

Online psychological help and psychosupport in psychological and pedagogical practice

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ABSTRACT

Modern information technology has been incorporated into almost all aspects of life. As a consequence of computer and Internet accessibility, the percentage rise in their users, especially young people, has been observed.

My professional experience of psychological help for the youth has suggested that young people prefer anonymous virtual counselling, psychological and spiritual support (i.e. „virtual guardian angel”), where one can consult a psychologist anytime about various issues, to direct contacts. However, this attitude is not a hindrance

to real contacts (direct or the so-called live contacts), designed to offer help and support.

The paper attempts at analyzing some of the issues regarding online psychological help from the perspective of current challenges and expectations. It refers to methodology as well as practical and ethical issues and analyses the usefulness of this new type of help for enriching the achievements of clinical psychology and improving assistance tools.

Key words: online, psychology, help, support

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Online psychological help

Online psychological help provides assistance via electronic media such as the Internet, telephone, video telephone etc. Online help generally involves information and educational services as well as therapeutic services. The first type of services is provided by clinical psychologists to widely promote mental health by various indirect and direct methods. It can involve both contacting interested individuals (also parents, teachers and other professionals) and making use of websites to promote information on education and support. It mainly refers to opportunities and threats to optimal development and functioning of humans; it also concerns various social roles and situations [1]. Whereas therapeutic aspect of online psychological help refers to providing services for people in need via the Internet and its tools such as e-mail, video telephone etc [see also 2].

Therapeutic activity of online psychologists involves psychological and therapeutic services such as psychosocial support with elements of crisis intervention and psychological counselling combined with psychoeducation and psychoprevention. Nonetheless, it is not actually traditional psychotherapy due to various possible errors in communication and specific interpersonal relationship between a therapist and client. In theory, however, the aim of therapeutic effect of online psychological help is the same as the aim of standard psychotherapy, which involves eliminating and alleviating consequences of functioning disorders as well as developing a patient's personality and enhancing their mental strength [3].

The terminology and principles of online psychological help are directly connected with main tasks of clinical as well as developmental and educational psychology. The pioneer of online help was Ivan Goldberg [4]. In 1993, he presented information on depression treatment on his *Depression Central* website and initiated a support group for people suffering from a disease termed *Walking In Darkness*. Since then, numerous other forms of Internet-based help have been introduced – including support groups such as discussion lists and forums [5-9] as well as attempts at online psychotherapy regarding specific disorders [10,11].

In Poland, there has been a considerable increase in websites and bulletins devoted to online psychological services. In comparison to years 2002-2003 (when the author, as one of the first in Poland, launched online psychological help service at the Academic Centre of Psychological Help www.acpp.ab.edu.pl at the then Kazimierz Wielki Bydgoszcz Academy psych.ab.edu.pl/cpp, at present www.acpp.ukw.edu.pl; he has also offered a similar service on the portals www.zdrowemiasto.pl and www.ptt-terapia.pl, while the author's most recent work is a portal for grammar and secondary school students www.psycho-help.pl (since 2003

over 7000 individuals have been provided with help by me and my team through online psychological counselling) an increase in companies and individuals providing Internet counselling has been observed (the Google query “online psychological help” will currently return over 330 000 results on 29th May 2010). Although European and Polish statistics have been less impressive than American ones, the numbers have definitely been increasing. In merely one year 1998, 22 million people were provided with health information via websites [12]. An estimated 5% of websites concern mental health [13].

Online therapeutic services in clinical practice – author's perspective

As far as psychological help provided via e-mail or other messengers (IRC, chat etc) Online therapeutic contact can be established by Internet telephone conversation (voice – over or video conference) is concerned, it is essential that a client consults a therapist when they need it, as frequently and as long as they decide to do so. It is clients who initiate contact, which may concern developmental, personality, social, professional, emotional-sexual and family-relationship problems. A psychologist-therapist may suggest the frequency or number of consultations but it is always clients who decide.

Considering my own practice, it is my belief that there are actually no limits to what problem can be discussed via the Internet (despite the absence of physical contact) and whether this form of contact will be effective in a given case, because actually no psychologist can be absolutely sure about their decision on a specific approach or work method. One can never be certain that the client will continue to attend therapeutic meetings. Therefore, it is not the nature of problems that imposes the limit but a patient's needs, communication capabilities and the ability to describe one's difficulties. When it comes to online therapeutic contact, motivation and confidence in this form of help become even more important than in the case of classical psychotherapy as it is not an easy task for online therapists to strengthen the motivation of distance patients. Online therapists can use the same approaches and techniques as traditional therapists, that is cognitive, behavioral and psychoanalytical methods.

However, where immediate physical or medical intervention for individuals with major problems is necessary, e-help can only be used as a temporary solution and cannot replace traditional psychotherapy.

