BASES FOR COUNSELLING
FOR A WEB-BASED COUNSELLOR
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Introduction

The Internet is becoming the most preferred channel of communication. More and more people are using the Internet for social interaction, as well as for looking for help and information. A study conducted in Norway as early as in 2002 revealed that web-based counselling was the most preferred way of receiving help for the study participants (Kummervold et al 2002). Compared to traditional face-to-face counselling, participants considered web-based counselling to be safer, as they were able to remain anonymous, if necessary. This made it easier for them to share their problems with a stranger.

Benefits of web-based counselling

There are several benefits to web-based counselling. The most obvious ones are ***easy access*** **and *convenient use.*** Web-based counselling can be used by persons with reduced mobility, those who live far away from the centres, are staying in a foreign country, or have a language barrier. This method of counselling also allows ***receiving help faster*** than traditional counselling and is suitable in situations where the ***client does not wish to meet the other person*** and prefers certain ***anonymity***. The possibility of receiving help is no longer dependent on geographical or temporal limitations.

Web-based counselling is perceived as ***private***, which removes the feeling of being stigmatised that is related to visiting a psychologist/psychiatrist. This method of counselling is also suitable for timid clients and those who have difficulties with social interactions. The physical absence of a counsellor decreases initial timidity, which may occur when talking about one's problems. Naturally, the physical presence of a counsellor is therapeutic in the context of timidity and social interaction but web-based counselling supports the initial contact more. The client's psyche does not have to defend itself from the judgement of other people, which may allow reaching the core of the problem faster with web-based counselling than with traditional counselling. If no one sees the person, they do not have to put on defensive masks or impressions.

The experience of web-based counsellors has shown that ***expressing oneself via text supports openness*** and clients are ready to reveal their deepest fears and thoughts faster. The perceived ***absence of difference between social statuses*** also supports openness. In text-based communication, clients perceive the counsellor as their equal and both parties contribute to the texts they share. Asynchronous (the reply is not received immediately, e.g. communication via e-mail) communication slows down the counselling process and allows both parties to dedicate more attention to their thoughts and feelings, while participating in a dialogue.

Clients' natural need to ventilate their experiences and limit their thoughts when writing them down work well together and shape a ***clearer vision of their problems***. The writing, which often includes re-reading and reviewing the text, contributes to the emergence of new points of view and objectivity. Conducted studies have revealed that written expression of experiences and feelings alone is a therapeutic activity (Pennebaker 1997).

*New associations, memories, and contemplation*s emerge in e-mail communication. The process is supported by creative isolation and silence. According to one online counsellor: *"In a traditional counselling session, you could talk for an hour and still not get to the core of the problem. With web-based counselling, the client may sit in silence for an hour and then write down one sentence that reveals more than that person has ever trusted to another person."*

The clients also enjoy that they perceive this process as their own and therefore feel that they have *more control* over it. The client can control the pace, tone, and volume of the process and define the limits of self-discovery without opposition or fear of disapproval from the counsellor. The client controls the "Send" button. All this *promotes focus and increases self-awareness*.

Peculiarity of web-based counselling
Web-based counselling may either be **asynchronous** (e-mail, forums) or **synchronous** (Skype call or messenger). In the case of asynchronous counselling, responses are mostly given to specific letters. As there is no immediate contact and feedback between the counsellor and the client, it creates a peculiar feature for the communication.
Online counselling is **different from traditional face-to-face counselling** in the following:
• the emotional dimension, which is characteristic of speech, is more difficult to express in written text;

• there is a risk of repeating common knowledge when replying to a letter;

• several aspects of speech that are communicated with the tone of voice, gestures, or simply silence should be explicitly expressed in writing or words should be used that express emotions, convictions, importance of a situation, etc.;

• it is difficult to start discussing a delicate matter without receiving immediate feedback from the other party;

• based on a letter they receive, the counsellor can only make preliminary and indirect conclusions about the client. As it is not possible to delve into the client's personality and their problems, it is unavoidable that the counselling must remain general at first;

• it is not possible to read the client's facial expression, posture, hear intonation or speech, and there is no eye contact;

• in the case of asynchronous counselling, it is not possible to quickly ask for additional information that would allow assessing the details of received information;

• the likelihood of misinterpretation increases; if there is not enough information or it is too unilateral, it tends to be replaced by fantasies, which may not correspond to reality;

• the especially efficient questioning technique used in immediate communication is difficult to apply online;

• web-based counselling entails shorter and more exact wording.

Preconditions for web-based counselling
Although web-based counselling has many benefits, it may not suit all counsellors and all clients. A large part of the information that the counsellor receives from the client's body language is not received in web-based counselling. **Above all, a web-based counsellor must be a good listener, be able to "read between the lines", have a good command of the basic skills of counselling and computer skills within the limits necessary for counselling.** Knowledge of the working mechanisms of computers and confidence in working with computers is necessary to the extent

that allows to quickly eliminate smaller errors and remain calm and choose a suitable source of help in the case of greater errors in order to eliminate those errors. Web-based counselling entails that the counsellor can work independently, bear isolation to some extent, and is flexible. The check-list given below helps to assess **whether web-based counselling could be suitable for your style of work.** For this, you must answer the following questions:

1. How do I feel about working alone by using a computer? Do I feel positive about the thought of working with clients via computer?

2. Are there topics that I would not feel comfortable with discussing online?

3. Does it feel convenient and good to communicate with my friends and acquaintances via the Internet? To what extent do I currently do this?

