Chapter 4
Ethical Issues in Online Counselling

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ABSTRACT

The use of technology is an emerging trend in the field of counselling. Despite advances in this area, there is a dearth of literature on the ethical use of online counselling. This chapter addresses ethical issues and concerns for counsellors conducting online counselling as well as the advantages and disadvantages of such an approach. Since the use of the Internet allows for global use of counselling services, this chapter, among others, examines various ethical standards of counselling that have been established across the world, and to this end, guidelines created by several countries’ professional associations are reviewed. Practical issues, including the training that may be necessary for counsellors to engage in this counselling mode are also addressed.

INTRODUCTION

The field of counselling has been affected by the rapid growth and application of the Internet. Many people use the Internet to access health information (D’Alessandro & Dosa, 2001), including mental health, or to participate in support groups. Online counselling Web sites devoted to counselling topics, as well as self-help information, are just a few examples of the proliferation in this field. In fact, a Google search using the words “online counselling” identifies approximately 6,260,000 hits. Thus, the Internet is filled with postings about counselling and related topics, presumably in demand to consumers’ interests.

Pollock (2006) stated that, “Clearly, therapists in this century will need to be informed of this phenomenon, regardless of whether they choose...
to engage in providing online therapy themselves” (p. 65). However, counsellors’ typical training for traditional counselling may not be sufficient to help them grasp the unique and complex ethical issues surrounding online counselling (Sampson, 2006). In fact, the ethical codes of the counselling profession have barely been able to keep track with technological advances. For example, despite the development of online counselling in the United States, the American Counselling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics (2005) makes mention of the Internet in only two places. One area refers to addressing risks and benefits and the other relates to maintaining accurate information on websites.

The goal of this chapter is to educate counsellors on the need for the use of technology in counselling with a view to call the practitioners’ attention to the ethical issues surrounding the use of technology in the act of counselling. This is in tandem with the observation of Maheu and Gordon (2000) when they stated that ultimately it is the responsibility of mental health professionals to examine the ethical, legal, and clinical issues related to the use of technology. Through an examination of online counselling standards and ethics across the world, the reader will gain knowledge related to this advancing field. Depending on the level of this acquired knowledge, practitioners can on their own therefore, decide if they will want to join this new phase of counselling application.

HISTORICAL EXAMINATION OF TECHNOLOGY IN COUNSELLING

For many years, counselling took place in face-to-face settings, though with variability in the type of counselling (group, family, and individual) and its theoretical basis. However, given the rapid expansion of Internet users in the world, counselling practice has experienced a marriage between its discipline and technology. In fact, counselling is a profession in which the use of online resources has experienced rapid growth, as there are opportunities for many applications. To understand this development and further examine the ethical issues associated with it, a brief background on the use of technology and counselling is necessary.

The field of counselling was initially impacted by computers in the 1970s with the advent of microcomputers (Gladding & Newsome, 2004). The early introduction of computers into counselling took the form of using computers for assessment, career guidance and managing client data. Gladding and Newsome (2004) stated that “by 1994, more than 70 computer-assisted guidance systems and software programs were in use” (p. 81). In more recent years, a variety of technologies have influenced the practice of counselling. These include telephones, computer assisted therapy, videos, CD-ROMS, e-mail and the Internet. Computers are used to store clients’ information, process insurance paperwork, and score assessments. Videos can be used with clients as an additional means of psycho education. However, it is the use of the Internet that appears to have had the most invasive impact on counselling.

Use of the Internet in Counselling

In June 2001, more than 167 million people accessed the Internet and in 2002, about 16 million Internet searches were done to seek mental health information (Freeny, 2001). Internet therapy is predicted to be the second fastest increasing service area in the next 10 years (Norcross, Hodges, & Prochaska, 2002). Sampson, Kolodinsky, and Greeno (1997) conducted a study to determine the pervasiveness of counselling-related activity on the Internet. Using the Internet search engine, Web Crawler found more than 4,500 Web pages with counselling as an identifier. Many of these Web pages were not owned by professional counsellors. This indicates an abundance of activity by non-professionals and the fact that potentially dangerous services are being offered online.

Internet counselling is defined as “the asynchronous and synchronous distance interaction