Online Counseling: Working with Anxiety

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Abstract

In the recent years, our society has seen an increase in the use of technology and the way in which technology is integrated into our everyday lives. Navigation systems are now used via cellphones; communicating with each other from different countries is possible now with just a click of a button on a cell phone; you longer need a microphone and web cameras attached to a computer to video conference with one another. It was only a matter of time till the field of psychology saw an increase in the integration of technology in the therapy process. Today, counselors and therapists can email, chat and videoconference with their clients who can be present for the session within the comforts of their own homes. The purpose of this tech plan is to provide an overview of how technology can be used by therapist in a private practice to work with clients dealing with anxiety. I will discuss the definition of online counseling, ways in which it can be utilized along with hardware and software needs and ethical considerations as well as how I plan on integrating technology into a private practice setting.

Today, in the year 2014, one cannot imagine life without technology. Cell phones, computers and tablets are just some of the tools that we use on a daily basis to interact with and stay in touch with one another. You no longer need to turn a television on to read a newspaper to stay updated with current news and happenings; your smart phone can be set up to send you updates on current and breaking news as and when it happens. Our everyday lives aren’t the only aspect that technology has impacted. The field of counseling and psychology has seen an increase in the use of technology to provide services online as well. There are many ways for define and understand what online counseling means. The easiest way to understand it is “E Therapy is a term that has been coined to describe the process of interacting with a therapist online in ongoing conversations over time when the client and therapist are in separate or remote locations and utilize electronic means to communicate with one another.” (Manhal - Baugus, 2001). Online counseling or e therapy as some refer to is simply the use of computers and electronic systems to communicate with one another for the purpose of providing therapy or counseling. Authors Kraus, Stricker & Speyer explain that online counseling can be synchronous or asynchronous. Synchronous communication is instant communication. The therapist and client communicate at the same time using chat and instant messaging tools. It is in real time and conversations are in the present. Asynchronous communication refers to delayed responses such as with emails, forums and message boards. Asynchronous communication is not in real time and has a delayed response. (Kraus, Stricker, & Speyer, 2010). There are five major methods of conducting e- therapy: email, secure web based message systems, real time text/ chat, video conferencing and voice over IP. (Manhal - Baugus, 2001)

For the purpose of this tech plan, I will be focusing on synchronous communication primarily videoconferencing and chat communications with the use of applications that can be used to help deal with anxiety on the clients own time.

Like any field and any form of counseling, online counseling too has its pros and cons. According to Barnett, one of the biggest advantages of online counseling is its ability to reach a vast number of individuals who generally may not have access to counselors. These include individuals who reside in geographically remote areas, those who are pressed for time and always travelling, individuals who may be physically disabled and are unable to leave their homes (Barnett, 2005). Individuals who suffer from anxiety disorders such as agoraphobia and social anxiety disorder can truly benefit from online counseling as well. Barnett goes on to state that that other benefits and pros of online counseling are the accessibility of services and the cost effectiveness of providing services online. Monique Manhal- Baugus in her article stated that in regards to cost effectiveness and affordability, online counseling is advantageous because for an email response the charge is approximately $15-50, and for a 60 min chat session it is $ 26- 65, which is significantly much less than a traditional face to face session for 60 minutes. (Manhal - Baugus, 2001). Another advantage of online counseling is that it allows for a sense of annonimity and often lets clients be more open and honest with their emotions and feelings and what they share with the therapist. “ Online counselings unique aspects has led theorists to suggest that there are special interpersonal factors such as annonymity , protection and openness to ones self that promote change through online means.” (Rummell & Joyce, 2010). I recently conducted a phone interview with a therapist in a private practice setting, and had the oppurtunity to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of online counseling . According to Leslie Richmond, one of the biggest advantages of online counseling is the access to related information that can be shared with clients during a chat or video session. Instead of giving clients information to read on their own time, the therapist and client can review the information together during an online session. Additionally, online counseling is usefull in situations of severe anxiety or distress because you have access to services at times separate from face to face meetings. (Richmond, 2014). “ The internet makes time constraints more manageable because sessions can be held during a clients lunch hour, in the evening or on weekends. It is even helpful for clients who are away or in college.” (Richmond, 2014)

