



Research Paper

A New Area of Mental Health Care: Online Therapy, Counseling and Guidance

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ABSTRACT: *The aim of this study is to describe online therapy and counseling on mental health care used. In the current study, first online counseling is defined by looking at its areas of use, its comparison to traditional face-to-face counseling, its theoretical framework and sample programs. Online counseling is used as e-counseling, internet-based counseling, computer-assisted counseling, online therapy, tele-therapy, and e-guidance on the databases. Online counseling is also useful for clients with a disability. In addition, migrants group who difficulty on self-expression, online counseling has advantages to help seek. Applications of computer-based cognitive behavioural approach, which also includes computer-centred and face-to-face therapy techniques, is found to be advantageous. When the current state of developing technologies and the point at which we are right now in psychological counseling are considered, it is anticipated that online counseling is developing fast and will continue its development.*

Keywords: *mental health, online therapy, online counseling, career guidance*

I. INTRODUCTION

Computer and Internet use is a tool that appears to be increasingly and widely used in every field in today's world [1]. The observable increase in the use of smart phones, tablets and general Internet in the last ten years has caused clients in the field of psychology to move their therapeutic interventions into the digital platform through computers and other communication technologies [2]. Mobile phone use has become significantly more sophisticated, including use in educational contexts, like as psychology [3]. It is observed that psychological assistance practices are supported by the Internet or computers and that such developments are demanded by the users [1]. Approaches that support an increase in time spent for mental health and a decrease in the costs of such services are now widely accepted [4]. New technologies are also used in applications and research in the field of mental health. Video-conferencing and the Internet are especially preferred in mental health services provided to children and adolescents/young people. Video-conferencing and the use of the Internet play important roles in prevention, appraisal, assessment, diagnosis, counseling and intervention programmes [5].

The increased use of technology and the Internet and their significant places as today's everyday communication tools brought about new fields of internet-based applications in the literature, which are generally called e-mail or online psychological counseling [6]. Through these applications, different concepts and application methods are provided for professionals' use. The counseling process is done using e-mails, chat rooms and/or video-conferencing through online psychological counseling, cyber counseling, e-counseling and so on [7]. Distant psychological help processes have been used for years in the past through methods such as letter writing and reading. However, parallel with the increased use of Internet and related technologies, the methods employed in distant psychological counseling have been changing in favour of online chatting, and more visual and audio techniques are used through methods such as the video [1].

Online psychological counseling services, which have brought a new perspective to the field of therapy, psychological counseling and guidance, are attracting attention in terms of areas of use, methods applied and ethical considerations. In this respect, it is important that the studies in relation to online psychological counseling are examined. The aim of this study is to describe online therapy and counseling on mental health care used which have become widely used in the last few years.

Online Therapy or Online Counseling

Richards and Vigano [8] define online counseling as a therapeutic intervention that is carried out by a professional counsellor in a cyber context using computer-assisted communication technologies. As an online technology, e-therapy appears to be a very useful service among the Internet-based intervention and health care services [9]. According to Dinçyürek and Uygarer [10], online counseling can be defined as a helping process that enables the counsellor or the therapist to provide professional assistance through the Internet to help the client solve his problems. There are psychological counseling applications that involve asking questions to a therapist through e-mail, online chatting or video conferencing [1]. Individuals who are in search for support and information do so through the Internet. Within this context, it is believed that there are factors such as the counsellor, clients, the situation, aim of the application, and the intervention that affect the process. Online counsellor has a unique position. He/she can read words in a context that is private and is chosen by the client. It is directed by an application plan. Objectives and expectations are communicated to the client on the other end of the screen through professional empathy skills. In clients' reports, instant rapport, genuineness and empathy appear to be strong factors supporting the effectiveness of online counseling. In the fast expanding mental-health system, online counseling as a therapeutic approach needs to be better understood. Moving concepts that are within this field into the area of practice is believed to contribute to the development of online counseling [11].

