

# PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES IN E-COUNSELLING IN NIGERIA



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## **Abstract**

*E-counselling which is the use of technology such as the internet and telephone is the newest trend of distance counselling. There are a plethora of internet facilities which can provide forms of counselling. E-counselling is defined as the counselling approach that takes the best practices of traditional counselling as well as some of its own unique advantages and adapts them for delivery to clients via electronic means in order to maximize the use of technology assisted counselling techniques. E-counselling may be free or fee based, either category raises a number of important issues. This paper discusses some of the advantages of e-counselling which include convenient and time saving, promotion of self-confidence and self-disclosure in therapy among others. It also highlights the obvious challenges of e-counselling such as: lack of basic counselling building blocks and gives suggestions for improvement.*

The provision of health care information and advice is one of the enormous growth areas of internet applications. Sixty million people world wide searched the web for health care information in 1998 (Maheu, 2000). Gedge (2002) reported that two years later, a Harn's poll in April 2001 found that almost 100 million Americans looked for health information online. Mental health is no exception – many people turn to the internet for support and information on life problems and personal growth.

Distance counselling has been on the increase in the last decade. Rawlings (2004) pointed out that in fall 1995, a psycho/Info search identified only 88 citations for

counselling internet, and only 12 therapists practising on the internet. By 2002, more than 300 private websites were listed on the internet and e-clinics (groups of online therapists who shared a web-site) accounted for an additional 500 therapists.

Distance, counseling is defined as the counseling approach that takes the best practices of traditional counseling as well as some of its own unique advantages and adapts them for delivery to clients via electronic means in order to maximize the use of technology-assisted counselling techniques (Ready Minds 2004). Rawlings (2004) disclosed that distance counselling had been practiced a long time ago. According to her, Sigmund Freud may have been the first modern day distance counselor. He did his counselling through the use of letters. The report added that more recently, the medical community has successfully used tele-medicine to bring services to out-laying and underserved areas.

Also, counselling over the telephone has proven effective. The research literature shows telephone counselling to be cost-effective, clinically useful ethical intervention modality. The American medical Association (2004) reported that researchers found they could significantly increase recovery rates for patients taking-depressants by providing several counselling sessions over phone.

The use of technology such as the internet is just the newest trend of distance counselling. There are a plethora of internet facilities which can provide forms of counselling such as peer support groups for specific problems, message forums and chat rooms, peer-based on-line discussion, therapy groups and e-mail services. These have been present on the internet for over a decade, with some of them mediated by professional counsellors. On-line counselling (also known as e-therapy) is a natural extension of these, involving a one-to-one interaction between a client and a person purporting to offer a professional counselling service.

On-line counselling may be free or fee based, but either category raises a number of important implementation and ethical issues. This paper examines some of these issues by attempting to highlight the prospects and challenges of this medium of counselling intervention in Nigeria.

Even for qualified professionals the effectiveness of on-line counselling as a clinical method has hardly even begun to be evaluated (Maheu and Gordon 2002). For some potential clients access to e-counselling services is either currently unavailable or they lack the computing skills to avail themselves of such services. Despite these concerns, fee-based e-counselling appears to be a growth industry. There are strong indications that it is increasing the current client base for therapy by making services

available or appealing to populations that previously would not use them. John Grohol, past president of the International Society for Mental Health Online (ISMHO), and a prominent academic and therapist, told the on-line Journal News Therapist in 2000 that he expected the number of on-line therapy providers to grow from the then 300 world-wide to over 5,000 by 2005 (in Dunaway, 2000) statistics of e-counselling in a country like Australia as at 2002 was small according to a comprehensive research reported in that year. It identified only 20 fee-based service sites (Coady, 2000).

Counselling in Nigeria is a new innovation. Many Nigerians are not comfortable with sharing their personal problems with any professional person no matter how experienced the professional is. Presenting their problems to a professional makes them have the psychological feeling that they will be thought to be unable to manage their emotional problems. However, everyone needs counselling at one time or the other as no one is an island unto himself. One cannot be an expert in all life issues. There must be areas that will require the others assistance to overcome challenges. To the average Nigerian, counselling is demeaning and shows weakness. On the other hand, what makes a person strong and ready to grow and develop is receiving expert assistance and information to face overwhelming challenges. (TechMoran, Tues. Jan 13<sup>th</sup>, 2015). Counselling aims at providing professional guidance to enable individuals develop healthy minds necessary for healthy sense of judgment and rational thinking. It creates major impact in reshaping the mind set of many while helping lots of youths and adults attain self actualization.

