone on the telephone line could listen in, there are security measures that can be taken to insure, as far as is possible, that unauthorized persons are not intercepting messages. This is the reason for communicating using secure email and message boards, on secure websites, as well as using private chat and informing you of specific security issues when in a more public environment. As well, with the anonymity that the net allows, the risk of meeting someone you know while going to or coming from a face to face counselling appointment is much greater than having someone you know overhear your online conversations. The greatest risk for some would be if they did not adequately store or erase their private communications, and an unsafe person in their life discovered such, but this could be a risk for any form of written communication that a person may have, not just the electronic sort, and is not limited to counselling situations.

Some people have also expressed the idea that counselling can not ethically be done online. However, there are always ethical concerns involved in any counselling that is done, whether online or offline, or for that matter, in any activity of life. Anyone who has spent any amount of time online knows that there are certain behaviours that are considered appropriate, and others that are not, just as there are appropriate and inappropriate ways for conducting oneself in offline situations. The area of online counselling is a new development, and so some matters regarding how to conduct oneself appropriately in such a situation are still being worked out on a

practical level, but basic guidelines for treating people with compassion, dignity and respect apply, as well as professional ethics in counselling, whether one has contact with people face to face, over the telephone, or through the internet. These principles do not change just because the mode of communication changes. Therefore it is possible to have ethical communication about counselling issues with people online.

Another development of life in cyberspace is that people often feel safe to express their deepest concerns there, as online aliases mask who they are and minimize the risk that they might be found out. The convenience of being able to quickly click in and out of any place online also provides a sense of protection for those who would not venture into situations they may be fearful of in an offline setting, and this could include reaching out for help. Therefore, many people are surfing the net and entering chat rooms looking for help, revealing their problems to whoever is kind enough to listen. I believe this is an ethical issue that counsellors need to address. We need to consider who these people might get "help" from, if they do not find a qualified person. If people are online looking for help, we who are counsellors need to be there too, so that the help they find will truly assist them towards healing. Counselling they receive online may be a start to help them improve their lives offline as well.

There are of course some types of issues that are best addressed in a face to face setting. Suicidality cannot be adequately addressed online, and anyone at immediate risk of committing suicide needs to contact emergency services in their own area. Online counselling also is best done with people who can and will take action for working through their own issues, rather than passively depending on the counsellor to prescribe the solution and direct the process. Client directed approaches rather than therapist directed approaches are best. Generally people who have support around them "on the ground" to help support them and the counselling process as they work through certain issues, or who are at a stage in their personal growth where they are willing and able to work on their issues and therapeutic exercises on their own without the counsellor physically present, will be able to receive more benefit from online counselling, than those who are expecting the counsellor to fix their problems for them. Those who are needing inpatient care, or who are at a stage where they need professional support to take them step by step through the process of therapeutic exercises, because they are unable or unwilling to work on these exercises on their own, are not candidates for online counselling. Support and encouragement in addressing issues can be given online, even to those who are struggling so deeply, but online help alone will not be enough. Face to face work will be needed as well.

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