

Chapter 53

Online Advice, Guidance and Counseling for Problem Gamblers

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ABSTRACT

Clinicians cannot afford to ignore the Internet. Psychological advice, help and treatment for addicts are no exceptions with both counseling and psychotherapy entering the computer age. The chapter overviews the main issues in the area and approaches the discussion acknowledging that online therapy has to be incorporated within the overall framework of the need for clinical assistance. The chapter also provides brief overviews of some websites as illustrative examples of what types of online help and therapy are available. The chapter makes particular reference to online help for problem gamblers and overviews the only study to date that evaluates the effectiveness of an online help and guidance service for a particular type of addiction (i.e., problem gambling).

INTRODUCTION

Most therapists remain suspect about the new and growing field of 'behavioral telehealth'. For instance, some have claimed that Internet therapy is an oxymoron because psychotherapy is based upon both verbal and nonverbal communication (Segall, 2000). It could be argued that since online relationships are just as real and intense as those in the face-to-face world (Griffiths, 2001a), there is little surprise that clinicians are beginning to

establish online therapeutic relationships. Others may argue that the time has come to embrace the new technology and to carry out research into this potentially innovative form of therapy.

To date there have been a growing number of non-empirical papers about various issues concerning online therapy including challenges and initiatives in this growing field (Griffiths, 2001a; Rochlen, Zack & Speyer, 2004; Carlbring & Andersson, 2006), ethical issues (Heinlen, Reynolds Welfel, Richmond & O'Donnell, 2003; Abbott, Klein & Ciechomski, 2008), and mediation of guidance and counseling using new technologies (Tait,

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61520-670-4.ch053

1999). There have also been a growing number of empirical reports utilising online therapy. These include its use in treating anxiety, panic disorders and social phobias (Klein, Richards & Austin, 2006; Botella, Quero, Banos, *et al*, 2008; Andersson, Carlbring, Holmström, *et al*, 2006; Pier, Austin, Klein, *et al*, 2008; Titov, Andrews & Schwencke, 2008), depression (Spek, Cuijpers, Nyklicek, *et al*, 2007; Mackinnon, Griffiths & Christensen, 2008), addiction (Carroll, Ball, Martino, *et al*, 2008), internet addiction (Kim, 2008), eating disorders (Tate, Wing & Winett, 2001; Zabinski, Pung, Wilfley, *et al*, 2001; Ljotsson, B., Lundin, C., Mitsell, *et al*, 2007), post-traumatic stress disorder (Lange, Van De Ven, Schrieken, *et al*, 2000; Wagner, Knaevelsrud & Maercker, 2008), and tinnitus (Kaldo, Levin, Widarsson, *et al*, 2008). Every one of these empirical studies showed improvements for those treated using online therapy.

Psychological advice, guidance, help and treatment for addicts are no exceptions. This chapter therefore (i) overviews some of the main issues in the area and (ii) provides brief overviews of some websites as illustrative examples of what types of online therapy are available. The chapter also makes particular reference to online help for problem gamblers and overviews a recent study by the author that evaluates the effectiveness of an online help and guidance service for problem gamblers. The evaluation utilised a mixed methods design in order to examine both primary and secondary data relating to the client experience. It was concluded that the service appears to be one of the few genuinely international guidance and “counselling” services available to problem gamblers, the utility of using online guidance and therapeutic services is discussed. The objectives of the chapter are to:

- Discuss the importance of online guidance and counseling and the emerging technological developments in relation to those with addictive behaviors.
- Introduce and discuss the challenges associated with online guidance and counseling developments, from different perspectives (social, organizational, technological, etc.).
- Introduce recent technological developments in online guidance and counseling and associated human/social implications in relation to those with addictions.
- Be of theoretical and practical interest to various audiences including academics (teachers, researchers, postgraduate studies), healthcare professionals (health specialists, psychologists, medics, etc.), and policy makers

BACKGROUND: ONLINE THERAPY AND ADDICTIVE BEHAVIOR

For the fourth time in six days, a 28-year old man comes home very late from a 12-hour drinking session. Unable to sleep, he logs onto the Internet and locates a self-help site for alcoholics and fills out a 20-item alcohol consumption checklist. Within a few hours he receives an e-mail that suggests he may have an undiagnosed drinking disorder. He is invited to revisit the site to learn more about her possible drinking disorder, seek further advice from an online alcohol counselor and join an online alcoholism self-help group.

On initial examination, this fictitious scenario appears of little concern until a number of questions raise serious concerns (Griffiths, 2005). For instance, who scored the test? Who will monitor the self-help group? Who will give online counseling advice for the alcohol problem? Does the counselor have legitimate qualifications and experience regarding alcohol problems? Who sponsors the website? What influence do the sponsors have over content of the site? Do the sponsors have access to visitor data collected by the website?

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