Internet counselling in Nigeria is desired to add to the traditional face-to-face counselling to boost counselling services to reach the teeming population that should benefit from counselling activities. The National University provides guidance services to distance learners, staff and the general public within 1 hour to 7 working days and throughout the session. Okopi (2010) explained that the aim of such guidance and counselling is to track a potential student from the point of first inquiry through graduation and often for life intervention strategies and assist him or her to painlessly overcome both academic and socio-psychological obstacles that will militate against his or her successful completion of studies. Such guidance services are provided by student counsellors of the university who are qualified counselling psychologists with minimum qualification of masters degree (Okopi 2010). Such counsellors are expected to provide induction/orientation activities, academic counselling, information and advising, career and personal counselling (exploring problems and suggesting directions) making referral to the appropriate professionals, assessment, giving feedback to the individual on non-academic issues, aptitude and skills advocacy, making out a case for not supplying study materials registered and paid for, writing references and promoting changes within the institution to benefit students and administration. However, there

seems to be no research as to the prevalence of e-counselling in Nigeria. Recently “seek an on-line counselling platform” in Nigeria launched its web and mobile page.

Generally, world wide, e-counselling sessions utilize traditional face-to-face modalities. Sessions can be individual, group, or family and may be conducted using e-mail, instant internet phone. The most commonly used communication mode of internet counselling and psychological services provisions according to Pelling and Renard (2000) are the e-mail and typed based chat and to a lesser extent tele-counselling. Mostly, e-counselling takes place at a secure website that uses encryption methods for email and instant messages to assure confidentiality. The intake processes ensure that the client’s presenting problem is one that can be appropriately treated using this medium. The informed consent portion of the intake include procedures should the session end prematurely due to technology failure, emergency contacts, should the therapist need to assure the clients safety, and the limitations of e-counselling explained to client.

E-counselling follows the best practices of traditional counselling sessions, rapport building, assessment, including use of internet instruments, preparing the client for therapy concrete treatment goals, and planning, skills development and processing communication procedures between sessions and termination and follow-up contexts (Ready Minds 2004).

For the past few years, e-counselling practice has specialized in relationship issues, family and couple communication, parenting concerns, bereavement support, birth parents loss, adoption issues, reunion, infertility and pregnancy loss, parent-teen conflicts, separation, divorce, blended families coping with illness and depression.

It offers an opportunity for one to consult with a professional as a guide and to receive feedback instantly. It may just be a one-time consultation or a series of e-mail sessions. Many individuals who choose e-counselling mostly tend to present cases that require brief solution oriented therapy of about 4 – 6 sessions to fulfill their needs. A similar number of people seek on-going sessions as they grapple with longer term issues. Some characteristics of e-counselling are definitely advantageous to either client or counsellor, while others are either disadvantageous or controversial. Some prospects of e-counselling will now be discussed.

### **Prospects of E-Counselling**

Many have argued in favour of e-counselling because of its ability to facilitate access to services, client privacy and disclosure, on-going client support and facilitating face-to face (F2F) contact and other merits. (Ainsworth, 2002, Bradley, Sullwan, &

King, 2003, Caleb, 2000, Hamitton, 1999, Hsiung, 2002, Koppel, 2001, Sampson, Kolodinsky, & Greeno, 1997 all in Pelling 2009).

### **1. Convenient and Time Saving**

Practically, e-counselling is convenient and offers accessibility to many clients. It is convenient and time saving for one to sit at home or before an office computer and compose an e-mail or make a telephone call with regard to a pressing need and receive an immediate or short interval attention and feedback. It is also cost effective, at about half the cost of face-to-face counselling due to reduced overheads (Gedge 2002). Also, the client is in control of the timing of the email to suite his/her everyday needs. The client can wait until he/she has some quiet time to write his/her email, to reflect or to read the response.

