

# Rapid Communication

## Success Factors in Internet-Based Psychological Counseling

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### ABSTRACT

**A number of special effectiveness factors of internet counseling are described, which represent advantages over face-to-face counseling. These factors were explored in a large-scale internet counseling project that ran for several years.**

### INTRODUCTION

**T**HE LARGE-SCALE online counseling project that is discussed in this article offered educational counseling for parents and teenagers. In Germany, educational counseling is provided exclusively by qualified professionals with psychotherapeutic training.

Beginning in 2001, the national umbrella organization for the staff of educational counseling centers<sup>1</sup> organized 80 professionals at a time who would provide psychologically well-founded advice via e-mail on a central webpage. The online counselors were not introduced to the clients on the interface of the internet representation, there were no photos, and all e-mails were signed with a nickname only.

The on-going performance review showed that, for many people, the virtual encounter within internet counseling was more accessible, more fruitful, more appropriate, more indicated than the face-to-face setting of traditional psychological counseling in an institution.

The present article seeks to present a phenomenology of some of the specific mental processes and

induced emotions that are found and are brought about by the virtual situational context<sup>2</sup> specific for clinical counseling.

### PSYCHOLOGICAL ANONYMITY

Beyond the realm of mere personal data protection, though, a client who decides to resolve his or her problems through online counseling obviously enjoys a much more fundamental kind of protection compared to the visitor of an outreach center, a therapist's practice, or a clinic.

Sitting in front of their private PC in their home, such patients experience a situation of familiarity, but also of shelter and "invisibility." Whether he or she reflects on it or not, the patient is very aware of this situation, which will often have been the trigger for choosing online counseling from the alternatives. The patient thus maintains a strong feeling of subjective protectedness.

What we have here is not merely protection on the level of personal data, then, but a mental category that may be characterized as psychological anonymity.

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This psychological anonymity is a basic condition, the importance of which cannot be overstated, for the partial superiority of internet counseling over face-to-face counseling.

It represents a peculiar mental state that preserves the withdrawal into privacy and the protection of being unknown. In the same vein, it facilitates what seems incompatible in ordinary life: to make contact with a stranger over very personal topics, with a degree of self-revelation that overcomes inhibitions regarding the portrayal of one's problems much more readily than would be the case for a meeting in person.

By having a permanent option of withdrawal,<sup>3</sup> the psychological anonymity is expanded by an undo option, something which never exists in other forms of personal contact.

These facets of the "psychological anonymity" factor allow the person who uses e-mail counseling to enter into a relationship with the counselor with a subjective feeling of inviolability.<sup>3</sup>

### PROTECTION OF SELF-ASSURANCE

The fact that, unlike in traditional encounters, no confrontation or looking into the other's face takes place, brings about another benefit of the internet encounter.

The client can "save their face," socially speaking, and maintain personal dignity. There is no "admittance" towards the stranger, because the self is out of reach; it is not only incognito, but remains in the realm of the unknown.

The consultants need not expose themselves without protection, as they would have to in a face-to-face confrontation. They need not find themselves subject to inner shame and damage to their self-esteem, as they confess to be weak, in need, and imperfect as a person, or to have failed as a parent. Therefore, they do not suffer from the mortification normally accompanying such a confession.

Rather, they are able to maintain their self-assurance and personal dignity. It stands to reason that the consultant is thus more likely to preserve access to his or her own resources than might be the case in the presence of shame-induced self-rejection (acquired helplessness).

This advantage was frequently apparent from client feedback: "especially since I also find it difficult to speak to other people face-to-face. Thank you so much."

### PROJECTION

During online counseling, the client will not develop a concrete idea of the counselor as a person.

However, given the lack of reference points for external features, the patient will also not experience any of the first stages of sympathy or antipathy that are otherwise the hallmark of any human encounter, in particular during "the first impression." Of course, such proto-emotions are strongly experienced as important during the first session with a face-to-face counselor.

Also absent are the emotional threshold and subjectively experienced distance that are regularly triggered in first encounters due to the unfamiliarity and the fact that no relationship has yet been established. An apt analogy for these reactions would be to label them "friction from unfamiliarity."

This observing attitude that is generally marked by formality, reservation, and insecurity is unavoidable during real life counseling sessions. This entire complex of inner reservations is dispensed with by e-mail counseling.

Furthermore, internet counseling disposes with the process of building more intimate trust, a process that, in real life confrontation with a counselor, is slow, accompanies the exchange step by step, and is highly charged, especially in the beginning. This process is very much at the center of the client's perceptions and self-persuasion at the time of the first contact in traditional counseling. It contributes to whether there will be any readiness to cooperate at all. In internet counseling, this psychological stage of relationship building is apparently skipped, because the client is able to reveal himself or herself directly in the online process, owing to one of the factors of psychological anonymity already mentioned.

