

Chapter 8

The Evolution of Guidelines for Online Counselling and Psychotherapy: The Development of Ethical Practice

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ABSTRACT

The history and development of guidelines on the ethics of providing online counselling and guidance are considered. Some issues the authors have found to be of particular importance are highlighted with reference to particular publications as exemplars of the ongoing development of ethical practice in this field. Changes in ethical guidelines produced by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) are examined to elucidate the evolution in ethical thinking and practice that has been necessitated by the continual rapid development of technological applications relevant to mental health care that have typified the field. The chapter ends with a look to the advent of Web 2.0 philosophies and the need for practitioners to remain constantly vigilant with regard to their work.

INTRODUCTION

As the field of online therapy has developed rapidly in various parts of the world since the mid-1990s, many distinct issues have arisen in practising counselling ethically over the Internet that differ from face to face practice. This chapter will explore

some of the ways in which ethical practice has had to change in response to the emerging use of new technologies in psychotherapy.

This chapter will address responses to some of the ethical considerations raised by the use of technology in counselling, psychotherapy, and guidance discussed in this book. It will trace the development of ethical guidance for online counselling, psychotherapy, and guidance. It will

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examine development in ethical thinking regarding the use of technology from the initial reluctant scepticism to the now growing acceptance of online practice, based on increasingly supportive evidence and robust rules for those offering guidance, counselling, or psychotherapy, and the developing view of the requirements for doing so in ways that provide adequate, effective services and sufficiently safe practice to protect clients—and practitioners—from the pitfalls that await the unwary when entering this area of work. Throughout this chapter, the ethical matters and guidelines under consideration are especially applicable to the use of email and Internet Relay Chat (IRC or ‘chat’). However, it should be noted that many of the same issues apply to other technologies such as use of video links, text messaging, stand-alone software, or virtual reality environments, or even more familiar means of communication such as the telephone.

We trace the development of guidelines for online work from around the English-speaking world with particular reference to major developments in ethical thinking regarding online counselling practice. The development of the guidelines provided by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) are considered in more detail as an exemplar of the ways in which ethical practice, and guides for practitioners, have had to be continually evolved merely to keep up with changes in this fast developing field. While written initially for application in the United Kingdom, all the ethical principles and the practices that are recommended in these guidelines apply anywhere in the world, with appropriate adaptation for differing cultural perspectives.

While we provide examples of ethical thinking and guidance, this should not be taken as a replacement for reference to the various guidelines available for practitioners themselves. We end by looking at the future impact of ‘Web 2.0’ developments for counselling and psychotherapy provision over the Internet and the need to pay attention to the shift in power it implies from the

practitioner as ‘skilled, knowledgeable expert,’ who dispenses interventions to their clientele towards a more shared knowledge and power over the direction and mechanisms for change.

REACTIONS TO TECHNOLOGY IN COUNSELLING, PSYCHOTHERAPY, AND GUIDANCE

Placing any form of technology between the practitioner and client appears to be met with strong and yet highly polarised responses. As early as the 1940s, Carl Rogers was writing enthusiastically about the advantages of using tape recordings of counselling sessions to improve client care and enhance practitioner training and supervision (Rogers, 1942). Even before that, using the available communication ‘technology’ of his time, Sigmund Freud carried out his analysis of ‘Little Hans’ by letter (cited Rothschild, 1997) and self-analysis through correspondence with Fliess (cited Kaplan, 1997). Computers and other forms of technology such as live video links have been used in several kinds of guidance, counselling, and mental health care, including psychiatry, since at least the mid 1960s (e.g. Cogswell, 1967; Cogswell & Estavan, 1965; Weizenbaum, 1966,) with encouraging research emerging then and in the 1970s (e.g. Bennet, et al., 1978; Del Vecchio, et al., 1970; Dwyer, 1973; Solow, et al., 1971) right through to the current century. Despite this extensive history, reactions to the idea do not appear to have changed substantially. It is often still treated as if it were something new, unexpected and perhaps even out of place in a profession that is based entirely on the quality of a human-human relationship.

When first coming across the idea, many practitioners, steeped in their experience of nurturing a human bond across a distance of no more than a few feet in their consulting room, are wary or even hostile to the idea of allowing technology to assist them in extending their ability to reach

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