Original Research Article

Web counselling as a recent advancement in technology: perspectives of practitioners in India

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ABSTRACT

Background: Online mental health treatment is an emerging, area and few professionals currently use the Internet to provide mental health services. At this time, mental health professions are lacking conclusive evidence about the effectiveness of these Internet services. The objective of the present study is to explore the nature and extent of online counselling in India.
Methods: The study relies on data collected through semi-structured interview from e-Counsellors (n=15) and site admins (n=3) from India. The collected data were thematically coded and analyzed quantitatively.
Results: Participants reported specific concerns and stereotypes related to the provision of mental health treatment online, including confidentiality of client information, liability issues, and limitations. Also, conveyed benefits of e-Counselling and suggestions for professionals for practicing on e-platforms.
Conclusions: Participants reported specific concerns and stereotypes related to the provision of mental health treatment online, including confidentiality of client information, liability issues, and limitations. Also, conveyed benefits of e-Counselling and suggestions for professionals for practicing on e-platforms.

Keywords: Web counselling, Online psychologists, e-Clients, Counselling stereotypes

INTRODUCTION

Human beings have always had problems. Unfortunately, this very need for assistance with personal problems is so widespread that it was but people are busy with their time schedules and is to some extent hesitant to approach mental health practitioners directly. To an extent this can solve via online counselling services. Online-counselling4you.com, 7cups.com, AmFine.in, mindframes.com, talkspace.com, breakthrough.com, familycounselling.co.in, and betterhelp.com are some of the online counselling websites. A growing body of knowledge to date is positive in showing that online counseling can have a similar impact and is capable of replicating the facilitative conditions as face-to-face encounters.[1] Recent researches on online counselling suggest that online psychological counselling would benefit people functioning at a moderately high level.[2]

Mental health services conducted on the Internet have been described as e-therapy, web therapy, online counseling, e-mail therapy, Internet-based therapy, and similar terminology.[3] Online therapy services may be provided as an adjunct to more traditional forms of mental health treatment, or may be initiated without any offline contact between the therapist and client. Currently, there are a variety of websites providing links and information regarding online therapy all over the globe.[3] Recent publications suggest that internet based treatments are effective for intellectual disability, adults with autism spectrum disorders, disruptive behaviour in

children, and patients with non-alcoholic fatty liver disease.[4-7]

Need and significance

Reviewing the literature, it has observed that there is very few investigations conducted on online mental health treatment. Thus the present investigation is exploring online counselling treatment among e-Counselling website admins and online mental health professionals. This study seeks to answer three research questions from the perspective of e-Counsellors and site developers. First, to what extent are mental health professionals currently providing online counselling? Second, what are the comforts of providing online treatment? And third, do mental health professionals face any limits related to providing online treatment? e-Counselling seems like having a lot of potential problems for many. Thus the present study conducted in the intention to minimize the false impressions and stereotypes in society on e-therapy and thereby promoting people to utilize and familiarize advancement in technology for better mental health supports.

Objectives

- To understand the nature and extent of online counselling.
- To understand the mode of preferable e-counselling among counsellors.
- To understand the perspectives of e-counsellors on online counselling.
- To study the comforts of online counselling.
- To study the limits of online counselling.

METHODS

Participants

A purposive sample of three website admins belongs to Kerala state and 15 Online Counsellors belonging to different states from India providing online counselling were responded. Inclusion criteria of counsellors were one year experience in e-counselling.

About e-counselling sites

These are an exclusive online platform for users anywhere in the globe to find solutions to the problems relating to the mind. The sites assure secure text, audio and video chat plans to counsel people online around the world. Many registered expert Counsellors/Psychologists are there to help users find the right balance in their life. Counsellors can decide their fee structures. Through websites, thousands of clients and their near ones are able to open up and discuss freely to the Counsellors about the conditions and symptoms. Online Counsellors and psychologists are able to reach out to a large number of users every day and provide solutions from everyday problems to psychological conditions via private online consultations.

Measures

- *Personal information sheet*: Personal information like age, sex, place, mode of e-Counselling etc., were collected through the personal information sheet.
- *Semi-structured interview schedule*: By observing the online counselling websites, discussion with multimedia experts regarding the use of online counselling, professional's involvement etc., investigator prepared a semi-structured interview schedule.

