

# INTRODUCTION

## OVERVIEW OF THE CURRENT TEXT

Welcome to *Therapy Online: a Practical Guide*. The main purpose of this book is to disseminate our practical experience and academic knowledge of working with text online, and enable the reader to learn from our expertise gained in over 10 years in online therapy, from our perspective as two leading experts in the field from either side of the Atlantic. In addition, no textbook on the topic would be complete without wider reference to the use of technology in therapy *without* the use of a keyboard, and we aim to introduce the reader to some of these facets of the work along the way.

We hope this will encourage further reading of the material already written and also emerging as technology develops and is applied to therapy and the mental health field. While we discuss the theory of therapy online, we also discuss the practice and ethics, including a detailed case study to exemplify some of the issues peculiar to working online therapeutically. Therefore, this book is aimed at the practitioner already working online and looking to improve and enhance their service, as well as those considering practising online in the future or who are undertaking training in therapy and who therefore need to deepen their understanding of the changing profession in light of new technology.

Chapter 1, 'Theoretical Aspects of Online Therapy' discusses online therapy from the point of view of three major theoretical orientations: Humanism, the Psychodynamic school of thought and Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT). These are discussed within themes common in traditional therapy, such as being an authentic practitioner with a sound level of self-knowledge, and having an understanding of the importance of the therapeutic relationship as underpinning the ability of the client to make changes in his or her life.

Other themes discussed are around empathy, unconditional positive regard, transference and counter-transference, fantasy, and defence mechanisms, as they appear online. We do not mean to suggest that only these theoretical elements are applicable to online work – quite the contrary. By examining theories particular to three main schools of thought, we aim to illustrate for the reader how their own orientation may be thought of in terms of being applicable to online work. Online therapy is a

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method of delivery, much as Freud's letter writing was – it is what the practitioner brings to the work that counts. The chapter ends with describing a model based on one of the authors' original empirical research.

Chapter 2, 'Essential Skills and Considerations of Online Therapy', examines what is needed to be an effective online therapist, and indeed an effective online client. It discusses how to determine if online therapy is a suitable method of delivery for the practitioner, and how to adapt existing skills to online work, such as being attentive, mirroring the client, summarizing and probing.

Also addressed within this chapter is the consideration needed in communications between practitioner and client *between* contracted sessions, and the importance of encryption for even the most simple housekeeping communications, such as confirming appointment times. Boundaries around this are discussed, with reference to sharing resources, journal-keeping, homework exercises and short 'check-in' emails. The necessary client skills section focuses on determining whether online therapy is suitable for the client from the outset as part of the overall initial intake and assessment process. Suler's (2004) six aspects of disinhibition are looked at by the authors in detail. The chapter ends with example questions that may offer insight into the potential client's ability to work online with the therapist via the intake questionnaire.

Chapter 3, 'Working Without a Physical Presence', gives an in-depth look at the how we communicate online without reliance on the physical presence – historically seen as a drawback to online work but increasingly seen also to be one of the benefits. Using examples, we examine appropriate and inappropriate communication via email, and discuss fully the 10 rules of Netiquette as they apply to the mental health field. The chapter then narrows down to focus on the specifics of Netiquette, such as use of emoticons, acronyms and abbreviations, and how to enhance text to convey what is meant by the written message. The conclusion to this chapter identifies the five most likely reasons misunderstandings may occur.

Chapter 4, 'Ethical Considerations', discusses a new global framework for therapy online based on what the authors define as the 'big five' – American (EthicsCode, NBCC, ACA), United Kingdom (BACP) and Cyberspace (ISMHO). These five publications (web-based apart from BACP) comprise guidelines, suggested principles and recommendations for online practice. The chapter discusses the ethical implications when considering informed consent, practitioner competence, client inclusion and client exclusion.

Perhaps most importantly, this chapter introduces a new 'Ethical Framework for the Use of Technology in Mental Health', encompassing several defined and extensive recommendations on practitioners' understanding of the technology, on working within their scope of practice, on seeking out training, knowledge and supervision, on ensuring pertinent and all necessary information is displayed on websites, on the intake and assessment process, and recommendations on informed consent. This global framework is the first of its kind, and draws on the considerable experience of both authors in working with organizations worldwide in developing ethical standards and guidelines.