### **2. Promotes Self-Confidence and Disclosure**

Being in ones home or office, may take away the discomfort some people feel when they meet in person with a counsellor to discuss personal problems. The privacy and anonymity provided by the distance may be comforting, disinhibiting and appealing to most clients. The anonymity and self-confidence it offers may reduce some of the barriers to seeking help with personal stories. This will enhance the process of counselling as it will promote client disclosure and facilitate the overall interaction. For the Nigerian, it removes the feeling that people will think the help seeker a weakling.

### **3. Good for those with Physical Disabilities**

E-counselling breaks down obstacles for those who have challenges accessing resources due to physical disabilities or communication challenges such as learning impairment, speech or language difficulties. For various other reasons one may be confined to the home, the internet or the telephone are the only sources of reaching out for help.

### **4. Easily Accessible**

E-counselling services may facilitate engagement in counselling services for those who may have difficulty with travelling. This group is likely to include some disabled individuals and teenagers. As a result, services may be provided to some individuals who would otherwise have difficulty accessing counseling or psychological professionals. Those who live in rural areas where there is little or no access to qualified professionals for counselling are easily taken care of. For such people who live in small communities, their local health care professionals might already be known to them as friends, close associates or co-workers, so privacy may be of concern. With e-counselling, their needs are easily met (Pelling 2009).

**5. Good for Normal People**

E-counselling can assist anyone to cope with life problems that men or women of all ages encounter. This is in line with the principle of guidance which says that guidance and counselling is for everyone. Such problems may include: adjustment to difficult situations such as transition from one developmental state to another, changes in life threatening illness, disabilities, relationship conflicts, job stresses, mid-life crises, the stress and storms of adolescence, parenting challenges, weight struggles and all other sources of emotional over-load. E-counselling can be one way of finding the feedback to help one get back on track to life, work through issues and feel less helpless.

**6. On-Going Client support and Facilitating Face-to-Face Contacts**

Electronic client contact does not always imply engaging in counselling service through e-mail, internet or any other electronic media. It could simply support on-going client F2F contact via brief communication regarding appointment changes follow-up, referral, or relapse services, encouragement and provision of information. Some indicate that client support activities versus direct counselling or psychological services are the best professional use of e-mail and internet contact (Pelling 2009). Having an e-mail and internet presence can be an excellent marketing tool for counselling services. Prospective clients may decide to seek out services electronically or F2F on the bases of information available on the internet. In addition, professional contact that begins as electronic contact may progress to F2F contact as a counselling relationship develops.

Contributing, Rawlings (2004), listed the following advantages of distance counselling:

1. Clients are more likely to disclose their problems due to its anonymity.
2. It is less stigmatizing than going to an office for therapy.
3. It can reach those who have difficulties going to therapist's office, such as the home bound and those who are ill, agoraphobic, or live in remote areas.
4. It seems to force counsellors to create a structure to the counselling session rather than have it open ended.
5. Sessions are usually more organized and thoughtful.
6. It provides increased flexibility as to time of appointment and method of counselling used in the session.
7. A well designed website provides clients with online resources, articles, links with professional organizations, and support, which are not always present in traditional therapy.
8. Because it is not limited by geographical boundaries, clients can choose a therapist who lives far away but who specializes in their presenting problem.
9. Clients can refer to written material generated as part of counselling process (e-mails, instant messages, etc) to review and reinforce therapy.

10. It usually costs less than face-to-face treatment.
11. If the distance counselor is connected with an online consultation group, should outside intervention be needed, group members from the client's location can often provide services.

### **Challenges of E-Counselling**

A number of arguments have been raised against electronic service provision. Rawlings (2004) advised that practitioners interested in distance counselling should proceed with cautious enthusiasm. This is more apparent in Nigeria where many are not computer literate and constant technology breakdown. Some of the numerous arguments put forward against e-counselling include: the lack of non-verbal and verbal cues, limits regarding counselling and psychological interventions and general efficacy issues, client and practitioner identity problems, counselling setting issues (bailey, 2003, Bradley, Sulvian & King's 2003, Caleb, 2000, cooper 2001 etc in Pelling 2009). Some of these views will be examined below.