Procedure

The data were collected from website admins and e-Counsellors, within the duration of 21st April to 21st December in 2018.

Stage 1

First, the managerial site admin of three websites (n=3) were contacted by prior appointment via mail and phone, and had a brief discussion about the purpose of the study as well as importance. Total number of e-Counsellors, gender, state and mode of counselling was enquired. The need of e-counselling was queried to admins and interview was recorded also.

Stage 2

From the discussion with site admins, more details were availed and based on that interview conducted among counsellors. The e-mail address of 46 e-Counsellors were collected from websites and contacted. Investigator introduced self, need and purpose of the study. All the counsellors used either text/audio/video chat for e-Counselling. Among 46 e-Counsellors, 15 were willing to co-operate with the study. Received reply and when permission allowed from Counsellors, appointment booked for detailed interview. As the Counsellors are from different locations over the nation, for the convenience, telephonic interview was conducted and data collected. After obtaining informed consent, each participant was asked to verbally respond to the following: what are the benefits of providing online mental health treatment? Do mental health professionals face any limits related to providing online treatment? Personal information like age, gender, geographical location, higher education qualification, e-mail address and telephone number was obtained from e-Counsellors.

All interviews (total 18) were mobile recorded with their permission and transcribed verbatim. Interviews lasted between 15 and 30 minutes and proceeded until no new themes emerged. The first researcher conducted all the interviews. A firm assurance was given to each participant that the information gathered from them

would be used only for research purposes and their identity would be kept confidential. Investigators thanked all participants for their kind co-operation to the study.

Data analysis

Colaizzi's phenomenological method was employed in analyzing participants' transcripts. In this method, all written transcripts are read several times to obtain an overall feeling for them.[8] From each transcript, significant phrases or sentences that pertain directly to the experience of online counselling are identified and themes generated. Theme Analysis of the interview has done.

RESULTS

Investigator interviewed website admins and online counsellors. In interview to site admins, Investigators mainly focused to e-Counselling involvement of professionals and their demographic details. Counsellors were interviewed on benefits and limits of web counselling. The thematically coded responses were analyzed and discussed in diagrammatic forms.

Counsellors as web practitioners

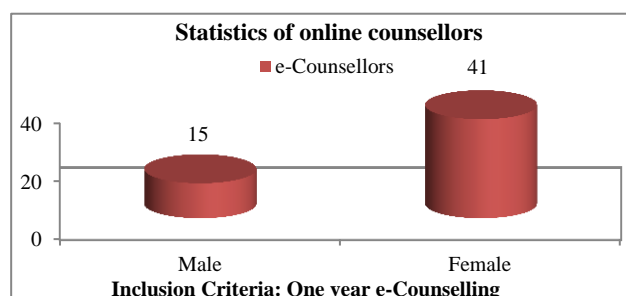There were 56 (41 female and 15 male) counsellors registered in the websites (Figure 1).
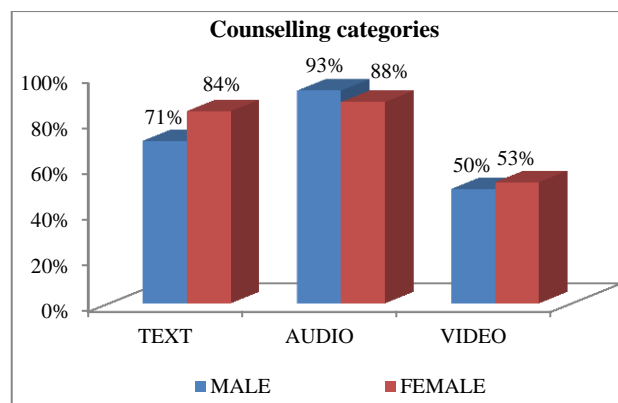

Figure 1: Details of e-Counsellors in websites.

Figure 2: Indicates counselor's preference of e-Counselling mediums.

In the websites, there is an option for every Counsellor to choose their mode of chats. One can choose all the three - text, audio and video - or any as per one's interest. On the basis of Counsellor's selection clients are allowed to choose type of chat in appointments. Figure 2 shows counselor's type of chat preference.