Chapter 5, 'The Business of Online Therapy', is an extensive analysis on what practitioners really need to know to offer a range of tools for setting up and marketing a practice as well as providing a successful and ethical service. This chapter is of

relevance even to the practitioner who has decided that working online is not appropriate in their particular case, as the basics of hosting a simple website to promote and advertise their face-to-face or other services is often overlooked. The chapter draws upon, not only the authors' knowledge, but also that of 'famous names' internationally such as Casey Truffo, who wrote the Foreward to this book. Advice is given on deciding whether joining an e-clinic is desirable, as well as on setting up in private practice as an adjunct or a stand-alone service.

Alongside these considerations are the next steps, for instance what you need to know about an organizational service provider in order to make an informed decision as to their reputation and reliability. Offering a more personalized approach within a private practice means beginning with the basics, such as appointment setting and payment methods, through to the more complex marketing strategies required to be a successful online counsellor. The chapter also covers the concept of creating a presence in Second Life which, although seemingly off the beaten path as far as online therapy goes, can actually serve as another extension of a website – a three dimensional advert.

Chapter 6, 'Case Study', is a detailed client case of a woman in her 50s experiencing symptoms of anxiety and depression stemming from an attack she experienced as a young teenager. Designed as an illustration of how an online therapy case could and should be conducted, the chapter guides the reader through Mary's experience from her initial research into finding a therapist, through intake and assessment, email exchanges, SMS contact, necessary because of a technological breakdown, a crisis chat room session, and finally to closure and termination of the contract.

Verbatim transcripts of the therapeutic process between Mary and her therapist Clara guide you through the process of Mary's journey, including her experience of technology in relation to her young teenage daughter's use of it in everyday life. Although fictional, Mary is a composite drawn from the authors' wide experience of online and offline clients and also the use of technology to conduct a therapeutic relationship.

Chapter 7, 'Training Online Therapists', provides an examination of the training available in transferring offline therapy skills to cyberspace. Both online training and offline (face-to-face) training are discussed to educate the reader as to what is available, and so they may make an informed choice as to what further training can or should be undertaken. The training online section defines many different applications that can be utilized to develop and enhance an online course on any topic, before going on to apply these to training online therapists specifically. We particularly focus on the use of role-play in training online, for which there are arguments both for and against.

The chapter also discusses offline, or face-to-face, training, from conference presentations to full two-day workshops. Both the authors have been training practitioners for many years, and so both aspects of their face-to-face training work is analysed, defining the UK attitude to workshops being used as Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and the need for therapists in the USA to gain Continuing Education (CE) credits. Also, discussed is the process for gaining the Distance Credentialed Counsellor (DCC<sup>TM</sup>) certification – a national qualification in the United States, which also offers the option of being applicable to practitioners across the globe.

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Chapter 8, 'Supervision, Research and Groups/Couples' provides examination of other considerations when working online. The section on supervision considers the use of technology historically before going on to debate what methods of delivery may or may not be appropriate for online work. Supervision via email, forums and listservs, and chat are discussed, underlining one of the themes running throughout the book regarding encryption being essential.

The section on research, written with Dr Stephen Goss, considers the myriad of ways that research can be undertaken online – both qualitatively and quantitatively – from simply looking up an academic paper to full-scale methods of data collection. The ethical considerations inherent in online research are discussed, such as disinhibition skewing results, alongside the many benefits of conducting research online.

The parts related to groups, couples and families examine the different ways of offering multiple participant services online. Couple therapy is a particularly interesting way of working when using technology, whether the participants are in separate locations or in the same room. The family therapy section notes the usefulness of technology in including younger members in the dynamic because of its appeal (and familiarity). Group work takes advantage of diverse geographical populations, particularly with asynchronous methods of communication. The role of the facilitator is examined, with a focus on group conflict resolution and other group dynamics, in cases such as what happens when the group ends.

