Chapter 12

An Analysis of 100 Muslim Email Counseling Clients

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ABSTRACT

This chapter analyzes 100 of the author’s Muslim clients to learn about their most common problems, demographic information, number of emails typically exchanged, and number of resolved and unresolved cases. The most common problems were marital, family (non-marital) issues, depression symptoms, and anxiety symptoms. Eighty-four percent of clients were women and 16% were men. Most clients were from either the Indian subcontinent or North America and were in their twenties. The average number of email exchanges (a single client’s email and the author’s therapeutic response) was six. Of the 100 clients, 36 cases were resolved, 57 cases were unresolved, and 7 cases are ongoing. The main type of marital problem faced was infidelity (physical and non-physical). Islam-informed cognitive behavioral techniques, as well as relevant Islamic teachings to use in therapy, are recommended and explained. An overall finding is that global Muslim clients seek online counseling for mostly relationship problems.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the author’s findings from analyzing emails from 100 Muslim clients. It answers the questions below, but the overall purpose of this analysis is to better understand the daily struggles of Muslims around the world.

1. What issues/problems are most common?
2. What demographic groups utilize this service the most?
3. How many emails are generally exchanged?
4. What methods of counseling seem most helpful?

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According to the author’s literature review, email counseling for Muslims is a new field of study with little to no research. Research on the field of email counseling in general is lacking (Baker & Ray, 2011). Clients learned about this free email counseling service from the author’s website, www.howtobeahappymuslim.com. Clients simply emailed the author to begin counseling. For over 4 years the author has provided this service, receiving thousands of emails from hundreds of Muslims around the globe.

Email counseling entails therapeutic email correspondence between the author and each client. The author mainly uses cognitive behavioral theory. Techniques include teaching cognitive behavioral tenets as well as building clients’ self-awareness of thoughts and feelings. The author also gives religious recommendations such as Islamic coping strategies and videos/articles. The author employs aspects of person-centered theory as well, especially empathic communication and reflection of feeling.

The author studied the last 100 email clients who had emailed her over the past five months before beginning to write this chapter. The objectives of this chapter are to discuss online counseling in general and in the Muslim world, to present the results of analyzing 100 Muslim email counseling clients, to suggest solutions and recommendations, and to discuss future research directions.

BACKGROUND

Email Counseling and Its Validity

Email counseling is therapeutic communication between a client and a counselor via email (Green, 2005). Email is the most common form of online counseling today (Baker & Ray, 2011; Green, 2005). Email counseling is a “new type of psychotherapy” that uses the “richness of language” to help clients (Grohol, 2001). Mental health professionals began offering fee-based services on the internet in 1995, primarily by email (Ainsworth, 2002). Online counseling is increasing due to the convenience of the internet (Baker & Ray, 2011; Olasupo & Atiri, 2013). Online counseling enables more people to receive mental health services that they otherwise would not get due to lack of accessibility and stigma (Ainsworth, 2002; Grohol, 2001; Novotney, 2017; Olasupo & Atiri, 2013; Taylor, Symonnette, & Singleton, 2009).

The number of email counseling websites today is innumerable (Olasupo & Atiri, 2013). Three of the most popular websites that offer online text-based counseling are Betterhelp.com, Talkspace.com, and Breakthrough.com. These websites give the options of counseling by live text, asynchronous messaging (similar to email), live phone, and live video (Novotney, 2017). Live text or online chat counseling is done synchronously; the counselor and client are communicating at the same time for a specified period. Email counseling is done asynchronously; the client and counselor are not communicating at the same time (Olasupo & Atiri, 2013). The University of Toronto’s Faculty of Social Work developed the first email counseling certificate program in 2004 (Murphy, MacFadden, & Mitchell, 2008).

Martha Ainsworth, a pioneer in e-therapy research, conducted a survey of over 400 online therapy clients which found that over 90% of clients believed that online therapy helped them (Ainsworth, 2002). Clients tend to disclose at a faster rate in email counseling than in face-to-face therapy (Baker & Ray, 2011; Grohol, 2001; Taylor et al., 2009). Online therapy is potentially more confidential than traditional therapy, as it doesn’t require personally identifying information in order to work (Green, 2005; Grohol, 2001).