Numerous studies show that the most common method of application that is used in online counseling is online individual communication/chatting [12]. It is argued that in terms of dealing with symptoms, counseling services provided through the Internet by a therapist are equally effective as counseling services provided through the phone and e-mails. The fact that there are studies showing the effectiveness of this therapeutic technique, is received positively in terms of the development of online counseling [12]. It is observed that negative attitudes towards computer-assisted therapy are in decline [13]. In addition to this, psychological counselors are emphasising that ethical principles caused the most concern in providing online counseling services. Despite the fact that APA has already defined ethical principles and standards, there are still other studies going on [14].

Areas of Use for Online Counseling

Online counseling is an area with extensive application possibilities in different areas and with different age groups. For example, career counseling has recently been provided in a virtual context. Career counsellors can use online assessment services before they start the process as well as online intervention services. In this way, counsellors can use their own information and can be extremely helpful to their clients by providing the best possible service [15]. When the last 10 years in psychological counseling are examined, it is observed that online counseling has become very important for especially young adults [16]. Group counseling, where individuals can share their emotions and receive a relative psychological support, is also within internet/computer-assisted helping applications [1]. E-counseling is defined as a support service, which is not diagnostic and treatment-oriented, but is effective, fast and provides possibilities for reaching many people, by employing methods such as online chatting and visual talk between the client and the counsellor during their long-term continuous communication [17]. School counseling is defined as a support service provided in educational settings that helps students' personal, psychological and educational development [18]. It is suggested that in school-based psychological counseling services, in addition to the traditional face-to-face counseling, the use of online counseling will be helpful in developing a better communication with the clients [19]. In cases where difficult experiences are involved, many students cannot receive this service. In such cases, an online counseling service that obtains the trust of adolescents is preferred [18]. Online support was found very effective in terms of student support [20].

Online Counseling or Traditional Face-to-face Counseling

Despite the fact that traditional face-to-face counseling is still preferred by many clients, the recent increases in the applications of various forms of online counseling makes it a popular model [21]. Online or computer-assisted counseling shows differences from traditional face-to-face counseling in terms of its theoretical framework [22]. Applications of computer-based cognitive behavioural approach, which also includes computer-centred and face-to-face therapy techniques, is found to be advantageous [23]. One of these advantages is the fact that it costs one-third of traditional treatments [24]. Computer-based approaches encourage participation in the therapy processes, especially for individuals who only seek information or are reluctant to start treatment, since these approaches do not require disclosure of personal information and therefore offer confidentiality. In addition, it is believed that their approaches minimise place related obstacles

during the treatment [23]. Counseling services can be offered and obtained at any time [13]. It also enables individuals who live in foreign countries and experience problems due to language proficiency, as well as individuals who are disabled, to receive counseling services at any time [1]. Due to the fact that internet-based counseling services are accessible and that they are payable, they provide great advantages for the clients. In a study on the treatment of panic attacks, it was found that counseling that was carried out using internet-based cognitive behavioural approach was much more effective than traditional face-to-face counseling [25]. In computer-based programs, user login is automatically saved. Such personal information is kept in reliable databases and are accessible for counselors or researchers for examination. Therefore, time and costs required for the therapy are reduced [23]. It is believed that online counselling has a similar effect to a face-to-face counseling and that it provides better possibilities for the improvement of responding skills. However, experimental proof is needed to confirm its effectiveness and validity [26]. Computer-based and online approaches have benefits such as flexibility, accessibility by a great majority of the population, anonymity and low costs [27]. Computer-based applications can be used anywhere and at any time [28]. In cases where individuals live in geographical places where there is no counselling service, cannot get out of their homes due to physical or health issues or cannot regularly attends face-to-face counseling session, online psychological counseling services provided great advantages. These programs are effective in providing these services to individuals with language problems/difficulties. In another study with prospective psychological counselors, it was found that candidates believed that online psychological counseling helped individuals to improve their responding skills through writing, enabled them to reflect on words and write the most appropriate sentence [29]. It was also found that the use of online communications in interventions affected the assessment of the results positively. It can be observed from the literature that most of the studies aim to look at the difference between the effectiveness of face-to-face counseling and online counseling. Such studies show that there is a negative correlation between both approaches and the clients' attitudes towards confidentiality of personal information and a positive correlation between the approaches' openness for new experiences and self-expression. Traditional counseling was found to be correlated with stigmatisation, while there was no such correlation found with online counseling [30].