It can be seen that for male and female e-Counsellors, most preferable type of e-Counselling is like audio, text, and then video chats respectively. Counselors prefer more on audio counselling than text or video chats. Also, a 50% of people prefer video counselling from male and female parts. Female are more in video counselling than their counterparts males.

Comforts of e-Counselling

The interview was embedded with huge information. From 15 verbatim transcripts of e-Counsellors (n=15), 155 significant statements were extracted and 8 themes formulated regarding comforts of online counselling. Table 1 includes examples of significant statements and themes.

Table 1: Selected examples of significant statements of e-Counsellors on comforts & concerns of e-Counselling and formulated themes.

No.	Significant statement	Formulated themes
1	*"ah…yeah…most of the clients are afraid of society while meeting a Counsellor. Because people may call them mentally ill till the end of life. In online sessions they feel privacy. Nobody knows. Even I am not asked my clients their personal details unnecessarily"*	Anonymity
2	*"I am a teacher but I like to do counselling also. Online counselling is convenient for me to satisfy my career interest even I have engagements. And I can choose my time slots for available appointments day or night"*	Convenience
3	*"For me sometimes it's difficult to be in therapy centre and wait for clients when I have some other programs or conferences. Online sessions help me to use my time efficiently in travels and me available for clients"*	Time efficiency
4	*"Some clinic cases need emergency follow up sessions. But when they are out of station they can met me online. Sometimes I will be out of station. Then I can also work anywhere from the world and access to clients"*	Accessibility

Continued.

| No.	Significant statement	Formulated themes
5	*"I am not interested to work under anyone but like to start up independently. It's cost-effective. Online counselling helps me to satisfy my vocational interest and less on costs. I don't want to build a clinic or travel anymore. My Gadget is my clinic. I am an artist and use my time for arts works too"*	Cost-effectiveness
6	*"I know many people searching for job. This is a kind of online job and easy to try because any qualified psychologist can register as Counsellor from their computer"*	Easy to try
7	*"One of the comfort of online sessions is that nobody will interrupt us in-between session. No distractions..."*	No interruption
8	*"From my online counselling experience I can say that some clients are concern that whether their identity reveal or not... Is online safe and secure or not... At first I am also concerned about security. Whether the cases are genuine or not... Will people play with counselling...?"*	Security
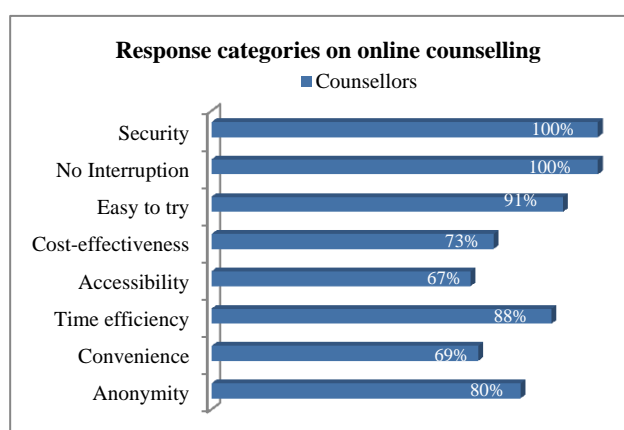
Figure 3: Response categories of e-Counsellors on comforts of e-Counselling.

All the participants are confident about security (100%) and absence of external interruptions (100%) in online consultation. The other themes are easy to try (91%), time efficiency (88%), anonymity (80%), cost-effectiveness (73%) and accessibility (67%). Figure 3 indicates the percentage on each response categories of e-Counsellors.

Limits of e-Counselling

Interview with e-Counsellors next focused on its limitations. From 15 verbatim transcripts of interview, 135 significant statements were extracted and 8 themes formulated on the limits of e-Counselling. Table 2 includes examples of significant statements and themes.

As regards limits of e-Counselling, all the participants are said about absence of regular appointments. Other major limitations are need dependence on gadgets (87%), delay in communication (87%), asynchronous nature in online consultation (73%) and reliability in technology (47%). The least counted limits are lack of physical presence (20%), and lack of visual verbal cues (13%). 6.70% participants reported that they doubt on efficacy of e-Counselling. Figure 4 indicates the percentage on each response categories of e-Counsellors.

