Chapter 13
Self-Disclosure in Online Counselling

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ABSTRACT

Online counselling has been described as an emerging trend and an anytime, anyplace activity that is supported by portable technology. Time constraints and geographical barriers are removed with online counselling. Counselling involves a series of skills and strategies along with a therapeutic approach. Self-disclosure is sometimes used in order to help build and deepen the therapeutic relationship. This chapter focuses on self-disclosure as a useful strategy for sharing information with others in a Web mediated context. In many counselling situations, considerable benefit may stem from online counsellor/counsellor mutual self-disclosure. The anonymity of the interaction seems to facilitate a sense of personal freedom and privacy that frees the client to talk to the counsellor with a sense of personal safety and security. These benefits notwithstanding, a number of challenges and ethical issues are involved in self-disclosure in online counselling and these should be taken into consideration by stakeholders.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of counselling has been around for many years, and it reflects the need for one person or group of persons to seek out help from another person. Counselling as a professional occupation, therefore, derives not from the clinic but from more social settings. It focuses on helping people resolve problems or role issues related to work, school, family matters, or other issues (Idowu & Esere, 2007). Online counselling, however, is a relatively recent innovation, brought about by modern day technology. It is variously referred to as Internet counselling, e-counselling, e-mail counselling, e-therapy, Web counselling, e-psychotherapy, Internet psychotherapy, or online counselling/
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psychotherapy (Heinlen, Welfel, Reynolds, Richmond, & Rak, 2003; Patrick, 2006).

In counselling, a number of skills, strategies, and behaviours are brought to the fore for effective interaction to take place. Counselling involves a series of skills and strategies along with a therapeutic approach, such as person-centred, cognitive-behavioural, or psychodynamic. Self-disclosure is sometimes used in order to help build and deepen the therapeutic relationship and this concept has long been a topic of interest in the counselling and psychotherapy literature (Watkins, 1990). Self-disclosure is a useful strategy for sharing information with others and through sharing information, we may become intimate with other people and our interpersonal relationship is strengthened. Self-disclosure is not simply providing information to another person. Instead, scholars (Simon, 1988; Anderson & Mandell, 1989; Doster & Nesbitt, 1999) define self-disclosure as sharing information with others that they would not normally know or discover. Self-disclosure involves risk and vulnerability on the part of the person sharing the information.

Self-disclosure (in this chapter, mutual self-disclosure) is regarded as a natural part of the counselling interaction. This chapter will highlight the four different (deliberate, unavoidable, accidental and client initiated) types of self-disclosure. Also to be highlighted in this chapter is self-disclosure with a range of populations (adolescents; children and those with diminished capacity for abstract thinking; people with diverse sexual orientations, etc.). Functions of mutual self-disclosure are also one of the thrusts of this chapter. Ethical issues in online mutual self-disclosure in counselling will also be examined as well as cultural and economic challenges/implications for Nigerian counsellors and counsellees. Before delving into these issues, the concept of online counseling is worthy of exploration.

THE CONCEPT OF COUNSELLING

Online counselling (also known as e-therapy) is a relatively recent innovation brought about by information and communication technology, involving a one-to-one interaction between a client and an offering a professional counselling service.

A plethora of Internet facilities provide forms of counselling. These include peer support groups for specific problems, message forums, and chat rooms. Peer based on-line discussion and therapy groups have been present on the Internet for over a decade, with some of them mediated by a professional counselor (Gedge, 2002).

Online counseling, according to Gedge (2002), is currently present in three basic forms. First, e-mail question and response—with many sites offering discounts on multiple emails. Second, chat programmes in which an appointment is made and generally paid for before counsellor and client “meet” online, using solely text based exchanges for a specified amount of time. This is evolving into secure Web based messaging. Third, video or audio links in which counsellor and client are visible over a Web based camera (Webcam).

Online counselling offers accessibility and convenience to many clients (Gedge, 2002). Costs are usually lower than face-to-face counselling due to reduced overheads. The lack of travel requirements means improved access to services for people in remote areas or people who are housebound due to disability or family commitments. People who travel extensively and/or who have time constraints may utilize online therapeutic services because they can be accessed from wherever they happen to be. Others who may prefer on-line therapy may be people who are ambivalent about therapy, or uncomfortable with the traditional model of counselling. These range from people who are mildly uncomfortable with talking about their problems face-to-face, to people suffering from serious mental health conditions, such as agoraphobia, social phobias or anxiety disorders (Chelune, 1999).
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