

COMPUTER THERAPEUTICS: A NEW CHALLENGE FOR COUNSELLORS AND PSYCHOTHERAPISTS

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INTRODUCTION

During the last two decades the development of computer based systems has been extraordinarily rapid and widespread within society. Computers with their visual display units are as commonplace now in shops and offices as quills, ledgers and oil lamps would have been one hundred years ago!

ELECTRONIC MAIL AND THE INTERNET

This article has been driven, in part, by considerations that my colleagues and I have been engaged in recently, in trying to consider ways in which we might offer a counselling service to students on distant campuses of Sheffield University. Resources do not extend to the provision of a peripatetic counsellor travelling between sites and unfortunately many students cannot afford either the time or expense to travel to visit our central service.

One possible answer to this difficulty is to envisage a counselling response service using the technology of electronic mail.

Working within a University setting means that there exists a reasonable provision of computers available for students and staff usage and many students now have their own electronic mail addresses.

Specifically for counsellors and therapists there are "units" of information stored about professional associations, discussion based communications around particular theoretical issues (to which one may contribute) and indeed even support groups for clients for a whole range of psychological difficulties. (Harris, 1995).

Electronic mail (E-Mail) offers new possibilities for direct communication between people across the world, through typed messages on the computer screen and transmitted to their electronic mail address. E-Mail can be received and responded to immediately (in real time) or can be stored, until collected and responded to later, (asynchronous time).

At the University of Sheffield we have evidence that students access psychological information that is presently available on the central university system as well as use electronic mail to address enquiries of a personal nature. (Shipton, et al 1995).

Elsewhere, the Samaritans already offer an electronic mail service to clients which apparently is very well used. A new national E-Mail service related to men's health matters is soon to go on line (Culf 1996).

McLeod (1993) asserts that telephone counselling is the most used form of counselling. For many clients, then, the telephone will be a preferred way of eliciting help. Electronic mail is a further extension of the use of contemporary technology that has the potential to transmit and effect communications between helper and helped.

The apparent potential of this new technology has far reaching implications both in terms of its impact upon society as well as how it might, most appropriately, be utilised for therapeutic communication. Certainly, it is urged that any new developments are monitored and researched carefully as to their efficacy, sensitivity and therapeutic potential.

COUNSELLING RELATIONSHIPS AND THE E-MAIL

A substantial proportion of the theories of counselling and psychotherapy lay considerable emphasis upon the relationship as a significant, if not the most significant aspect of the therapeutic endeavour.

The potential of relationship could be said to be diminished through the use of telephones in contrast to (live) interviews. Both parties, within the telephone encounter, are deprived of the visible, spacial and tactile possibilities that exist within a live counselling interview. Nevertheless, through concentrated listening both parties are able to pick up also all the clues and cues communicated through paralinguistic phenomena. The telephone relationship, though deprived of some of the major sensory areas necessary for human communication, nevertheless still retains this vital aural dimension.

By contrast, what sort of relationship do we have if I, as client, write to you (through E-Mail) as a counsellor? How might we conceptualise this relationship in therapeutic terms?

Also, recognising that the majority of use of electronic mail will be carried out in asynchronous time, that is, I write to you today and you write back tomorrow or later, how long might it take for a relationship to develop?

THE PARADOX OF ISOLATION AND CONNECTION

A profound paradox seems to surround this activity. The user of electronic mail may communicate with others anywhere in the world and indeed do so over very personal matters. A form of connectedness and communication is thus established through the words on the screen. A recent legal case in the United States is even based upon the allegation by an aggrieved husband that his wife committed computer adultery with a man she never met. (Slouka 1996). There are also several claims of people meeting and falling in love through the internet. (Billen, 1996). Ultimately, however, despite the potential of such very intimate communications, both persons continue to be alone, in the physical sense, isolated from the world, sitting at their own computers. Slouka (1996) also asserts that there are many incidents of users being hurt emotionally by electronic communication.

The paradox can be thus expressed as follows:

"I have connected deeply with you psychologically and emotionally on my computer yet I still remain isolated from you in every physical sense (no vision, no sound, no touch). It is very personal and not personal at all. You are ultimately words on a screen and a figure of imagination in my head! Yet I have told you things I've not shared with another person."

For clients whose trust in persons has been considerably abused, the mechanism of electronic mail might prove extremely attractive. And if a sense of relationship exists for the client, is it to the computer itself or to the responding helper?

TYPED LANGUAGE - THE FORM OF COMMUNICATION

"A different language is a different form of life"

(Frederico Fellini)

The language used for electronic communication is reduced to words only, on a screen. All paralinguistic, non-verbal and cultural clues to communication are not available. Argyle (1975) cites research where "no-vision" encounters were marked by greater formality, were more task oriented, depersonalized and less spontaneous. They were experienced as more socially distant, with less social presence. (Rutter, Argyle p.119) In the absence of visual cues, Rutter concludes that a greater focus is maintained on the communication task at hand.

This particular finding might bode very well for the counselling process.

Both Billen (1996) and Slouka (1996) note the tendency of electronic mail writers to communicate more directly, more spontaneously, more frankly and abruptly. Discursive letter writing styles do not hold sway. The messages become short, direct transmissions, not descriptive or conversational prose.

Dorothy Rowe has argued that the words we use determine what we do (1995). Words create metaphors and metaphors determine the framework in which we operate. All of this suggests that the counsellor, offering an electronic mail response service will have to become a "wordsmith," more than anything else.