Table 2: Selected examples of significant statements of e-counselors on limits of e-counselling and formulated themes.

| No.	Significant statement	Formulated themes
1	*"Some clients prefer text or audio chats and so sometimes I may need their facial reactions... Some not prefer audio... In text chats I feel to get their reactions at least by voice. We can't compel them to select video chat. It's their choice..."*	Lack of visual and verbal cues
2	*"...and... it's difficult to get range from my home... sometimes it will be in 4G signal at the same time no signal at all..."*	Technology can be unreliable
3	*"A single online session takes 45 minutes. The interruptions in web connection from the part of client or counsellor sometimes spoil the fluency of session and treatment..."*	Low efficacy
4	*"You know... action is the man's mirror... hmm... Its absence is a limit... sometimes can't predict what one word means..."*	Lack of physical presence
5	*"I may get frustrated when I can't get syncing reply from other side..."*	Asynchronous nature
6	*"There will be time delay in text chats... This lacks urgent or emergency responses..."*	Prevents urgency
7	*"As a job, online appointments are unpredictable... I think it is because people are scared to use technology..."*	Absence of job security
8	*"...and computer or gadget facility is essential... it may difficult for uneducated people get into online sessions... some govt. policy changes needed"*	Gadget concerns
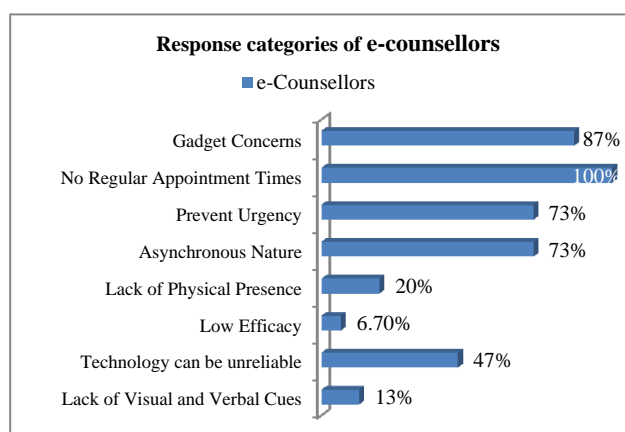
Figure 4: Response categories of e-counsellors on limits of e-counselling.

DISCUSSION

Counsellors as web practitioners

Taking the population of qualified counsellors, a number of 56 e-Counsellors seem as negligible. This simply shows the extent to which mental health professionals currently providing online counselling. Survey results of professional information on e-counselling supports this finding that very few (1% or less) professionals provide e-Counselling.[3]

The studies reviewed on video counselling include many reports of satisfaction levels of practitioners, families and young people[9] as well saving time, costs and improving service quality.[10] The literature suggests young people may be more likely to respond to alternate service delivery strategies such as video counselling or Internet-based applications. In the videoconferencing literature, children aged 4-12 are very positive about videoconferencing with 94% liking the system and 29% indicating they prefer a 'television' doctor to a 'real' doctor.[11] Yet here video chat is less preferable among e-Counsellors and the reluctant to use video counselling may make big barriers for many e-counsellors.

Mehta and Chalhoub enquired about text based communications and participants opined that text based communications are simply not as smooth and detailed as verbal communications, which may lead to more misunderstandings or less insight.[12] Both client and Counsellor would say more in a talking situation than when typing – it is simply easier to speak than it is to type.[13] At the same time it can be seen that benefits of using text mode to deliver services are well documented and include increased time available for contact between young people and clinicians, both frequency of contact and amount of time.[12] Study says that young people often spend time for text chats to their clinicians, and receive regular brief feedback. It makes them feel that their clinician is present, listening, and thinking about them.[14] One of the advantage of text over audio chat is that much less clinician time is required for reading and responding to messages than is required with audio chats.[13]

Comforts of e-Counselling

Participants opined that in online counselling some clients feel safer and are able to be more open in a 'Virtual Room' than in face to face counselling, yet which can be confronting for some. One of the counsellor responded that "sometimes it is comfort for therapists because there are greater flexibility and options in appointments as they provide 24×7 services. This helps to focus more fully on the counselling process due to being at a time and place that suits counsellors. Also, time efficiency is beneficial for clients and counsellors because no need to take time off work or travel anywhere. Another counsellor said that, "e-Counselling offers increased access to services from rural and remote locations or to people who are unable to leave their homes or travel to an office. Also very convenient for people who travel extensively, as it can be accessed from anywhere they happen to be".