4. How have I felt if I have had to counsel someone via phone or the Internet?

5. Could I manage the planning and arrangement of web-based work (scheduling appointments, connection to time of day, etc.)?

Answering these questions may give rise to new questions that highlight the positive and negative aspects of web-based work. Similarly to face-to-face counselling, it is possible to keep to a time schedule and take breaks between clients. Working on a computer without breaks is not good for the counsellor, the client, or the counselling process. A suitable work environment that supports prolonged sitting, as well as functional software and hardware are also important. Before commencing work, it is important to contemplate and assess your level of competence and ascertain the need for additional training to minimise obstacles that stem from the lack of technical and substantive skills.

The precondition for efficient web-based counselling is a **well-organised and functioning background structure.**

1. If the service is provided via a website or portal, the environment must have a simple structure and be user-friendly, support positive experience, and make the service trustworthy. This also applies to the hardware and means (e-mail, Skype, forum, etc.) of counselling.

2. The work equipment used for counselling must enable data encryption and an environment secured with a password. The latter is especially important if psychotherapy or supervision is offered online. Protection from external or internal unauthorised participation is important for security protection. All means must correspond to the requirements of ethical practice.

3. If this is a paid service, the environment should allow paying the fee by using different means and be secured and easy for making the transaction.

4. If you use a calendar and booking system, they must work seamlessly and support you, not cause extra problems. Booking instructions must be clear and communicated to the client in an understandable way. This is especially important if the clients can change or annul their appointments themselves.

5. In the case of web-based counselling, the client must know where to turn to if their counsellor is unavailable for 24 hours.

6. The clients must know if their data is being stored and how it is being stored. The data storage system used must correspond to the legal, ethical, and professional guidelines of processing personal data.

Ethics of web-based counselling

The same principles apply to web-based counselling as to traditional counselling. The generally recognised principles of ethical counselling are as follows:

☐ do not harm your client by word or action, but also by avoiding important intervention;

☐ do good to your client within the limits of your knowledge and opportunities;

☐ respect your client's need to make their own decisions in vital matters;

☐ be truthful and fair to your client;

☐ comply with the obligations you assumed with the counselling agreement;

☐ confidentiality – considering the peculiarity of web-based communication, it is possible that information is accidentally passed on to third persons. Use measures to protect the content of the conversation exchanged in the course of counselling. Clients using the services of mental health have the right to confidentiality. A counsellor must do everything in their power to ensure the confidentiality of the client's data. A web-based counsellor must also inform the client of dangers related to confidentiality in web-based counselling;

☐ informed consent from the person who is being counselled;

☐ appropriate counselling relationship (e.g. the counsellor does not go along with flirting);

☐ availability of the service.

Mistakes are usually related to the following:

☐ violating the trust of the person who is being counselled;

☐ acting outside of one's area of competence;

☐ backing out of assumed obligations;

☐ forcing one's values upon the person who is being counselled;

☐ making the person who is being counselled dependant on the counsellor;

☐ influencing the person who is being counselled in a sexual manner (e.g. to form a relationship with the counsellor);

☐ accepting inappropriate payment, e.g. accepting valuable gifts and services;

☐ making empty promises for services and results.

Online communication must follow the rules of **"netiquette"**, as well as an oral or written agreement concluded with the client, which may differ to some extent for different service providers. The word "netiquette" comes from the phrase "net etiquette", or network etiquette, which covers the guidelines and rules of Internet behaviour. Each Internet user should adhere to these rules – this makes you respectful of other people.

1. Remember that you are not communicating with a computer but another person.

2. Keep your writing clear, short, and precise.

3. You are who you write yourself to be.

4. Give titles to your notifications, always add a title to the subject line.

5. Accept and respect the reader – do not hold back on thanking them.

6. Be careful with humour and sarcasm.

7. Be tolerant, avoid insults.

8. When using data of any kind, always refer to the source.

9. Try to avoid repeating yourself and what you wrote, explain the background if necessary.

10. Do not abuse the power of your computer.

One of the most important parts of netiquette is e-mail etiquette. E-mail etiquette includes rules and good practices that should be kept in mind when sending and receiving e-mails.

☐ Try to subdivide long texts. Use empty lines to separate paragraphs.

☐ Always sign your name.

☐ Do not send letters with an empty subject line. Write a short summary of the topic of the letter on the subject line.

☐ Always remain polite in your letter. Use formal language, avoid slang.

Do not use CAPS LOCK. In a computer network, this is the equivalent of shouting.

☐ Do not use long quotes when replying to a letter; only quote the minimum necessary part.

☐ Do not forward chain mail. This helps you avoid clogging your mailboxes.

☐ Reread your letter before sending it. Check your grammar and make sure that there are no ambiguities.

☐ Never use irony in your letters. The recipient of the letter may not understand this and it may cause a lot of confusion.

☐ Gossip and cussing have no place in a letter – someone can very easily save or forward the letter.

☐ If possible, send the letter as plain text, not as HTML/rich text. The e-mail programme used by the recipient of the letter may not be able to display your beautifully designed letter.

☐ Ask the recipient if they are interested before adding attachments to the letter.

☐ Prefer pdf format for forwarding files.

☐ Reply to the letters in a timely manner, no later than within 24 hours.

☐ Do not respond to spam mail or "unsubscribe" letters. If you react to an "unsubscribe" letter, it shows that your mail address is active and you will receive even more spam in the future.