In my experience, it is possible to provide online help for behaviour disorders and adjustment difficulties regarding, for instance:

- coping with difficult or crisis situations concerning personal, family-relationship, professional and social-life issues;
- coping with one's own or loved ones'

- illness and its consequences;
- solving problems concerning addiction to alcohol or drugs;
- solving relationship and sexual problems;
- solving personal problems concerning one's system of values;
- solving educational and school problems;
- preventing dangers and solving current problems in order to help develop one's self-reliance, responsibility and ability to make decisions.
- preventing dangers and providing help concerning anxiety behaviour, aggression, self-aggression etc;
- shaping adequate self-appraisal, learning self-acceptance and ways to be yourself;
- choosing and fulfilling life aims;
- shaping sexual or personal identity;

Moreover, therapeutic services involve the support as well as psychosocial and professional rehabilitation of ill and disabled people by various means of *mutual help and online psychoemotional support*, which are also designed for people with addiction and violence problems.

My clinical experience concerning both young people and adults has confirmed that online counselling and help can be an additional or alternative form of assistance, compared to traditional help. It is an ideal method of establishing contact for clients who wish to stay anonymous. Not only can the Internet be used for contacting clients but also for improving cooperation between psychologists in order to, for instance, seek expert secondary opinions. Considering the wide availability of the Internet, online psychological help makes it possible for therapists and patients to maintain contact even after the completion of therapy. Most importantly, it is an indispensable prevention and information tool.

Popularity of online psychological services

According to my own survey on online help, conducted with a group of 750 young people (school and academic students) in years 2003-2009, more and more school and academic students recognize the existence of online psychological services and it is them who most frequently decide to make use of it (in 2005 – 11%, 2006 – 19%, 2008 – 28%, 2009 44%) when personal, family, social, relationship or sexual difficulties arise Aouil [3].

Taking all results into consideration [1,3,14] it can be concluded that there is a need for this type of help and the interest in online psychological help has gradually been increasing. Clients most frequently value anonymity, comfort and availability of help whenever they experience difficulties.

Contemporary psychologists should make

an effort to adjust conditions, stages, methods and forms of work and contact to patients' individual needs. Numerous people consider online psychological help to be a trustworthy form of help and they recognize its effectiveness [1,3,14]. Such processes create opportunities for the improvement of healthcare and better feedback as well as for overcoming resistance to consult therapists.

According to numerous other authors like, for instance, Grohol, one of the major reasons behind using online psychological help is mainly the opportunity to receive advice and support whenever needed. It especially refers to inhabitants of distant or rural areas who may not have access to well qualified specialists or mental health centres. Supplied with the opportunity to use online help services, they are given the chance of contacting professionals and online support groups.

Other people may have difficulty with social relations in real life. Such people do not need to feel lonely – they can compare feelings and thoughts with others and consequently receive support and life help. In the process of seeking communication opportunities and professionals to discuss with, one should choose online help. Finally, for numerous people there is still a lot of stigma attached to mental illnesses. Online services provide opportunities for removing much of the stigma from these problems [15].

Qualifications of an e-therapist versus the effectiveness of help

Considering some of the above discussed theoretical and clinical aspects of online psychological help, such clinical practice appears to be undoubtedly important and advisable and the number of people willing to use online help will be growing day by day.

Apart from the earlier mentioned arguments, the reasons behind the necessity to discuss qualifications of an e-psychologist are, on one hand, survey results concerning opinions of various groups of people, including psychologists, about the significance of online psychological help in clinical practice and, on the other hand, alarming attitudes of some professionals who outwardly provide online psychological help or e-therapy and actually „experiment“ with clients, trying to help without the use of professional background. Although I do not have assessment tools regarding one's theoretical or professional qualifications for working directly with clients, I would like to remark that the efficiency and effectiveness of online psychological help does not often depend only on the contents of help but also on the manner of providing it.

The differences between classical and online help are mainly the following:

- characteristic features of distance communication;
- limitations resulting from the impossibility

of observation and the absence of other immediate and auxiliary interaction tools, important for therapists

- wide range of ages of clients (my youngest e-client was 9 and the oldest was 72 years old);
- wide range of problems raised by e-clients.

Similarly to direct contact, for therapeutic change to occur, there are necessary conditions, described by Rogers [16], that also have to be satisfied in regards to online help. Based on my own clinical and research experience, let me analyze the structure of qualifications of an e-therapist in order to determine development areas.

Online psychological help has essentially been designed for:

- helping provide revealing insight into oneself and one's situation;
- helping make adequate assessment of one's individual abilities, environment, source of stress and helplessness;
- better understanding of oneself and one's own behaviour motives (conscious and unconscious) and defense mechanisms;
- arriving at one's own conclusions and developing the knowledge of oneself and one's environment;
- making it easier for clients to take actions meant for better adjustment and solving of problems on the basis of their hierarchy of values and beliefs.