Despite these advantages, online counseling has its disadvantages as well. For example, one of these disadvantages is the individuals' worry that the relationship between the therapist and client will be recorded. The fact that online counseling does not include a therapeutic agreement is believed to negatively affect both the clients' attendance and the process [23]. In terms of providing therapeutic tools for specific individual needs, online therapy provides limited opportunities for a unique therapy [23]. In face-to-face therapy, the counsellor and the client usually communicate through the mimics, posture and eye contact. Non-verbal communication cues, which are very important in psychological counseling, cannot be observed in online counseling, which is another disadvantage. Disconnecting from the service due to technical problems cause the clients to feel isolated and alienated. It is believed that online counseling is not effective with individuals with paranoia, dissociative disorders and personality disorders [22]. It is also believed that online therapy is not effective in family therapy and severe psychotic cases. The most common problem in clients who receive online counseling is reported to be relationships [31]. For individuals with severe depression or suicidal tendencies, online chatting format was not found to be appropriate and therefore counselors should pay extreme attention when using this therapy as it also can be a risk factor [32].

During online communications, the texts and emoticons are frequently used by both parties and are recorded. At this point, the use of traditional face-to-face counseling together with online counseling to determine the meaning of many non-verbal communication cues is very useful [11].

Psychological Approaches in Online Counseling

Cognitive behavioural therapies aim to increase their functionality by changing individuals' attitudes towards their own thoughts, helping them understand how their thoughts impact their behaviours and change their thoughts and behaviours [33]. Psycho-educational tendencies that lie beneath cognitive behavioural approach allowed it to be conceptualised to be used in online platforms. Computer or internet-based cognitive behavioural counseling modules are installed on virtual contexts and therefore enable the client to receive counseling services at any place with an Internet connection [34]. Cognitive behavioural therapies on digital platforms allow the clients to receive support from teachers, nurses or counsellors via e-mails, phone conversations or personal text messages or to complete the programme independently with their own motivation and at their own pace [35].

The Internet-based psychological counseling service that is based on cognitive behavioural approach is made up of twelve modules. At the beginning, features such as graphics, sound and videos that support the written text are used. The applications include psycho-training related to the problem. Later modules include

thought and behaviour changing strategies Homework tasks that help complete the module are also assigned. Clients login using their own username and password and can send private messages to their therapists. These messages are also saved [36]. E-counseling services provide their users at least six behaviour changing techniques. These techniques also provide a preventive framework [37]. They also employ homework tasks, information sheets, and rewards systems, which are usually associated with traditional therapy models [23].

There are findings in the literature that show that Internet-based cognitive behavioural therapies are effective, provide possibilities for assessment through scales and are low cost. It is known that counsellors and clients accept online counselling based on cognitive behavioural approach [34]. Despite the existence of findings that suggest that clients who use self-help programmes designed according to the Internet-based cognitive behavioural approach benefit from these programmes [38], there is also evidence in the literature that traditional face-to-face counselling is equally effective [35]. It was found that Internet-based applications that are anchored in cognitive behavioural approach have reduced intellectual ageing from 50% to 27% [39]. It is also argued that Internet-based applications that are framed within cognitive behavioural approach are effective in treating depression, panic attacks, post-traumatic stress disorders and exhaustion [40]. These applications are especially effective in clinical conditions [34]. In another study, it was found that in the case of isolated men whose communication with their children have been deteriorating, online support and counselling increased their and their children's quality of life [41].