The following description will likely come close to the inner, only partly conscious, subjective processes. The abstract counterpart, that contourless fantasy that materializes in the client as they type away at the PC, as the "image" of their e-mail recipient, has traits of a projection.

This kind of projection includes an "inner" counselor, who has come into existence untainted by all the processes and hindrances described above—sympathy-antipathy reconciliation and "friction from unfamiliarity"—and was born from necessity. It stands to reason that this inner counselor matches the respective client's imagined character of an idealized aide or counsel, in the terms of a "dream counselor."

### CONDENSATION OF THE SUBJECTIVE REPRESENTATION OF PROBLEMS VIA "BALANCING EFFECT"

By contrast, in drawing up an e-mail enquiry without any contact with the counselor, the client is able to orientate themselves toward his or her problem and emotional world, which is possibly in turmoil, without interference from a "participating observer."

In many cases, this induces a—very fruitful—condensed global view in the client of his situation, which may be termed a "balancing effect." Owing to this beneficial effect of the virtual setting, the process of writing the e-mail enquiry tends to be marked by a more unbiased and self-exploring attitude.

In the words of a consulter: "On the Internet, via e-mail, it is easier to describe one's issues, be it briefly or rather detailed, than during a spontaneous personal conversation or on the phone. You get to say everything you wanted to say first. It might also be better for the one who replies, because he got everything in front of him in writing and can specifically address the individual items. Regarding my therapy sessions, I often have a feeling that I haven't said all the things I intended to say."

This more open, less fearful inner collection, circumspection, and stock-taking has of course a strong subjective value of orientation towards the self, and thus a curative effect by and in itself.

### WILLINGNESS TO CHANGE

Owing to a number of specific factors, the virtual setting brings about increased inner assuredness and openness on the client's part.

These in turn facilitate acceptance, and thus effectiveness, of the counselor's intervention in the form of responses. On the one hand, the response meets with a substantially lower mental defense, for instance in terms of a greater willingness to question oneself and to deal with awkward issues.

In addition the heightened impressionability in the form of autosuggestivity comes into play that is specific to internet (chat room) encounters, which further increases the compliance.

Further, the increased willingness to change obviously increases the mental space for effective one-time counseling for many consulters. Repeated counseling, like in institutional treatment, were unnecessary in the overwhelming majority of cases of

e-mail counseling for parents during the project (<10% follow-up enquiries).

### INTENSIFIED TRANSFER OF THE CONSULTING CONTENTS

All of the consultant's statements

- Are permanently available to the client seeking advice, thanks to the written form
- May be re-read several times and reflected upon by the client for deeper understanding
- May be used not unlike a "guidebook"
- You can expose yourself to them again and again in the future; by comparison, oral counseling is not reproducible offhand

A counselor's intervention may sometimes be experienced as an unexpected confrontation with a less familiar, unconscious aspect of one's self and thus be disconcerting. A father: "to direct my main focus on what I really want and to try to implement that as best as possible. You raised issues concerning myself that I wasn't really aware of in this form, though they are quite on the mark." Such realizations must first be "stomached." The written form provides the necessary respite to deal with them and to accept (e.g., new aspects of one's self in the end).

### ON THE FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL E-MAIL COUNSELING

Regarding the path of further development that the methods and the field of internet-based psychological counseling should take, the above reflections sought to show that the restrictions and limits of e-mail counseling, stressed by some who point to the absence of a "counselor incarnate," represent in fact to a material extent its undreamt of strengths!

It cannot be the goal, then, to gradually remove these perceived limitations of the virtual setting by means of technological progress that addresses these limitations. From the perspective of the potential of the virtual setting discussed herein, it would not be a desirable development if the described virtual setting was supplanted by methods to simulate real-life encounters (such as, for example, live video).

Such suggestions would mean the abandonment of one or several factors of the virtual setting that

are especially fruitful from the therapeutic point of view. In particular:

- The projection of an idealized counselor would be abandoned.
- Sequential synchronous transmission would prevent the balancing effect.
- The learning transfer brought about by the written form would be abandoned.
- Visual transmission would compromise the psychological anonymity.
- If there is two-way transmission, the feeling of inviolability would be largely destroyed.

Therefore, the opportunities for increased professional efficiency predominantly lie in the analysis of the interpersonal framework of the encounter on both sides of the virtual setting, whereas this analysis ought to be guided less by technology than by psychological and psychotherapeutic considerations.

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