Chapter 14

The Challenges of Online Counseling in a Developing Country

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ABSTRACT

Information and communication technology has expanded the capacity for person-to-person communication and has created opportunities for man to expand knowledge and communicate such. Statistics has shown that the number of individuals having access to Internet is increasing and as such, every field of human knowledge is annexing the opportunity. These opportunities are, however, filled with challenges. The counseling field is not an exception. This chapter has, however, outlined that challenges such as technical know-how, counseling environment in terms of privacy and security, the problem of invisibility and anonymity, and the ethical issues of practice, may hinder online counseling in Nigeria. It is concluded that online counseling is a possibility in Nigeria and other developing countries if certain pertinent issues are addressed.

INTRODUCTION

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has finally come to stay, expanding the capacity for person-to-person communication irrespective of time zones, geographic location, convenience, and time gaps between sending and receiving messages. This is taken to mean that ICT has become an immediate answer for almost (if there is anything left) everything that man need to achieve—in medicine, transportation, teaching, and governance, to mention but a few. There is hardly a sector of any economy that ICT has not permeated, making all human endeavours
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to depend on it. Today, automobile faults are diagnosed using ICT, patients are treated online, and the 21st century classrooms are automated. However, the most recognized ICTs are computer and Internet. Schools, government offices, and business places have been connected to the Internet to make information dissemination and sharing more convenient.

Gore (1998) observed that American government has made progress in reaching the goal of connecting all of the nation’s schools and classrooms to the Internet by the year 2000. Goosley (2001) also pointed out that during the first quarter of 2001, 27 nations and about 429 million people have Internet access, with about 41% of them from North America. Another recent survey by the Internet World Stats (2009) revealed that Africa has a population of 991,002,342 out of which 4,514,400 had access to the Internet in 2001 and that the number increased to about 65,903,900 in 2009, representing 6.7% of the population. In contrast, North America has about 340,831,831 people in 2001, 108,096,800 had access to the Internet, while the number increased to about 251,735,500 in 2009, representing approximately 73.9% of the total population. It was further revealed from the report that Nigeria has a population of about 149,229,090, with about 11,000,000 Internet users representing approximately 7.4% of the population. This statistics clearly indicates that the percentage of those with access to the Internet in the developing nations is far less than those in the developing world.

Moving with this development, counseling profession in the advanced nations has annexed the opportunity with the introduction of the online counseling, which was not imagined about one, two decades ago. However, there are issues that are pertinent to online counseling vis-à-vis the developing countries that need adequate attention before the practice could have much effect. As could be concluded from the statistics given earlier, access to Internet will have hampering effects on the application of ICT to deliver counseling services in a nation as Nigeria. It should also be noted that there are no statistics representing the percentage of this population who will likely need counseling and of course online counseling. However, if anyone will need online counseling, it may likely be among those who have access to the Internet.

It has been noted that counseling is a profession that empowers individual and addresses issues such as gaining perspective on ones behaviour, emotions and relationships, provides a means to express ones feelings and identify patterns of thinking, alleviates anxiety, depression and anger in their many forms, helps develop communication skills for dealing with conflict and frustration, and addresses pain, working through loss and adding meaning to one’s life (LaCombe, 2008). The platform that facilitates an interaction between clients and counselor will must thus be well ‘prepared,’ first, by the counselor and ‘understood’ by both parties. This is because the process has to do with trust and confidence in an “intimate stranger” as alluded to by Snow (2001), because they might have never met one another before.

Counseling is many things, but it will be proper to clarify that counseling cannot properly be given a definition. Counseling does not refer to an activity where a counseling expert analyzes the client. It is rather an interaction between a counselor and client that produces a framework to make positive changes in the client’s approach to life. It is not also a process or activity that is used to solve what people regard as major problems. It simply attends to issues that cause distress for clients and prevent them from having satisfaction in life. Counseling brings out the strengths and abilities of clients in order for them to manage life issues and challenges. LaCombe (2008) believed that counseling helps with problems in living through an interaction with a trained professional, by offering a way to gain perspective on ones behaviour, emotions, and relationships, providing a means to express ones feelings and identify patterns of thinking. Alleviating anxiety,