Chapter 9: 'A Look to The Future and Concluding Thoughts' defines and discusses other types of technology used in therapy. Landline telephone therapy is examined, and also using mobile phones (cellphones) and SMS texting as both a communication tool and as a means of delivering specific applications such as anger diaries. Along a similar theme, Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) and videoconferencing have their own benefits and pitfalls. Websites, wikis and podcasting are looked at, alongside other newer technologies in mental health, such as blogging and social/professional networking. Computerized Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CCBT) is becoming more widely used since the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) found it successful in the UK. Another newer use of technology is the use of gaming for therapeutic use, particularly in engaging adolescents in therapy. The importance of the rise of avatar therapy and virtual reality environments in mental health is discussed, before the book's concluding thoughts are presented on Web 2.0 and its implications for us as practitioners, for our clients, and for the profession as a whole.

### NOTE ON THE SCOPE OF THE TEXT AND THE LANGUAGE USED

The collaboration of authors from both sides of the Atlantic is deliberate. Addressing an audience that is international is appropriate when discussing a topic that provides therapeutic services globally, regardless of geographical limitations. The scope and language of the book has been kept as internationally applicable as possible. However, some language has been chosen for the sake of consistency, such as using 'therapy' to indicate counselling/counseling and psychotherapy, which are also used

interchangeably (McLeod, 1994). Also, we have adopted ‘therapists’ or ‘practitioners’ in a similar vein, and used the term ‘mental health’ to indicate that much of the material here is applicable to different tiers of the profession. We aim for the text to be useful to all practitioners, from students of therapy, to qualified therapists, as well as those offering therapeutic services in medical settings, such as psychiatry. Although sometimes the term ‘patient’ may be applicable to the person seeking therapeutic help, we will use the term ‘client’ throughout.

The remit of the book is to provide a theoretical, ethical and practical guide to online therapy using text. Therefore, the book concentrates on the use of email, chat and forums, rather than the wider remit of other technological applications, although these are discussed in the final chapter and included where appropriate at other points within the book. The authors recognize, however, that many of the central themes of this book – and especially the themes in Chapter 4, may overlap and be applicable to other technologies. In addition, duplication of some basic information in chapters is deliberate to allow for each chapter to be read in isolation if preferred. Finally, although the book draws on actual cases experienced in conducting online and offline therapy over the last several years, all case material is fictional.

The remainder of this Introduction prepares you further for reading the book. We offer historical background information about the Internet and a summary of key terms you will encounter throughout the book and within your work as an online therapist.

## DECIPHERING CYBERSPACE

Since 1991, when the first incarnation of the World Wide Web was completed, the Internet has become a pervasive element of most of the developed world. The recognized creator of the World Wide Web, Tim Berners-Lee (1998), dreamt of ‘a common information space in which we communicate by sharing information’. This dream was certainly realized, but it is the development of the Internet since then and indeed the maturation of it as it morphs into Web 2.0 – or even Web 3.0 – that shows us that the presence of cyberspace in our daily lives is unlikely to dissipate or disappear. On the contrary, the use of the Internet has now spread out from use on a personal computer to mobile devices, and is likely to become even more embedded in our personal and professional lives, without us feeling the need to comment, or even noticing. While early use of the term cyberspace involved very technical capabilities such as sensors, signals, connections, transmissions, processors and controllers, the term has now become ubiquitous in describing personal computers, the Internet, information technology and the culture that goes with being part of an online world. Being part of an online world makes one a Netizen (Hauben and Hauben, 1997) – a collision of Internet and citizen – also sometimes called a Cybercitizen or Internaut.

Many textbooks on the subject of online therapy describe accurately the nature of cyberspace being ‘virtual’ as opposed to ‘physical’. That is, living life online – whether by looking for information on the Web, email, chat rooms, social networking, virtual reality environments, gaming, texting and similar – was distinct from the

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actual business of day-to-day life in the physical world, referred to as Real Life (RL). It is the position of the authors that this is no longer the case – online life exists *as part of* RL for much of the developed world, particularly for those who were born into a world where the Internet and other technologies such as mobile devices were already considered the norm. While pockets of resistance or ignorance may well still exist among some populations (Nagel, 2008), particularly in the mental health field, the merging of cyberspace and RL has already arrived. For clarity, we refer to the actual location of communication as being *online* or *offline*.