#### **1. Lack of Verbal and Non-Verbal Cues**

In a counselling session, right from the moment the client starts to state his problems, the counsellor is always alert to the client's feelings. The counsellor usually must be observant concerning the emotional reactions and needs of the client which calls for close and constant attention to not only what he says but also to how he says it and his non-verbal gestures in saying it: this vital aspect of data collection and interaction between the counsellor and the client is lost in e-counselling. Traditional counselling relies heavily on characteristics such as: tone of voice, facial expression, body language, eye contact or even silence to communicate information that words may be unable to.

#### **2. Lack of the Basic Counselling Building Blocks**

The interest and caring demonstrated by the counsellor's attending behaviours that facilitate effective counselling include; rapport, which signifies a cordial relationship between client and counsellor. It is a basis for building up a counselling relationship. For a fruitful relationship with the client, the counsellor must want to help the client, and the client must feel that the counsellor can help him. In this way, communication between them must be sandwiched with feelings (Ekennia 2000). Establishing rapport with a new client is not always easy, but it is a very important part of the initial stages of counselling relationship. If this is so in face-to-face counselling, it becomes a very serious problem in e-counselling.

Other important building blocks that could be negatively affected in e-counselling are: ability of the counsellor to create warmth, empathy, confidentiality etc.

Effective helping skills are built upon a base of attending counsellor behaviours (Ivey, 1988 in Rawling 2004). These may include eye contact and the general way the counsellor is presented to the client.

### **3. Limitation of Interventions and General Efficacy**

It is obvious that certain interventions cannot be used when professional contact remains electronic in nature. For instance, play therapy, sand tray therapy and other creative forms of interactions, and expressions do not translate well to a typed format nor are clinical demonstrations and practices that are basic to many intervention strategies.

### **4. Difficulties in Ascertaining Client and Counsellor identities**

In e-counselling, the client may decide to present different personalities and styles of relating with the counsellor. Internet communications tend to be more permissive, aggressive and sexual (Pelling, 2009). This will impact negatively on the counsellor's ability to accurately assess the client's presenting problems for meaningful intervention.

In addition, a clinician has a duty to respond quite differently when a minor is talking about unwanted sexual contact from when an adult does so (mandatory reporting regulations) moreso, in parts of the world minors can only engage in regular counselling with the permission of a responsible adult. This could mean unwittingly providing counselling to minors and can result to legal implications.

When clients visit a counsellor in his office they immediately learn a lot about his/her physical characterizes such as gender, age, ethnicity, office décor. on the wall, and the myriad of other details give an overall picture of the person. Conversely in e-counselling, the only information the client has about the counsellor is a name/or one self-selected photograph. This will tend to result in the client "filling in the gap" with imagined qualities and characterizes shaped by their own needs. These may create an idealized or even at times demonized counsellor.

### **5. The Problem of Counselling Setting**

Generally, counselling is done in a quiet, comfortable and private office. Both client and counsellor need a quiet environment away from the distraction of others to facilitate interaction necessary for the counsellor to accurately assess the client's presenting problems and the client's self-disclosure and ensure confidentiality as much as possible. A busy cyber-café or lounge room in which ones partner can look over one's shoulder and read on-going interaction between the clients and the counsellor would not be suitable. Also, engaging in counselling and at the same time doing other



things like viewing television show, does not make for the required concentration which aid confidentiality.

## **6. Violation of Some Ethical Issues**

E-counselling holds some special limitation with regard to upholding some ethical issues in counselling, for example, confidentiality of counselling services. Personal issues are not discussed in public. Electronic communication is not always secure. An e-mail can be said to be public communication. There is high frequency of misdirection or loss of information. Clients who reveal their most deeply felt and or possible shameful (to them) thoughts and feelings may fear the deliberate or accidental disclosure of these. Computer based electronic records have been subject to exacting ethical requirements with regard to storage and disclosure to others. The counsellor's office are generally set up to ensure considerable privacy for the clients and password protected computer programmes. Internet communications however are not secure. All data that travel between the client and the counsellor are exposed to potential hackers unless the client and counsellor use additional security measures. Most commonly used e-mail and internet messaging systems do not support authentication and encryption. Also, one finding social support in the internet could develop into an unhealthy connection there in, such as forming groups for supporting and sharing unhealthy activities.

