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Online counselling

Offering her experience piloting online counselling Jane Evans invites other F/HE counsellors to join an online

As Terry Hanley has indicated, e-learning and e-support are developing in both FE and HE to provide a versatile and accessible resource for the student population. A key issue supporting development of these resources is the suitability of this medium to the target client group and the willingness of the student population to engage with learning support through this medium. As an indicator, there were over five million student and staff logons (77 per cent from off campus) to the Nottingham Trent University (NTU) virtual learning portal in 05/06.

The online counselling service at NTU is intended to complement, rather than replace, face-to-face services, offering flexibility to clients in the way they access counselling. The service is aligned to both the university's strategic plan and the e-learning strategy by providing an additional component in the variety of learning and support approaches offered to students. A unified resource for supporting this strategy, such as the NTU Virtual Learning Support Unit, can provide valuable technological expertise and professional knowledge to assist with the development of appropriate and ethical online counselling systems (or other student support services).

From my personal experience of planning and project managing a pilot I consider it crucial that counselling services take time to evaluate how such a service could be integrated alongside their existing face-to-face service, and to identify target groups from the outset. The decision to be selective in how the service was offered has helped our project to feel manageable and to hold an ethical structure. The following sets out some of the key points to consider, based on our experience at NTU.

Why online counselling?

The successful and responsive NTU counselling service is consistently rated highly by users, but general student feedback has occasionally indicated dissatisfaction from those who have had difficulty accessing mainstream counselling provision. For example, students on placement may feel more isolated and in need of additional support without being able to access it. Online counselling has the potential to offer a more flexible source of emotional support. Other student groups who may benefit from online counselling services include distance learners, part-time students, mature students, and students with mobility difficulties. Historically there are also students who may not be comfortable in presenting for face-to-face counselling due to disability, cultural, faith, or social and gender perceptions of its purpose. In such cases online counselling may offer a more discreet



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at Nottingham Trent University, online counselling discussion forum

facility that can reduce reluctance in seeking emotional support.

Appropriate training

Services introducing online working with clients will no doubt be influenced by the resources available to them in establishing a service. Here at NTU we were fortunate to be able to recruit counsellors with specific online counselling training and experience. There are ethical and professional aspects of online counselling that differ from face-to-face client work. I feel very strongly that counsellors intending to work online with clients should receive specific training as well as feeling comfortable with the medium for service delivery. Prior to planning the pilot and recruiting team members for our service I trained in online counselling and online supervision, and the team has since progressed in training to diploma level with the role of supervisee and supervisor featuring throughout the syllabus. Appropriate supervision of online counselling work is vital, and I would strongly advise online counsellors to seek a clinical supervisor experienced in working online with clients in both a synchronous and asynchronous context in addition to experience of working in an educational context. Details of useful references and recommended online training are provided below.

Systems and procedures

Before commencing the pilot the e-counselling team spent considerable time planning a working system for the administration and delivery of the service. This included establishing a separate mail box for incoming enquiries, servicing applications, and processing incoming and outgoing mail for the e-counselling team.

Assessment procedures have been more rigorous for clients accessing the service due to applications being processed without face-to-face contact. Clients are asked to identify on an electronic form

the issues they wish to bring to counselling. They give the service a telephone contact number in the event of a technology issue arising or more immediate support being required, and GP and personal address details are also required. Online counselling is not a suitable medium for all students and alternative options are needed to ensure the team supports students appropriately.

Clients are offered a mutually agreed appointment time when they will receive the weekly email from their counsellor. The client is required to send their email up to 48 hours prior to their appointment slot. This provides a bounded agreement where the client and counsellor know when mail will be received and exchanged. The e-counselling team has compiled a comprehensive client information booklet outlining the process of online counselling which includes how the client can maintain their personal privacy and boundaries of confidentiality and other useful topics including how to express yourself through text.

Evaluation

Starting the pilot with selected student cohorts provided the opportunity to adopt an ongoing review of systems, evaluating and further developing the online service during the life of the pilot. The initial target group consisted of six cohorts of placement students in four of the 10 academic schools. The pilot was then extended to the broader student population through the online NTU student bulletin, specifically at times of increased pressure in the academic calendar such as the exam and assessment periods. Creating 'windows of opportunity' for access to the service in this way has allowed the team to be better placed to manage the volume of enquiries and meet student needs in a timely manner.

The service has been used in an interesting variety of ways, with anonymity ensuring that enquiries have been received from students who may not have presented for face-to-face work, and in some cases providing a 'gateway' for students to access face-to-face counselling. The e-counselling team has also been able to refer students to other forms of academic or student support services.

Further support

From my current experience of providing counselling through synchronous and asynchronous electronic media I feel confident that a strong therapeutic relationship can be established and maintained online. There are online counselling services currently being offered by established external organisations, which further endorse this support as a suitable medium of accessible and professional resources. Terry Hanley has mentioned the Samaritans. In addition there are youth organisations such as Kooth, funded by local authorities in the North of England, which offers online counselling and referral support to 11-25 year olds (www.xenzone.com/kooth.html), and the UK Eating Disorders Association BYTE programme, which offers CBT online with the support of a qualified counsellor (www.edauk.com/HelpandSupport/Onlinetherapy).

I agree with Terry that those services within further and higher education currently offering online counselling can benefit from sharing good practice in this developing area. There is a discussion forum for this purpose (see below). I would also like to invite colleagues who are currently working online with clients to contact me if they would be interested in joining a live online forum which would meet once a term to discuss working practices and offer support to each other regarding progress in this area: jane.evans@ntu.ac.uk ■

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Resources

Discussion forum: online-counselling@jjscmail.ac.uk

UK online counselling training providers:
www.onlinecounsellors.co.uk
www.olt4counsellors.onlineuk.org

International Society for Mental Health Online (eg providing online assessment guidelines):
www.ismho.org/casestudy/ccsgas.htm

Handbook: Kraus R, Zack J, Stricker G. Online counselling: a handbook for mental health professionals. London: Elsevier Academic Press; 2004.