This concept of an integrated world is not a new one; it is just a more recognized one. Previous books on online work in mental health hint towards it (Fenichel, 2004), and other mental health professionals have created whole models around it, such as E-Quest (Suler, 2002), which aims as part of its remit to ‘integrate online activities with in-person lifestyle’ (ibid.: 379). Later chapters in this book examine the myriad of ways people now connect online for therapeutic help, as well as using static sites for information, research and self-development. For the moment, though, let us stay with the wider remit of cyberspace, as it exists at the time of writing. This Introduction aims to decipher many aspects of cyberspace, and then goes on to discuss the concept of the future of cyberspace. This theme will then be picked up as we give our concluding thoughts at the end of the book.

### Websites

The wealth of information, and indeed misinformation, that exists on the Internet comes in the form of websites, collections of web pages under one domain name using hyperlinks to provide a simple route to finding whatever it is one is looking for information about. Search engines have further simplified this process in providing links to websites via Boolean terms such as OR, AND or NOT, named after George Boole, an English mathematician and philosopher. Further development of search engines came in the form of using natural language engines (see Anthony and Lawson, 2002) where search terms could be submitted using colloquial language rather than Boolean terms. Software quickly appeared which meant that individuals were able to write and upload their own websites on purchase of a domain name, on any subject from what their cat had for breakfast to an examination of the meaning of life, alongside the more notorious explosion of pornographic websites.

### Email (asynchronous)

The best known aspect of Internet communication, email (electronic mail) is Simple Mail Transfer Protocol (SMTP), which is the single standard first introduced in 1982. Email is stored and forwarded by servers to network enabled devices (usually a personal computer but increasingly in mobile technology) in the time it takes to send or receive the communication. This is as opposed to device-to-device communications such as mobile SMS, which we shall cover in relation to mental health practitioners later.

Historically email could only use ASCII type characters (standard keyboard characters), but now many media formats, such as pictures, animation, video, and audio can be included in an email. Email can be sent to one or many (CC or Carbon Copied) recipients from an individual account, and often without the recipient knowing who else has received it (BCC or Blind Carbon Copied).

### **Listservs and forums (asynchronous)**

Similar to email in many ways in as far as it is an asynchronous communication being sent via text, listservs and forums (or discussion boards or bulletin boards) utilize the public nature of the Internet to seek or disseminate information to a wider audience than just that of the intended recipient. Listservs (electronic mailing lists) deliver posted information to an inbox, and it is possible to subscribe and unsubscribe to them or alter how often the messages are posted (if at all – many choose to access such posts directly from the server itself). Forums are also web-based applications that manage user-generated content that the user has to log in to see (unless configured otherwise by the user for notifications to be delivered to an inbox). Forums contain threads (topics), which contain the posts (messages), and are usually facilitated with strict rules of conduct for members.

### **Chat rooms, Internet Relay Chat (IRC) and Instant Messaging (synchronous)**

Chat rooms use much shorter communications held in real time so the users need to be online at the same time. Chat rooms have been usurped somewhat by Instant Messaging (IM), and both have cultural norms in Chatiquette, a sub-strand of Netiquette. Just like other forms of online communication, rules of conduct apply and public chat rooms are often monitored by the owner or volunteers, who have the power to step in and moderate users by gagging them or taking away their participation access. Chat rooms in many cases also have an audio facility, and audio files (often from popular culture) can be played to display emotion. Webcams are increasingly used in Instant Messaging, and most software can save or log the chat, even delivering messages to an inbox when the recipient is offline.

### **Graphical multiuser environments and virtual reality**

Chat rooms that use avatars or other visuals are similar to other chat rooms except that they allow use of an avatar (a computer generated representation of, in this case, a human being) that can move around a virtual environment. These can be used for anything from simple social networking with participants simply talking to each other, to playing a multiuser game, such as World of Warcraft (WoW),

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where users band together to defeat enemies and achieve goals within the game. More sophisticated environments which are created by the user within a given platform, offer even more, allowing whole communities to be built, with provision of software to allow virtual sex, and some even having their own commerce, such as Second Life where the currency – which can be converted to actual currencies offline – is Linden Dollars (L\$).

