Chapter 5
Intimacy and Relational Communication in Online Counselling

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ABSTRACT

Intimacy is very crucial to the success of any therapeutic relationship. In a counselling relationship, disclosure has been found to be a cornerstone for the relationship to be effective and for self-disclosure to be achieved. In counselling there should be trust, intimacy, and effective relational communication. Intimate relationships can only occur where there is trust, effective communication, and assurance of confidentiality. Lack of intimacy in a counselling relationship has been found to contribute to both physiological and psychological problems of a client. It is, therefore, important for any counsellor who is aspiring to make a remarkable impact in the practice of counselling to make the establishment of intimacy and relational communication a priority. Online counselling by its nature requires much more effort to establish intimacy and relational communication with the client than face-to-face counselling. This chapter posits that, apart from acquiring the necessary skills needed in becoming a professional counsellor, an online counsellor needs to acquire some level of proficiency in communication technologies, especially in the areas of handling computers and effective use of the Internet. Also, such a counsellor should be well equipped with the principles of effective communication. He/She should be familiar with some of the Internet languages often referred to as ‘net lingo’ and some emotional icons often referred to as ‘emoticons’ in order for him/her to establish and promote intimacy and relational communication in an online counselling relationship.

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INTRODUCTION

Basically, counselling is a relationship of trust between counsellors and their clients with the intention of helping the clients to understand their potentials, challenges, opportunities, and threats. It is expected that in the course of the relationship, the client will be able to make well-informed decisions, which will help them to function well in the society. In a nutshell, it is believed that the counselling relationship will help individuals to contribute their quota to the development of their society and humanity at large. Other human relations, such as marriage, friendship, employer-employee relationships, and so on, are also relationships based on trust, and there is bound to be communication and intimacy. In all these forms of relationships, the importance of intimacy and communication cannot be underestimated. In fact, the importance of intimacy to counsellors has been stressed in a number of studies in which the researchers showed clear evidence that a lack of intimacy contributes to both physiological and psychological problems of clients (Cassidy, 2001; Berman & Margolin, 1992; Fisher & Stricker, 1982; Loevinger, 1976; Pennebaker, 1990).

INTIMACY

The word “intimacy” is popularly used to describe the familiar and very close affective connection with another as a result of entering into a deep or close relationship through knowledge and experience of the other. Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary (1971) defines intimacy as being commonly used to mean ‘belonging to or characterizing one’s deepest nature.’ It generally refers to the feeling of being in a close personal association and belonging together. Intimacy in the words of Albo (2010) is the closeness of a personal or private nature shared between two people that are friends. It is also used as a euphemism for an illicit sexual encounter.

The word was actually derived from the Latin word “intimus,” meaning inner or inmost (Hu, Wood, Smith, & Westbrook, 2004). Cassidy (2001) quoting Reiss and Patrick (1996) pointed out that the word originated from the Latin words “intimus” which means ‘innermost’ and “intimare” meaning ‘to make the innermost known.’ Cassidy concluded that the discussion of intimacy addresses one’s deepest nature, one’s innermost self, the core of one’s being, and the truth about whom one really is.

In general, intimacy inspires thoughts of closeness, warmth, and shared affection. Genuine intimacy in human relationships requires dialogue, transparency, vulnerability, and reciprocity. Each of us has experienced intimacy in our lives, but despite our familiarity with intimacy, behavioural scientists find it difficult to study. Cordova and Scott (2001) argued that intimacy has not been ignored by psychology, although it is often regarded as mystical, ethereal, or intensely private and, therefore, hidden from view. Also, researchers such as Hu et al. (2004), Stemberg (1988), Reis and Shaver (1988), Prager (1995), and Hatfield (1998) described intimacy as a very complex and heterogeneous concept that has generated a variety of definitions. Such definitions have generally been either confusingly fuzzy or unsatisfactorily narrow (Cordova & Scott, 2001). Hu et al. (2004), therefore, posited that for social science researchers, the several definitions could be generalized into two broad categories. First, intimacy is defined as the sharing of one’s innermost being, or essence, such as strength and vulnerability, weakness, and competence with another person; a warm, close, and communicative relationship with one person in particular. Second, intimacy is defined as the experience of another’s wholeness, an awareness of the innermost character of another person, and is much more a matter of tuning into someone else’s reality, and risking being changed by that experience, than a matter of extending your self-absorption to include someone else.