It has to be additionally recognized that there are limits concerning online psychological help. They mainly refer to certain ethical standards. This seems to be the weakest point of e-help practice, both in countries which have had e-help tradition and in Poland. The ethical side also definitely concerns the e-therapist certification system and professional responsibility towards e-clients.

Considering the recommendations of American organizations which were first to provide online psychological help *American Counseling Association* (ACA) [17], *National Board for Certified Counselors* (NBCC) [18] observations of researchers in the field [19] and my own experience, the following competence standards regarding effective online help can be established:

- considerable knowledge of psychological theories and professional qualifications;
- considerable knowledge of theoretical and practical principles of distance psychological help;
- considerable knowledge of communication technologies and ability to apply them;
- knowledge of online communication methods and techniques as well as basic principles behind the Internet linguistic and non-textual communication;
- considerable knowledge of the code of ethics suggested by foreign psychological

societies which have incorporated online help into their activity;

- experience of using the media in psychological practice and experience of information management by the use of media as well as the ability to use electronic information resources in the process of communication with clients;
- ability to identify and diagnose a client's problems and specify current needs of clients from various social-cultural environments;
- knowledge of institutions providing psychological help, including online institutions, and their competence
- knowledge of national and European network of consultants;
- ability to establish verbal and non-verbal contact with a client as well as maintain the balance between a monologue and dialogue by means of non-verbal communication;
- willingness to attend training and supervision sessions. Supervision – a psychotherapeutic method, rather obligatory for psychotherapists. It involves regular meetings between a therapist and another specialist certified as a supervisor. During a meeting a supervisor and psychotherapist discuss selected cases regarding clients and other issues connected with the duties of a psychotherapist. Therefore these meetings aim at providing assistance for psychotherapists and enhancing the quality of therapeutic services.)

It can be easily observed that not all psychologists who have graduated from psychological studies and have even obtained a license for a given therapeutic competence have automatically become prepared for this type of work. Therefore, considering the necessity to systematize a newly emerging work market in order to provide high-quality online psychological services, on this stage of development of online therapeutic services training, supervision and associations of online psychologists-consultants have to be necessarily focused on.

Moreover, it has to be recognized that certain remarks about the practice of online psychological help result from a specific code of ethical conduct. At present, this aspect is one of the weakest points of the practice of e-help, both in countries which have had the tradition of psychological help and in Poland. The ethical side definitely concerns both the e-therapist certification system and professional responsibility towards e-clients.

Stages and characteristics of online psychological help

The first stage involves establishing online contact on the initiative of a person who needs help. It usually begins with an application made on the portal or submitted to a psychologist. The request is mostly made via e-mail. On a well structured online help portal or website there will be an application form requesting basic information about a client (and ensuring the anonymity of clients in terms of personal details) and giving the opportunity for describing one's problem. It is usually a detailed description of ailments and difficulties experienced by a given client. Some clients focus mainly on a problem itself, ignoring formal details or providing false information for fear of being identified. An example can be Monika;

My name's Monika, I come from Wroclaw and my problem's domestic violence. I don't want to talk to the school psychologist because I know I'd be recognized and my girl mates would find out about these visits. I've tried to cope myself but it's come to nothing. I've decided to write to you because I've had enough of this life. Please ?

More detailed messages probably result from the need of immediate help or concern a crisis situation. An e-therapist initiates the preliminary stage of establishing therapeutic contact and begins psychoeducation regarding problems that have been raised; a therapist also asks additional questions to gain a better understanding of a problem and client's personal and social situation. At this stage it is also necessary to determine what category of help can be provided and what tool is meant to be used.

After an e-client has answered a therapist's questions and the type and range of help have been determined, the next stage – therapeutic contact – begins.

A contract is an agreement between an e-therapist and e-client, aimed at determining the conditions of help, enhancing the security of both parties and preventing potential misunderstandings about the process of e-therapy or its results and effects. In one of initial e-mails, an e-therapist presents the terms of the contract and confirms them together with an e-client. Both of them have the right to negotiate the terms of the contract before the final approval.

The contents of the contract can be negotiated until the approval, especially in regards to the frequency of contact, waiting time for an e-mail reply, length of conversation via skype or telephone or possibility of sending SMS messages or talking via mobile. If it is supposed to be paid help, such conditions have to be precisely determined.

Essential elements of the help process include **identification of a problem** and factors behind the problem and finally **search for the solution to the problem**. There are essentially four stages of online psychological counselling:

1. Problem identification – identification of a

difficulty experienced by an e-client – usually described as difficulty in fulfilling specific tasks concerning life or development or a new situation.

