Counselling in a digital world



Along with almost every other aspect of day to day life, counselling is also a digital option now. Clients can now access mental health services such as psychotherapy, couples' therapy and coaching from the comfort of their living rooms or a hotel room far from where their counsellor lives. From what used to be exclusively face-to-face services, counsellors now offer sessions online via email, video-chat, instant-messaging, group forums, and more.

For clients, this means more choice and flexibility: they can have ongoing therapy when away on business or vacation, or choose to receive support in a way that best fits their learning style and comfort level. What does all this mean for counsellors and for the clients engaging in counselling? Let's take a look at some of the intricacies and specificities of what makes online counselling unique.

Addressing fears and misconceptions about digital counselling

Often people are tentative, unsure or reluctant when they hear about online counselling. After all, the face-to-face aspect of traditional therapy seems critical to its success and inseparable from how the therapeutic process functions. Reservations about trying online counselling might include the misunderstanding that it isn't "real" counselling, but this is far from the case. Digital counselling is an effective method of support.

People also sometimes fear that if it's online, it isn't private and confidential. This is a valid concern but reputable practitioners should be utilizing the latest advances in security software. It is worth noting here that counsellors online are bound by the same ethical standards as their face-to-face counterparts and cannot in any way share the information you tell them without your consent.

Counsellors may need to update and refine their skill sets for online counselling environments. They will to find ways to keep their clients "in the room" - that is keep them focused and engaged in the face of multiple distractions. In crisis counselling, they will need to adjust their risk assessment skills and know when to direct clients to an in-person form of counselling is needed to ensure safety.

Benefits of online counselling

Let's take a look at some of the reasons online counselling is on the rise and why you might choose to take advantage of it:

Mobility and accessibility

Online counselling goes where you go! This flexibility can be a great feature for people who travel a lot or are just on-the-go in their own community. Likewise, it is accessible for people who have mobility restrictions, as they can access these services from home. All in all, online counselling is going to fit that much easier into your daily schedule as it skips any commuting to see your counsellor.

Feeling of safety

Going to see a counsellor face-to-face for the very first time can be daunting. People worry about feeling awkward, nervous, wanting to leave, and not knowing what to say. What if you could just type in some of what you are feeling and have a compassionate and skilled professional on the other end to offer feedback and help. Online counselling can often be an accessible first step for people who would otherwise never consider seeing a counsellor. Communicating online can provide a feeling of security and anonymity, which can encourage more open and honest sharing.

Lessened social stigma

Although there is absolutely nothing wrong with seeing a therapist and therapy is sought by healthy individuals, some people still do not feel comfortable with it. Speaking to someone online may feel more casual and because it is so new, it does not have the historical associations seeing a therapist may have.

Cost effectiveness

Online counselling is very cost effective from both sides of the screen. For counsellors, it can save on the overhead of renting an office. For clients, travel time, transportation and parking costs are eliminated, as is time away from work.

Who is best suited for online counselling

There are no hard and fast rules about who is the ideal client for online counselling - indeed there is no "ideal", and this type of delivery can suit a diverse range of people. But there are some guidelines for who might be best suited for this type of counselling:

- People 18 years or older
- Individuals who have an easier time expressing themselves in writing than through speaking
- Are comfortable using technology and already have communication technology as part of their everyday lives
- Are dealing with issues that are not of a high risk or crisis nature

Online counselling is on the rise and we will likely see it become more and more prevalent as technological developments make it more accessible and more secure. However, this doesn't mean it's for everybody. Go with your gut: if you're more comfortable seeing someone in person, then that is going to be what works best for you. Everyone is different and what you need today may differ from what you need tomorrow. What's most important is that you get the help you need in the environment in which you feel safe.

Your Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) provides you with an immediate and confidential help for any work, health or life concern. We're available anytime and anywhere. Let us help.