This whole section asks what are the implications for therapeutic discourse in the wake of electronic communication? What are the connections between the language used in the communications and the thought, affect and actions of both participants?

The use of computers changes and transforms language.

What do empathic, reflective, interpretive, instructive and congruent statements look like on a monitor screen?

Also, how effective will they be?

THE QUESTION OF THEORY FOR E-MAIL COUNSELLING

The various sections detailed above, that is, the nature of relationship, the paradox of isolation and intimacy and the restricted yet specialised forms of communication required of the medium pose considerable questions as to the nature of an appropriate underlying theory for the process. It might well be that an E-Mail counselling approach can only simply communicate information in response to clients questions or statements. However, as mentioned earlier, colleagues have already indicated that very personal communication can occur through this medium. Indeed Kirschenbaum (1990) cites research by Lindsley (p.114) that provides empirical evidence for considerable patient improvement associated with interactions with a machine. Nevertheless, Kirschenbaum also concludes that "trustworthiness" must be evident within the human-machine interaction for it to work effectively and therapeutically.

One theoretical idea that seems to have some potential in this domain is that of the pre-therapy work that has been developed in recent years by Gary Prouty (1990) in the U.S.A. and more recently by Dion Van Werde in Belgium. (Mearns, 1994).

The work of pre-therapy has taken as its starting point Rogers's first condition of the six necessary and sufficient conditions for therapeutic personality change to occur. (1957). This condition states that for therapy to occur, "it is necessary that the two persons (counsellor and client) are in psychological contact" (Rogers, 1957: 96). This first condition has attracted very little attention historically, the common assumption being that psychological contact was

automatic for two people in the same room. Prouty challenged this mistaken assumption and has been developing his "pre-therapy" approach since the mid 1970's with client groups who experience difficulties in the establishment of contact with others, with "reality" and with their own affective selves. This work has been applied with persons diagnosed as schizophrenic, retarded, suffering acute psychosis and with multiple personalities.

This does not infer or imply that users of E-Mail Counselling Services will be suffering acute psychological states as medically defined above. Rather, it is argued here that the nature of establishing psychological contact with the client through E-Mail will be a priority before other therapeutic work will become possible.

Staying within the theory of client-centred therapy, some of Rogers's other conditions, namely those of unconditional positive regard and congruence will prove challenging to demonstrate because of the lack of non-verbal cues.

Rogers's fifth condition, that the therapist strives for an empathic understanding of the client's internal frame of reference and then endeavours to communicate this experience to the client, may become a more important response mode as the relationship develops.

In being reduced to a words only transaction, the clients perception of the counsellors messages will be crucial in determining the extent to which they stay in contact to resolve their difficulties. The E-Mail client has so much less to go on in their judgement of the counsellor and this whole area of client perception, Rogers sixth condition, may determine the extent to which therapy will continue.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF FANTASY AND COUNTER-FANTASY

Precisely because the form of E-Mail communication determines that both participants type their messages into the vacuum of the machine, a potent opportunity exists for the development of fantasy, one to the other.

Rather more worrying, though, is the possibility that the development of the fantasized figure of the therapist by the client might become over-exaggerated and unrealistic. A psychotic tendency in the client might become exacerbated through this medium. The E-Mail counsellors sensitivity to this potential phenomenon must be well-tuned. A practical point arising from this is the consideration that will need to be given by services wishing to go on-line in offering an E-Mail service, to the contact name they advertise. It is suggested here that perhaps that name is one that is short, gender-neutral and culturally appropriate. Gender-neutral names might include "Sam" (Samuel, Samantha), "Jo" (Joseph, Joanne), "Les" (Lesley, Leslie) and so on. The name also should not be the name of one of the counsellors already in the service. These strategies might go some way towards offering primary safeguards against the personalisation of fantasy figures by clients.

ETHICAL BEHAVIOUR ON E-MAIL

There is already a general and unwritten code of ethical behaviour on the internet termed "netiquette." As E-Mail Counselling Services begin to emerge, attention will have to be focussed upon the specialist construction of an ethical code for this work. Libel cases for "flaming" another user (insulting) are already a known phenomenon in the United States and though it is hoped that counsellors would not knowingly be hurtful to clients through their messages, a considerable degree of latitude nevertheless remains within the verbal construction of messages that will require utmost care in their composition.

The confidentiality of the system will be another huge area for concern and great care will have to be taken to prevent inappropriate and indeed deliberate breaking into the stream of communications.

SUMMING UP

The general increase in usage of electronic forms of communication has paved the way for the emergence of Counselling Services on this medium. Being reduced to messages comprising printed words only between clients and counsellor, great attention to process and a re-definition of the relationship will be required.

This emerging field implicitly asks questions of existing theory. Do the existing theories of psychotherapy continue to apply, or do we need a new theory of E-Mail therapy?

Themes for therapeutic (computer/therapist) competence are likely to include:

- (a) the ability to establish contact.
- (b) the ability to establish relationship.
- (c) the ability to communicate accurately with minimal loss or distortion.
- (d) the ability to demonstrate understanding and frame empathic responses.
- (e) the capacity and resources to provide appropriate and supportive information. This might include reading lists and short relevant articles on a wide range of human concerns.

Computer communications might, at worst, exacerbate a psychological splitting away from humans for some clients who will seek refuge in intimate communications on the internet.

At a theoretical level we might have to consider what these developments mean in terms of the nature of the self, of self development, of self actualisation and interpersonal relations.

What good is therapy and education if they are not humanising? The "therapeuters" task philosophically will be to facilitate, as best as possible, the personal and humanising drives within each client.

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