Secondly, e-counselling could encourage internet and e-mail addiction. Some clients may through this mode of counselling develop attachment to internet and e-mail. Such compulsive behaviour is analogous to pathological gambling. Some studies suggest that as many as 9% of adolescents (cybeteen) and 10% of university students and 6-14% of the general public may experience internet addiction this has been shown to negatively influence adolescent health, parental relationships, stress levels and school achievement (Pelling 2009).

Thirdly, the continued use of the internet for counselling can fuel other addictions. These include gambling, shopping and sexual related addictions such as pornography. Individuals with such tendencies need special monitoring when accessing the internet to help ensure that the internet does not become a convenient avenue for other compulsive behaviours.

Discussing the obvious disadvantages of distance counselling Rawlings (2007) lists:

1. Ethical concerns such as confidentiality breaches and lack of grievance process should the client wish to file a complaint.
2. Legal and malpractice concerns: because distance counselling is in its infancy, there is no existing case law to determine and guide practices.

3. Regulatory concerns; distance counselling is not regulated in most countries.
4. Technology breakdown; what procedure should the client and therapists follow if they lose contact during a session?
5. Inability of the distance therapist to observe the clients body language, voice cues creating a higher potential for misunderstanding.
6. An increased potential for someone to impersonate the client.
7. It may not be covered by insurance.
8. It is not appropriate for every presenting problem, for example eating disorder, violent relationship, sexual abuse, psychiatric disorders that involves distortions of reality, extreme depression and suicidality.
9. Cultural and ethnic insensitivity may result if not clearly defined at intake.

Also, there is little research indicating the effectiveness of e-mail and internet counselling especially in Nigeria. Generally, electronic means of service provision are viewed as less effective than face-to-face services. Electronic communication is considered especially inappropriate for clinical populations versus self-development or counselling populations, and those at risk of harm. Given the known problems and the lack of studies to date, it is very difficult at present to make any definite statements to this effect, some warning that they do not believe it can be as effective as F2F counselling (Gedge, 2002). However, a few studies of the use of tele psychiatry and interacting television show comparable efficacy to traditional psycho-therapy (Yellowlees, 2001). It does seem that the biggest single factor working against on-line counselling is the lack of visual and auditory information and for e-counselling generally is the lack of verbal and non-verbal cues. The problems associated with efficacy of e-counselling have been raised and discussed by many. They include Suler (2000), Dunaway (2000), Fish, Kraut & Foot (1993), Gedge and Abramson, (2001) further research regarding both process and outcome is needed for Nigeria, it is said that practice makes perfect. Given some of its merits, it is good to use in conjunction with F2F counselling.

### **Suggestions for Improving E-Counselling**

A number of issues must be addressed before a professional engagement in e-counselling. These include:

#### **1. Location and Qualification Issues**

Practitioners should provide service where they are qualified to do so, as well as in areas that they have the competence and license to function. Foxhail (2000), Simon (2000), and Temy (2000) all in Gedge (2009) advise practitioners to be cautious of such legal issue. The individual should consider whether he can set up a solo site or join a group of e-mail or internet site. Experts point to the fact that deciding to set up a

solo site may be difficult if one does not have the technological knowledge required to maintain a secure site and gaining professional technical assistance could be costly especially in Nigeria. Decisions on such matters need to be done before starting. Also, the practitioner needs to decide and find a quiet and private place free from distractions to give the best service to the clients.

## **2. Record Keeping**

When working electronically, counsellors must determine how they are going to keep records. They have to decide if this has to include a verbatim transcript of typed e-mail or internet chat transaction. Clients need to be made aware of record keeping practices, as they may be considered the legal owners of the verbatim transcripts. The existence of verbatim transcripts can have obvious impact on legal proceedings if any type of malpractice action were to result from the service rendered.

## **3. Controlling Computer Based Problems**

E-counselling practitioners need to give thought to how they will deal with potential computer problems such as information hackers, unwanted and unsolicited e-mail, potentially lost or misdirected e-mail, computer viruses, computer crashes, phone line or broad band difficulties and power outages.