2. Identification of factors contributing to the persistence of a problem and to difficulties encountered during the attempts to solve it – in terms of feelings experienced by clients (e.g. fear), impeding the application of one's skills, causing the absence of certain skills or inability to use them.

3. Search for alternative solutions to difficulties experienced by e-clients. The solutions have to be specific, applicable to a client's circumstances and have to make it possible to experience an immediate change (even the slightest).

4. Completion stage – contact is made again after a short and long periods of time to support and enhance client's efforts to make changes; it is also an opportunity to modify the earlier accepted strategy.

Therapy effects usually arise from a supporting atmosphere (trust, acceptance and support) and therapy mechanisms (when clients talk about problems and describe them). Therapeutic mechanisms also result in: filtering and reduction of negative emotions and experiences as well as elimination and alleviation of symptoms.

The aim or aims of e-help govern the direction of actions and the choice of help strategies adopted by an e-therapist. Similarly to psychological counselling, the strategies can be directive (instructional strategy and confrontational strategy) or non-directive (catalyzing strategy, discharge strategy, information strategy, support strategy).

Essential duties of an e-therapist involve providing help in the identification and specification of an objective, or objectives and construction of their hierarchy. An e-therapist teaches a client how to participate in e-therapy and adapts oneself to the type of relation established by a client. For direct contact with clients, each e-therapist uses their own therapeutic skills and abilities. Their skills become resources which enrich the process of e-help.

The future of online psychological help

There are numerous disputes amongst psychologists and psychotherapists over e-therapy, that is psychological service provided via the Internet. Negative attitudes often result from the ignorance about this category of support. A number of specialists cannot imagine Internet therapy, pointing to differences between online help and direct therapy sessions, held in specialist offices. The results emphasize the necessity to spread knowledge of online psychological activity, especially concerning application rules.

A serious obstacle in the path of the development of e-help is the absence of

professional and ethical principles behind it. The commonest accusations made against online help are the following:

- It is „unethical” and „unprofessional” due to the lack of legal and professional rules; the absence of them can pose threats to clients;
- Communication based „on text” or „without the possibility of observation and direct contact with a client” cannot be regarded as psychotherapy or even counselling owing to various limitations resulting from distance communication.

What measures can be taken then? Without doubt nobody will ever halt the development of online psychological services, especially because of their growing popularity and clients’ expectations.

Psychological e-help can definitely be considered professional, but it has to be emphasized that it is not a good solution for everybody. Moreover, it cannot fully replace direct help. It is professional qualifications of psychologists/ online consultants and online psychologists’ code of ethics that the range of services, including psychoeducation, prevention, support, intervention, counselling or therapy, will depend on. After all, refusing to help people in need seems unethical.

Certification, Training, Supervision: In order to establish professional standards of psychological e-help, it is necessary to promote training and supervision for e-therapists so that they can be awarded professional certificates. I have been the head of the **Section of Counselling and Media Presentations of the Polish Psychological Society** which has made a comprehensive suggestion, according to which, among other things, candidates applying for the Certificate of Online Consultant have to collect 300 obligatory points (out of 500) and subsequently pass an exam.

Association of consultants: The creation of professional standards of online psychological services does not only involve investment in team qualifications and technology but also legal protection and organizational background. An association of e-therapists can provide such protection and basis for further research on the improvement of work methods, with the use of clear, lawful and ethical basics.

My suggestion is to establish the “Online Psychologists Association” or the „Polish Online Psychologists Association” (Polskie Stowarzyszenie Psychologów Online- PSPO).

From the perspective of the world development of the market of online services, it is not a completely original idea. Throughout the very short history of online help there have been such organizations before. The first one was ACA (American Counseling Association). Other organizations of this type tried to issue a consultant license. One of the first ideas was a consultant diploma issued by the „National Board of Certified

Counselors” NBCC. Another example would be the most popular organization for e-therapists known as ISMHO, which attempts at pointing to the major importance of online psychological help for academic research.

Ethical context: Establishing the code of ethics is an indispensable basis for the development of online psychological services. The plan of the code of ethics for e-therapists is under preparation and it includes the following assumptions:

- possibilities and limitations concerning the positive effects of online help;
- situations providing opportunities for therapeutic contact between an e-therapist and client;
- limits of online diagnosis;
- client’s right to anonymity and comfortable communication tools as well as a therapist’s obligation to perform overt actions;
- situations when direct contact with a psychologist or psychiatrist is necessary;
- decisions concerning payment for services.

The above discussed conception corresponds to the principles of *Health On the Net Foundation* [20] and the suggestion made by Ron Kraus [10], who points to the necessity of establishing such a code of ethics, although he is completely aware of the fact that the code will not solve all dilemmas and conflicts but still it will be the basis and guarantee that a psychologist will make efforts to provide services of the highest possible quality.

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