It is suggested that online counselling is effective and applicable at the beginning of the process while the therapeutic approach is being explained, in supportive counselling services and in applications where cognitive behavioural approach is effective [12]. Some child-oriented programmes involve the whole family and techniques such as relaxation, psycho-training, cognitive reconstruction, problem solving and exposure [42]. From clients' point of view, Internet-based cognitive behavioural programmes appear to help acceptance [43, 44]. The fact that clients can choose their time and length of the therapy is another advantage [43, 44]. It is argued that sharing personal information and answering difficult questions through e-mailing or instant messaging can reduce possible irritations on the part of the clients [43]. Another advantage is that it provides a quality support relationship in favour of the client [34].

It is found that adolescents with medium level depression or anxiety find internet-based therapies that are anchored in cognitive behavioural approach fun and helpful [45], as well as satisfactory and trustworthy [46]. These programmes prove to be especially effective in dealing with conflict resolution, problem solving, social interaction, coping and relaxation and can be applied to many different age groups [44]. For a shy young person who is at risk, online counseling is believed to be of extreme importance in seeking help. In this respect, online counseling is considered to be a strong force in constructing the help seeking behaviours of individuals who have been through various troublesome experiences [8].

Therapy Programmes

There are several computer-assisted cognitive behavioural programmes. Coping Cat CD-ROM is a treatment programme employed in dealing with anxiety in children [23]. In this specific programme, there are blinking animations, sound, 2D animations, photos, videos, drawings, secret reward systems, self-control systems and textual information. In addition, there is a funny cartoon character named Charlie, who helps the users as they cruise through the programme [23]. In a study with children diagnosed with high-functioning autism together with anxiety disorders, Coping Cat was found to be applicable and it helped to reduce the intensity of anxiety [47]. Cool Teens CD-ROM is a self-help programme designed to deal with anxiety in adolescents [48]. BRAVE is another programme that can be used with children as well as adolescents. In this online programme, counsellors provide their support through e-mails and phone conversations [49].

II. CONCLUSION

It is observed that in the last ten years, online counseling services have developed and have contributed significantly, especially in cases where traditional face-to-face counseling is not available. It was found that these online/computer-based programmes take a cognitive behavioural approach to counseling. It is believed that this is due to the fact the cognitive behavioural approach has a psycho-educational approach and is engineered towards changing behaviours. Programmes specifically aimed at dealing with anxiety in children and adolescents are common. There are also research findings in the literature that suggest that such programmes are indeed effective. There was no evidence in the literature that any of these programmes were translated into Turkish. It appears that face-to-face counseling is preferred by clients and counsellors in Turkey. Psychological Counseling and Guidance students believe that they miss out non-verbal communication cues during online therapy [50]. This disadvantage was stated in the literature. However, in cases where the number of available counselors are low or where it is difficult to reach them, the advantages of online counseling seem to outweigh

its disadvantages. When it is considered that anxiety is commonly found in adolescents [51], it is believed that translating such online applications into Turkish will contribute to the existing field. It appears that online counseling is primarily focused on chronic illnesses and mental health issues. It was also found that research studies in relation to the use of online counseling in school counseling and guidance services were very few.

It is worth mentioning that there were no studies focusing on internet-based psychological counseling services and their effectiveness in Turkey and North Cyprus. There were also no studies on the use of information and communication technologies in primary and secondary educational institutions for counseling purposes [52]. It is known that internet or computer-based counseling applications are limited in Turkey. There are, however, a few websites where individual therapy applications are carried out through online chatting and e-mailing. It is argued in the current study that, in cases where the ratio of counsellors to students in schools is inadequate, where there are no counseling facilities, rooms and/or materials or where they are also inadequate, internet-based counseling applications can help evade the negative effects of such deficiencies. In addition, the fact that it makes it easy for the counselors to reach parents and allows students to contact their counselors before the actual therapy are but some other benefits [6].

When the current state of developing technologies and the point at which we are right now in psychological counseling are considered, it is anticipated that online counseling is developing fast and will continue its development. Thus, it is important for further research to be conducted, programmes to be developed or to be culturally adapted to our country. A conclusion section must be included and should indicate clearly the advantages, limitations, and possible applications of the paper. Although a conclusion may review the main points of the paper, do not replicate the abstract as the conclusion. A conclusion might elaborate on the importance of the work or suggest applications and extensions.

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