### Blogs and blogging

Blogs (web logs) are online diaries or journals, with either full or more private public access on the Internet. The two main types of blog are personal blogs and corporate blogs. The former can be used in many different ways for the individual, such as letting people know their innermost thoughts and feelings, or as a journal to disseminate information that the individual enjoys or feels is important. Corporate blogs are more generally used to disseminate information about a company or for marketing, branding, advertising and public relations purposes. Blogs are traditionally text based, but increasingly use video, at which point they are called Vlogs. Blogs can also be defined by their purpose, such as asking questions (Qlog) or to discuss art (Artlog). All types of blog are part of the Blogosphere in cyberspace. Most blogs allow the reader to make comments on what is posted, often generating long threads of discussion and debate, particularly in the academic field.

More recently, mini-blogging has come about with websites such as Twitter, where the communication can only have a maximum of 140 characters. Tweets (the communications) are posted and witnessed by those who choose to ‘follow’ you. Tweets are in response to the (current) question ‘What are you doing?’ but in addition are often links of interest to other material on the Internet. Twitter may also be considered a social networking site, and updates can be sent to mobile devices (see Grohol, 2009).

### Social and professional networking

Social networks are online communities of people who share interests, activities, friendship, family, or who are getting back in touch with people they have known in the past or friends of friends. Recently there has been a flurry of professional networking sites for people with common professional fields or interests, or for those seeking jobs via networking. Most networking sites provide a variety of ways for users to interact, such as email, IM, file sharing, mini-applications to share, such as games or contests, in-groups, fanclubs, and virtual gift giving. Professional networks can be an extremely cost-effective way of promoting start-up businesses and gaining publicity through contacts, since the majority are free to users and are funded (usually) through advertising on the site (see Lee, 2009). Notifications of the activities of other users one is linked to in relation to what one is interested in can be configured to arrive in inboxes for instant updating.



## Wikis

Wikis (Hawaiian for 'fast') are simply information web pages that are held online and are open to adding to or editing by anyone who cares to do so. However, instead of being as random as it sounds, wikis encourage a collaboration of users to invest in making the information added to or edited as robust as possible for the greater good of the Internet itself. The additions and edits on wikis are also open to the same process via a simple (supplied) markup text system. Large global wikis such as Wikipedia are a good source of information if used responsibly, and smaller wikis are invaluable for many community and business websites in disseminating information in the spirit of collaboration in working towards a universal goal.

## Web 2.0

What is interesting about several of the above facets of cyberspace is they demonstrate Web 2.0 in action. Netizens are involved in online communities and have a philosophy that is conducive to the development and growth of the Internet via open access and free speech. In addition, the online community has its own culture in the use and understanding of Netiquette. The online community is Web 2.0 in action.

According to Wikipedia (2009):

The term 'Web 2.0' describes the changing trends in the use of World Wide Web technology and web design that aim to enhance creativity, communications, secure information sharing, collaboration and functionality of the web. Web 2.0 concepts have led to the development and evolution of web-culture communities and hosted services, such as social-networking sites, video sharing sites, wikis, blogs, and folksonomies. The term first became notable after the O'Reilly Media Web 2.0 conference in 2004. Although the term suggests a new version of the World Wide Web, it does not refer to an update to any technical specifications, but rather to changes in the ways software developers and end-users utilize the Web.

The implications of Web 2.0 philosophy in the mental health field will be examined further in the final chapter. What is an unknown, however, is the evolutionary phase of the development of the Internet that is referred to as Web 3.0. This is speculative and undefinable at the moment both for practical reasons and because of lack of technological advancement. Further, constantly updating, wiki discussion of Web 3.0 should be available at Wikipedia, although interestingly the information available was deleted at the time of writing.

Finally, we hope you enjoy the book as well as finding it an invaluable practitioner resource in building, developing or researching an online presence.

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