Many believe that one of the disadvantages of online counseling is that there may be a of lack of face to face cues and verbal cues. Counselors have been trained on picking up on cues ( verbal, non verbal and facial ) from their clients. With the birth of online counseling, specifically text based counseling, relying on cues to understand the clients emotions didn’t play a role anymore. For some clients and therapist, loosing cues wasn’t as important because they believed that they can still build a theraputic relationship via text communication and the use of emoticons . As Alleman(2002) stated “ People meet and fall in love on the internet. Why would a theraputic relationship not also be possible ?” ( as cited by Rummell & Joyce, 2010) . Technological glitches such as server downtime or freezing screens and computers crashing are also some of the cons associated with online counseling. “ When either the clients or the psychotherapists computer or internt connection fails, the theraputic conversation is interrupted or even terminated , often in a abrupt way. (Rummell & Joyce, 2010). For this reason, a therapist and client must always have a backup plan for when technology fails to work. For instance, before starting a session, both parties should discuss how and when the session should be continued in case of session interruptions. Another concern with online counseling is in regards to confidentiality and privacy. Online fraud, identity theft, information being openly available in the vast online sphere are all concerns of online counseling which unfortunetly are also the disadvantages. Therapists and clients both need to aware of such risks and must make all attempts to maintain a secure and confidential comunication process. Another concern stated by Leslie Richmond was that while online counseling is advantageous for treatments such as anxiety, it may not be suitable to other situations which may lead to overdose and suicide. “ Working with diagnosis such as bipolar disorders would be important to treat face to face ; they need a level of intensity that I do not believe online treatment can give. Clients could overdose and this would not be noticed on Skype or chat.” (Richmond, 2014)

In 1992, the American Psychological Assiciation put out a statement that stated “ the Ethics Code is not specific with regard to telephone therapy or teleconferencing or any electronically provided services as such and hs no rules prohibiting such services. (Rummell & Joyce, 2010). This statement didn’t help ease the concerns that clients might have in regards to guidelines and regulations pertaining to confidentiality and other issues. However, in 2002, a revised statement from the American Psychological Assicuation stated that the previous statement was inactive and that the current code requires that online counseling follow all codes set forth in the current Ethic Codes.

In regards to ethics, competence is one of the biggest concerns. As stated by Rummell and Joyce, if a therapist has never conducted text or video based psychotherapy, training should be considered before starting. (Rummell & Joyce, 2010).

Leslie Richmond in her phone interview pointed out that one of the drawbacks of online counseling is that of complying with HIPPA guidelines, which go along with other considerations such as confidentiality and privacy. The therapist must ensure that client information and all communication ( text based or video streaming ) is not saved as most web communications leave behind a digital imprint. Therapists therefore must ensure privacy and confidentiality by using passwords, secure websites and personal log in systems. “ To mitigate the risk of potential confidentilaity breaches, counselors should utilize security websites and email encryption.” (Manhal - Baugus, 2001) Other tools that can help secure the communication are firewalls and data encryptions.

Another important ethical consideration relating to online counseling is that of state licensing. Practicing counseling online via the web or even the telephone gives you access to individuals all the world, if not just around the country. However, therpaists and clients for that matter, must remember that each state has its own requirments and jurisdictions regarding who can practice counseling. Informed consent is another ethical guideline that must be discussed with client . Online counseling is not expempt from reporting child or elderly abuse . The same ethical codes in regards to informed consent that traditional counselors follow are mandatary for online counselors as well.

Lastly, one other ethical and legal concern to keep in mind is that of true identity. Providing counseling specifically via text based platforms can lead to mis identification and mis portrayal of an individual. How does the client know that therapist is who they say they are and vice versa. Sending an email or chatting through a session can lead to a client mis representing themselves and their emotions and can lead to unsuccessful sessions because they changed how they potray themselves or misrepresent how they are feeling. This is a concern that the therapist I interviewed had as well. She stated in her interview “ clients can easily present a ‘better’ self online that is not revealed unless in person.” (Richmond, 2014) Videconferencing lessens the chances of this happening because you are able to visaully see who are communicating with through out the session. In regards to privacy and confidentiality via email and chat based communications, it is a challenge for therpaists and clients to know that they are truly speaking with the intended individual. “ One suggestion is that in the first session , the therapist and client come up with a challenge and response to initial each subsequent session- in other words, a specified question the therapist asks and an answer the client must give.” (Rummell & Joyce, 2010)

In regards to online counseling, the modality used depends on the therapist. Some theories are not practical to use online, however most modalities can be adapted to be used online. Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, in short CBT, is the most commonly used modality used in online counseling. “ Cognitive theory works on examining the individuals thought processess, detecting cognitive error and helping the individual develop alternative and more flexible understanding about the self and his or her environment .” ( Laslo, Esterman & Zabko, 1999). Christensen et al stated that online therapies , particularly those using CBT are effective for anxiety disorders and anxiety sympotoms secondary to disorders such as major depression. (Christensen, Batterham, & Calear, 2014) Authors Yuen et al. found in their study on Social Anxiet Disorder, that several componenets of CBT with the combination of exposure were key components. 24 adult participants were recruited for the purpose of the study and they received 12 weekly sessions via video conferencing . They were assessed at pre treatment, mid treatment, post treatment and a 3 month follow up. The results based on the patient satisfaction survey found that overall the participants were satisfied with their treatment. 91 % agreed that they felt decreased or dimished fears, and the same number reported agreeing on a decreased amount of avoidance of social interactions. Many participants commented on the surveys stating that the convenience of videoconferencing was definetly an advantage. From the study, it was also reported that sound quality was the most commonly reported technical problem. (Yuen, et al., 2013)

