Chapter 6

Reaching out across the Virtual Divide: An Empirical Review of Text-Based Therapeutic Online Relationships

D’Arcy J. Reynolds Jr.
University of Southern Indiana, USA

Terry Hanley
University of Manchester, UK

Markus Wolf
University Hospital Heidelberg, Germany

ABSTRACT

Text-based online therapy interventions have been used for more than a decade, but no comprehensive review of the effects on the alliance have been conducted. The authors have collected all of the empirical articles published up to December 2008 (n = 12) that examine the alliance of text-based online therapy. These studies involved a total of 574 clients who were treated by 18 therapists through various psychological interventions for a variety of problems. When compared to the face-to-face relationships (7 studies), participants in text based forms of online therapy mostly reported similar (3 studies) or stronger (2 studies) alliance ratings. The findings of this review suggest that online text therapists are able to meaningfully connect with their clients. Limitations of the findings and future research are discussed.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61350-204-4.ch006

INTRODUCTION

The high prevalence of diagnosable psychological problems and their contribution to ill health and disability has been regularly cited in the mental health literature (e.g., World Health Organization, 2001). Unfortunately, many individuals never seek assistance for their treatable mental disorders (Surgeon General’s Report on Mental Health, 1999). Barriers to traditional face-to-face therapy, such as managed care’s insistence on medical necessity, social stigma, and geographic
isolation have prompted some people to turn to the growing number of therapists conducting psychotherapy over the Internet.

At this writing, the most common mode of delivery for Internet psychotherapy is text-based e-mail although text-based chat services are becoming more popular (Heinlen, Welfel, Richmond, & Rak, 2003; Stofle, 2001). E-mail services are asynchronous, meaning participants respond to one another when they have time, rather than immediately. Online psychotherapists have developed a variety of pricing arrangements including flat fees for standard message lengths, by-the-minute charges for time spent replying, or package deals for a set number of e-mail or unlimited e-mails for a specific period of time (Rochlen, Zack, & Speyer, 2004). Chat services are synchronous or involve a dialogue between client and practitioner in real time using an Internet chatroom or Instant Messaging software (AIM, ICQ, etc.). Typically, these sessions require a pre-determined appointment time and clients are charged by the half-hour or hour, although some sites charge by the minute (Anthony, 2006; Tyler & Guth, 2004). Therapists have also begun to offer their services using more sensory rich online technologies such as videoconferencing or audio-to-audio (Rochlen, Zack, & Speyer, 2004). However, we do not discuss these developments but rather choose to focus on the currently most popular form: text based online therapy.

In an extensive meta-analysis of the outcome effectiveness of Internet based psychotherapeutic interventions, Barak, Hen, Boniel-Nissim, & Shapira (2008) reported a medium mean weighted effect size (0.53). They reviewed 92 studies involving 9,764 clients with only 7 studies examining email therapy (N = 383, ES = 0.51) and 9 studies examining synchronous chat therapy (N = 231, ES = 0.53). Although this study concluded that online psychological interventions are a legitimate therapeutic activity, it did not systematically address a crucial aspect of therapeutic process: the therapeutic relationship.

**BACKGROUND**

**Importance of the Therapeutic Relationship Online**

There is a long-held and widespread view that the therapeutic relationship is at the very least a vehicle for conveying face-to-face therapy’s active ingredients (Hartley & Strupp, 1983) and perhaps even responsible for achieving face-to-face therapy’s positive outcomes (Garfield, 1994; Goldfried, Greenberg, & Marmar, 1990; Horvath & Bedi, 2002; Luborsky, Barber, & Crits-Christoph, 1990; Orlinsky, Grawe, & Parks, 1994; Sexton & Whiston, 1994). Its role in online therapy, however, is less clear (e.g., Griffiths & Cooper, 2003; Sampson, Kolodinsky, & Greeno, 1997).

Online practitioners maintain that their ability to form therapeutic relationships is “very important” (Powell, 1998), raising questions about the effect the online context has on the therapeutic relationship. Although online therapy might be expected to be less stimulus rich than conventional therapy, some have argued this need not lead to a lesser quality interaction (Grohol, 1999). For example, paper-and-pencil writing alone (without therapeutic feedback) has demonstrated generally positive effects (e.g., Pennebaker, 1997; see Wright, 2004, for a review of this literature). More specifically, anecdotal reports have indicated that online clients and therapists may perceive text therapy as similar to traditional therapy. Fenichel et al. (2002), noted the “…similarity between a text-based transcript and a comparable office session” and more specifically, “…the expressiveness and depth of the text-based communication” (p. 26).

In this chapter, we review the research on whether therapeutic relationships are being formed solely using online text-based approaches. We addressed two fundamental questions: first, ‘can therapeutic relationships truly develop online?’ and second, ‘how do online therapeutic relationships compare to their face-to-face counterparts?’ We start by summarizing the positions and the
Related Content

Online Identity Formation and Digital Ethos Building in the Chinese Blogosphere
[www.igi-global.com/chapter/online-identity-formation-digital-ethos/72633?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/chapter/online-identity-formation-digital-ethos/72633?camid=4v1a)

Going Viral in the Classroom: Using Emerging CMC Technologies for Social Change
[www.igi-global.com/chapter/going-viral-classroom/60024?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/chapter/going-viral-classroom/60024?camid=4v1a)

Communicating Electronically When Too Far Away to Visit
[www.igi-global.com/chapter/communicating-electronically-when-too-far/19759?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/chapter/communicating-electronically-when-too-far/19759?camid=4v1a)

Maximizing Multicultural Online Learning Experiences with the Social Presence Model, Course Examples, and Specific Strategies
[www.igi-global.com/chapter/maximizing-multicultural-online-learning-experiences/55581?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/chapter/maximizing-multicultural-online-learning-experiences/55581?camid=4v1a)