## **4. Controlling Identity Issues**

Counsellors will need to determine what type of identity information they require from e-counselling clients prior to engaging in service provision. Identity information may be needed if the counsellor is to respond to a client's emergency such as suicide threat, harm to others, threat or admission of child abuse. The counsellor in such situation should be able to verify the information. Correspondingly, the counsellors need to provide potential clients with emergency contact details of themselves and hopefully, a contact in their area of location should a difficulty requiring phone or F2F contact arises.

## **5. There should be Response Frequency Structure**

E-counselling practitioners like those of F2f need to determine how often to respond/send e-mails whether daily, weekly or forth nightly or when to meet on-line and for how long. The counsellor and client should decide also the maximum limit on the amount of e-mail to be received from any one client. The counsellor should also decide what to do if this limit is by exceeded either a needy or a demanding client.

## **6. Amount of Fees and Method of Payment**

The counsellor should agree with the client on the amount of fees to be charged. Whether this would be based on the amount of typed information (number of

words read and responded to) time taken to read or respond (minute) or per e-mail (irrespective of length). They need to work out the mode of payment; whether bank draft, cheque, or credit card. Whatever the decisions are, the counsellor should always bear in mind the ethical code of not cheating or defrauding the client.

## **7. Continuous Professional Development and Training**

Assuming that those engaged in F2F counselling are competent and hold the qualifications required to do so, it needs to be noted that competence in F2F counselling does not necessarily translate to competency in e-counselling. Practitioners need to engage in professional development and training to continuously increase their competence in various areas especially electronic services provision (Hsiung 2002, Stamin and Peradma, 2002, Softle, 2002 in Yellowless 2001).

Also e-counsellors need to assess and evaluate if they are able to provide service in a competent manner using electronic means of communication and leave areas that they are lacking in competence.

## **8. Achieving Emotional Connections**

Because of the lack of verbal and non-verbal cues in communication via e-mail and internet counselling, practitioners need to make emotional connections in different ways. These ways according to Gedge (2002) may include:

**a. Emotional Bracketing:** This is a skill to be used by the counsellor and can be taught to client. Emotional bracketing occurs when emotional content is placed in square brackets within typed communication. For example, a counsellor may type “it was good for me to read that you are feeling less depressed this week (it makes me smile, while typing this note to you, it makes me happy to know your mood is improving after your difficult personal work). I hope we can continue to help you make improvements in your mood” thus indicating emotional content in square brackets. Such an expression of emotion is not immediately natural but when practiced can become more innate over time and practice. Emotional expression like this, can help build the connection between the counsellor and client and eventual efficacy of service.

**b. Descriptive Immediacy:** This is the type of equivalent to a process comment or using immediacy in session with a client. Such comments are used by counsellors to deepen the communication between them and their clients. Clients can also learn to convey information in such a manner. Specifically, descriptive immediacy is used to highlight a moment of emotion when a simple typed response is not enough. For example, a counsellor may type “I just finished reading your last message and I am feeling compassion for you and your situation. I can clearly read your desire for support and wish I could look in your eyes and let you know I am here for you”. This is to

demonstrate a caring and current reaction towards the client and increase his/her trust and confidence in the counsellor. Such comments build the relationship to be formed between client and the counsellor (Gedge 2009).

#### **9. Following National and International Counselling Standards**

In addition to being generally competent technologically skilled and knowing the two text-based counselling intervention outlined above, e-counsellors need to be aware of and follow national and international e-mail and internet counselling standards, including telephone counselling ethics. It has been noted that many do not follow established standards for the ethical practice of counselling in the electronic realm (Heinlan, Raynolds Welfel, Richmond, & Rak, 2003 in Pelling 2009). They noted that not to follow best practices as established in any area is to provide a lesser form of services. In order to provide the client with the best possible care they deserve, practitioners should adhere to the established national and international standards.

#### **Conclusion**

E-counselling has been on the increase since the past few years. The use of technology in counselling such as the internet and telephone is the new trend of distance counselling. Even though e-counselling follows the best practices of traditional counselling such as structuring, rapport building, assessment and so on, the fact that the counsellor and client are in separate locations creates some problems. However, e-counselling has some undeniable advantages especially for the Nigerian who see visiting a professional counsellor as stigmatizing. For these obvious reasons practitioners are advised to proceed with caution in order not to violate the basic principles of guidance and counselling as well as the established ethical codes.

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