Keeping ethical guidelines, definitions of what online counseling are and theoretical modalities in mind , I plan to integrate online counseling into a private practice setting where individuals with anxiety are served. The population being served is both males and females aged 18 years and older. The primary concern for the potential clients must be working on and coping with anxiety. This is what the practic specializes in. To successfully integrate technology into a practice, we would need to ensure that the private practice be equipped with the right hardware and sotware to begin with. The therapist will have access to their own individualized computer with working webcams and microphones ; to which no other indivudal will have log in credentials. A website dedicated to the online counseling practice would need to be created which would allow clients and therapists to have a secure log in before starting a video conferncing session. Client username and password will be generated by the therapist and given to the client once informed consent, confidentiality agreements and privacy agreements have been signed and reviewed. Clients will be able to able to change the password that the therpaist generated to them, allowing only themselves to know the secure password. Allowing clients to log in using the website ensures and promotes confidentiality and privacy. Therapists and clients will have set days and times for videoconferencing sessions. If a client for some reason does not have access to videoconferencing, they can chat with the therapist at a set appointment time . The chat feature will be set up on the website as a application on the website which they will need to log in to with their username and passwords. Any form of email communication will be encrypted from the therapist side to ensure there are no privacy infringes. If a session gets interrupted due to technical glitches such as computers freezing or crashing, the therapist will continue the session with the client via phone. This backup method will be discussed with the client before starting the therapy process.

Another feature that the website will have is an application that allows clients to write journal entries. Writing can be very theraputic for many individuals. Sometimes one sentence written down can be more meaningfull than an entire session. “ Pennebaker (1997) provided empirical evidence that writing about emotional experiences is generally helpful.” ( (Rochlen, Zack, & Speyer, 2004) The reason the journal application is on the website is that it provides the clients a space where they can be sure no one will have access to their thoughts and feelings. The only way clients can write a journal is by using their individualized and specific usernames and passwords. The therpaist will have access to the journal only if the client gives web permission to share the entry with the therapist. This feature allows clients to share and reflect on their thoughts and feelings, and they have the option of sharing it or not with therapist. The therapists computer will be equipped with a high level virus and securty system such as Norton Antivirus and will be updated regularly. It is important to understand that before any of the above described elements get implemented, the therapist will undergo training conducted by a proffesional IT support specialist to understand how the applications work and afffect the clients.

To begin with the main form of online counseling will be primarily through videoconferencing with as needed assistance provided through email and chat.

Looking toward the future, I would like to integrate the virtual reality platform to the practice. Virtual Reality is a new technology that completely changes the way we interact with technology. “ It has been defined as a set of computer technologies that, when combined, provide an interface to a computer generated world.” (Villani, Riva, & Riva, 2007). Virtualy Reality or VR for short, essentially provides a 3 dimensional virtual world where clients can imagine themselves to be a part of. For the purpose of working on anxiety this in my opinion would be a great feature. Lets say I have a client who gets anxious in public speaking situations. With the help of virtual reality, we can set up a platform that represents a anxiety causing situation and lets the client practice and work through the emotions they encounter. According to Villani et al, the key feature of VR , which is a positive aspect and differentiates it from other forms of media, is the role of presence. (Villani, Riva, & Riva, 2007) The therapist would be responsible for creating a individualized VR world based on the clients fears and anxiety causing situations.Clients would access their own virtual world the same way they would access their videoconferencing sessions, and journal entries or chat sessions- through their individualized secure log in accounts.

Along with video conferencing, journal entries, chat and the virtual world applications, the website will also have links to external applications that can be downloaded onto any smartphone. These external applications can help clients monitor and assess their feelings and emotions on their own time. An example of such an application is Mindshift, which is an app that can be downloaded from the iTunes Store on any iphone or ipad. The application provides the user with helpful tools to keep calm in an anxiety causing situation, lets you describe and record a situation and has quick explanations on what axiety is. Applications and tools like this can be extremely helpful for clients to get them through a situation before they have a session with the therapist and allows clients to work through situations on their own. These applications will be promoted on the website as additional self help tools.

Integrating technology into a functional private practice is not an easy task. Getting the technology set up and in functioning order is one aspect of the process. Getting clients on board with online counseling is a process in itself. Clients have to believe that their sessions and communications will remain private and confidential. It is the therapists respnonsibility to ensure that the practice of online counseling follows ethical codes and guidelines as well as keep their systems updated. Online counseling can work, and can be the future of the field of counseling. There is futher research that needs to be conducted, and ethical guidelines need to be set in place specific to online counseling. In terms of cost effectiveness and accessability, online counseling takes the lead without a doubt. To start of with, therapists and practices should start integrating technology into their practices and begin online counseling as a adjunct to traditional counseling. This gives both clients and therapits an oppurtunity to get used to online counseling and see how the process works. There is no doubt that within the next few years, technology will find its way into most practices, why not get a head start and start integrating it already. “ I believe from this scenario that the most competeive individuals and organziations will offer both online and face-to-face counseling as a planned product mix. Some clients may use exclusively on or the other, whereas others benefit from some blend of two.” (Alleman, 2002).

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