Regarding the fee, a participant said that "In online counselling each counsellor can decide his/her own fee structures for text/audio/video sessions and yet it can be say that for clients it is less costly than face-to-face counselling in the sense of travel costs, child-care costs, and taking time off from work etc. can generally be avoided". The first pediatric autism study conducted entirely online found that not only a valuable platform for conducting randomized clinical trial, but both cost and time effective, as well.[15] Youth are generally more open and confident when online, providing more personal details due to perceived distance between client and therapist.[16]

Limits of e-Counselling

Based on earlier studies, clinical researchers assumed that the two forms of therapy were on a par.[17] Conventional face-to-face therapy and online therapies are equally effective in experiments. Recent study by Taylor, Peterson, Pruiksma, Mc-Caughan, Nicholson, & Mintz focused on soldiers who had chronic insomnia at Fort Hood. In their two experimental groups one received CBT directly and other group of soldiers via internet. Both the in-person and internet therapy improved their sleep qualities.[18] Counsellors criticized e-Counselling that device and device network issues can result in lags in response time, connection failures, message delivery failure, disruption to audio or video, or even system crashes. Also, they assumed that "it is difficult at present to make any definitive statements about the efficacy of online counselling. However when compared to face-to-face counselling it is often found to be not as at ease". At the same time, Counsellors said that "there are some cases which will more effectively deal via e-Counselling. Some of them are marital problems, internet addiction, parenting, anxiety, hopelessness, stage fear etc." Results

from a new study suggest that the pace of recovery may be slow, although online group therapy is effective for treating bulimia nervosa.[19]

Counsellors suggested the necessity of advancement in test administration-online as well as making psychological tests available in online. Sampson suggest that when using online tests, consider factors such as accessibility, affordability, user-friendliness, security of test results, compliance with ethical principles, reliability, and validity.[20] Barak and English exposed that Diagnostic testing can be valuable in assessing the psychopathological factors that might influence the efficacy of online treatment.[21] APA recommends that assessing personality types and disorders gives information to Counsellor about client's react to various forms of online therapy.[22] People with borderline personality disorders often challenge the boundaries of therapy, which can be problematic in communication, especially in text chats and when combining different methods of communication.[23] Hopefully, in the near future, professionally managed websites will become available that offer diagnostic tests as an aid for online therapists.

Considering from the viewpoint of Counsellors, expressed their concern regarding limits like absence of regular appointments in e-Counselling. Satisfaction with job security predicts job commitment and job performance.[24] An investigation confined that virtual worker face a great departure from the usual way of doing occupation and the basic way a job is performed. A comprehensive change in management plan can help to ensure the long-term adoption of a successful virtual work program.[25]

Clinical researchers assumed that online as well as face-to-face therapy are equally effective in practice.[17] This studies support mental health professionals incorporate Internet technology into their professional practice. Recent studies proved that online therapies are effective but limits of e-Counselling and the ways to overcome are negligible. Therefore, future research should assess possible methods of minimizing or eliminating some of the practical and ethical concerns in this area.

CONCLUSION

These findings suggest several practical implications for professionals providing mental health services to clients. First, few professionals are utilizing e-Counselling and availability of online counsellors handling different languages are few. Second, clients and counsellors are having some false assumptions before experiencing e-Counselling. This may be due to the lack of guidelines regarding the same. Third, counsellors are needed to acquire information on online mental health care and thereby maximize availability to clients. Fourth, and finally, there are pros and cons for everything. When mobile phone enters as an individual assistant, society

was very scared of it. Now the picture changed. So, online counselling may have limitations but utilizing the brighter side is necessary recently. Stigma and taboos are needed to vanish not only from client's mind but also from counsellors/mental health professionals too. There is broad global scope for investigation on this area because mental health practitioners may familiarize with online practicing and far away from counselling stereotypes. If so, it will be a revolution, when efficient psychologists are available in a click away for clients all over the world via World Wide Web.

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