

Kids Help Phone/Jeunesse J'écoute – Best Practices in “Live Chat” Counselling

Presenter: Dilya Haner, PhD Candidate, York University, Former Senior Manager, Clinical Research and Development, Kids Help Phone; Alisa Simon, VP, Counselling Services and Programs, Kids Help Phone

What is the issue?

Young people are making increased use of social media technologies to communicate with each other, but also to seek information and reach out for help from professionals. Young people indicate the #1 reason for not reaching out for help when they need it is because of lack of confidentiality and having control of their situation taken away from them by well-meaning adults.¹ The perceived increased anonymity of texting and “Live Chat” media provides feelings of control and privacy for young people who may otherwise decide not to reach out for information and help. Professionals who communicate with youth in text-based environments require evidence-based best practices to help them form healthy helping relationships and scaffold² effective counselling/therapeutic interventions using these media.

Why is this important?

Whether, as a helping professional, you grew up in a world using current technology (digital native) or had to learn technology as an adult (digital immigrant), the youth you communicate with on social media will be more adept at it than you by virtue of simply being younger than you. Many helping professionals (especially those who offer counselling or psychotherapy) are accustomed to seeing youth face-to-face and benefiting from visual cues (e.g., facial expressions, gestures, posture, clothing, etc...) that provide context around the problem or situation being discussed by youth. Professionals are also accustomed to benefiting from non-verbal vocalizations that help them negotiate moment-to-moment ruptures and repairs in the therapeutic alliance. These cues are missing in text-based interventions and therefore professionals require support to learn to communicate effectively with youth in these environments. At Kids Help Phone, it was found that most young people seeking help using online “Live Chat” were struggling with clinically relevant symptoms of depression and anxiety.³ When youth are struggling with these mental health syndromes, they are prone to use communication styles that make it difficult to have healthy online interactions. For example, these youth may be inclined to perceive statements that are positive or neutral as negative, which in turn deepens their feelings of depression or anxiety. These negative attribution styles increase the chances of misunderstanding their counsellors and therapists – and of being misunderstood themselves. Given that young people demonstrate preferences for seeking help using text-based media, it is vitally important that helping professionals understand these

¹ Gilchrist, H., & Sullivan, G. (2006). Barriers to help-seeking in young people: Community beliefs about youth suicide. *Australian Social Work*, 59(1), 73-85. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03124070500449796>

² Bruner, J. (1971). *The relevance of education*. Oxford, UK: W. W. Norton; Vygotsky, L. S. (1962). *Thought and language*. (Ed. & Trns. Alex Kosulin, 1986). Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

³ Haner, D. (2015). *Counselling young people by telephone and chat: An evaluation of 2014 service data and comparison of 2014 & 2012 data*. Internal report for Kids Help Phone/Jeunesse J'écoute.

communication pitfalls and learn how to be skilled communicators in the therapeutic online environments.

What did the researcher do?

During a large-scale evaluation of “Live Chat” services in 2014, our researcher examined the transcripts of “Live Chat” therapeutic sessions that were considered the most successful and least successful counselling interventions (top and bottom 10% from the evaluation). “Live Chat” transcripts were examined using the Collaborative Interactions Scale⁴ – a coding scheme designed to determine the quality of the therapeutic relationship based on the communication styles of clients and the responses of counsellors/therapists when faced with ruptures in the therapeutic alliance. The researcher identified communication styles and patterns associated with the ability to maintain and repair the therapeutic relationship in a text-based environment.

What did the researcher find?

Successful counselling/therapy sessions in the “Live Chat” environment were associated with counsellors who skilfully demonstrated 5 factors of successful therapeutic alliance^{5 6}: warmth, empathy, genuineness, trustworthiness, and attentiveness - in the text-based environment. The communication of the 5 factors was successful when counsellors/therapists were aware of the cognitive distortions associated with depression and anxiety and responded through skilful use of the keyboard to clearly communicate their intent and to ensure they were being understood. Effective communication skills in the text-based environment included judicious use of formatting, use of emoticons, emotional bracketing, and empathic sustains.⁷ Successful counsellors/therapists were able to translate unspoken visual and auditory cues easily discerned in the face-to-face therapy to text. Skilled counsellors/therapists creatively and clearly used text to make explicit what was unspoken.

How can you use this research?

This session will help you to understand how youth struggling with mental health problems are likely to communicate on line and how to use text-based media to form helping relationships with them as professionals. Participants will challenge their perceptions of how youth present themselves in social media environments and by doing so learn to respond to requests for help with genuine empathy rather than with reactions tainted by unexamined countertransference. Participants will develop an awareness of the skills required to communicate successfully in text-based environments and consider how they can develop their

⁴ Colli, A. & Liangiardi, V. (2009). The collaborative interactions scale: A new transcript-based method for the assessment of therapeutic alliance ruptures and resolutions in psychotherapy. *Psychotherapy Research*, 19(6), 718-734.

⁵ Martin, D. J., Garske, J. P. & Davis, M. K. (2000). Relation of the therapeutic alliance with outcome and other variables: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 68(3), 438-450.

⁶ Lambert, M. J. & Barley, D. E. (2001). Research summary on the therapeutic relationship and psychotherapy outcome. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training*, 38(4), 357-361.

⁷ Murphy, L. J. & Mitchell, D. L. (2009). *Overcoming the absence of tone and non-verbal elements of communication in text-based cybercounselling*. In J.G. McDaniel (Ed.), *Advances in Information Technology and Communication in Health*, Vol. 143, 215-219. IOS Press BV, Amsterdam.

own personal counselling/therapy style with attention to the communication of warmth, empathy, genuineness, trustworthiness, and attentiveness – 5 elements proven to be associated with healthy and helpful therapeutic relationships. Specific keyboarding and communication skills such as use of formatting and emoticons, emotional bracketing, and empathic sustains will be demonstrated and participants will be asked to reflect upon how to incorporate these skills into their own text-based communications. Participants will also gain a deeper understanding of how the communication styles and attribution styles of young people struggling with mental health problems such as depression and anxiety present in the text-based environment. Participants will consider how they can increase their chances of understanding youth as well as being clearly understood by youth using text-based social media.

Additional resources

www.kidshelpphone.ca

www.jeunessejecoute.ca

www.therapyonline.ca

www.thetypingcat.com

Authors

Dilys Haner, MA, PhD Candidate and Vanier Scholar – York University

Currently a clinical resident at Northern Ontario Psychology Internship Consortium

Former senior manager – clinical research and development at Kids Help Phone/Jeunesse J'écoute

Supported by Alisa Simon, VP Counselling Services at Kids Help Phone/Jeunesse J'écoute

Keywords

e-counselling, e-therapy, "Live Chat," computer-mediated communication, adolescent mental health, therapeutic alliance, social media, online relationships