



Keeping a journal that answers back — experiencing e-counselling

BY CEDRIC SPEYER, MA, MED, MA

"I'm so much more comfortable when I can email people or chat online with them than being on the phone or in-person. I find it easier to express myself because I don't feel judged or on the spot. Another reason e-counselling appealed to me is that I can take the time to re-read and digest it all. So often when I am talking to someone, I come away retaining only a small amount of what was exchanged." (e-counselling client)

"I was able to share thoughts and feeling with my E-counsellor that I know I wouldn't have dared to express in a face-to-face session. It was really like writing to an old friend... a really wise friend who knows when to support you and when to challenge you." (e-counselling client)

On both sides of the computer, the online therapeutic dialogue we call e-counselling has proven to be not just convenient and innovative, but remarkably advantageous for both clients and counsellors. One may think it would be in spite of the medium, yet in many ways it's due to the medium. Of course, the obvious advantage is ease of access without compromising confidentiality. The sessions or back-and-forth exchanges take place on a secure internet platform (webboard) facilitating the dialogue

in a private conference area accessed with login names and passwords. (For the purposes of this article e-counselling refers to this text-based format, rather than the chat or video versions of online counselling.) There are no scheduling restrictions or other difficulties associated with specific appointment times. Different time zones are not an obstacle. The E-counsellor has a wealth of online resources to access, which can then be selectively used for ongoing client support. With any number of logistical obstacles to keeping counselling

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appointments removed from the equation, client and counsellor are still very much present to each other.

"There is a special type of interpersonal empathy that is unique to text relationships. Some claim that text-only talk carries you past the distracting, superficial aspects of a person's existence and connects you more directly to the other's psyche." ~ John Suler

Beyond the practical benefits, what might be lost from the immediate give-and-take of a "live" conversation is gained from slowing the process down. Clients have all the advantages of keeping a journal of their thoughts and feelings while still being part of a compassionate inter-change. There's a built-in sense of containment. It's reassuring to be in control of the send button and able to gauge one's own comfort level for self-disclosure. Differences in status are less apparent given the "level playing field" of online exchanges.

Of course the medium does present unique challenges as well. Both client and counsellor must be comfortable and relatively skilled on the computer or tablet. In keeping with more conventional forms of counselling, standards of care, screening procedures, back-up resources, assessment protocols, quality assurance supervision, and ethical safeguards are all essential elements of conducting an online practice. Substance abuse, risk to children, safety concerns, and psychiatric crises are examples of when appropriate referrals and proper treatment modalities need to be mobilized.

In the end, a text-based relationship offers the same understanding, caring and empathy that is the foundation of all forms of counselling. However e-counselling also

enhances self-reflection in a process that allows the client to step back from emotionally charged situations in the very act of writing. Both client and counsellor have an opportunity to witness strong feelings and gain perspective on reactive emotions before responding. When consciously used this way, the medium fosters mindful awareness.

Nelson is a community of about 10,000 souls, nestled in the Selkirk Mountains in southern B.C., within the great range of Rocky Mountains. We're not exactly easy to get to. The nearest airport frequently cancels flights because of low cloud ceilings. The pass connecting us to cities to the east is the highest in this part of the province, with frighteningly steep drop-offs. In winter, heavy snowfalls can make the roads difficult and dangerous, or altogether impassible. And so it is, when I awaken each weekday at six am, in the darkness and cold of my bedroom, I bestir myself to switch on my laptop, make a cup of green tea, and settle into my home office chair for a day of e-counselling exchanges. I don't necessarily see my work as "alternative." And yet I can appreciate why others might – our clients can be on the other end of the continent from us; we neither see nor hear them – isn't there something magical about this?

The clients come with a wide range of issues, presenting anything from relational gridlock to requests for advice on the stress of toxic workplaces. Each morning I endeavor to pitch my work at the proper level. Generally it feels very intense, more so than face-to-face counselling, or in a different way. e-counselling doesn't allow me to sit back while the client speaks; I must stay

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continuously attuned by means of "text-based bonding." I come to know the presence of my client, the person, through their written words, and they in turn recognize my presence in my written "voice." In this experience of mutual presence – with the computer screen a shared canvas – a measure of healing often occurs.

~ Ralph Friesen (from A Day in the Life of an E-counsellor, TILT magazine)

"Getting it down in writing" allows us to witness experiences from an author's point of view, making it possible to form a new perspective. And once it's "seen in print," there's now a tangible record of the thought or feeling. When a life predicament is externalized in this way, it becomes less threatening and easier to manage. Composing oneself (pun intended) first allows the story to be told, then rewritten with additional layers of meaning, and finally revised as the E-counsellor's feedback opens a view to choices unfolding in life's next chapters. Keeping a journal in order to grow in self-awareness is a time-honoured practice. E-counselling now offers a journal that answers back, with the reflections and guidance of a therapeutic co-author.

"E-counselling is the best and most effective method of reflection, learning, and growing that I have ever used. One reason is that I can look back on the discussions on both sides to allow the advice to really sink in and chart my progress. I am amazed at where I started and where I ended up. I could not have gotten out of my unhealthy situation without the help of my E-counsellor. She made a huge difference in my life not only through her loving counselling but from providing food for thought and source material (which I used very thoroughly). The directness and uplifting messages got me back on my feet so to speak and I have moved on from

the situation I was in – with the tools she gave me I am recovering and healing. I can't say enough about this service. It is much better than one-on-one personal as that would present some distractions and you do not have written transcripts to review." (e-counselling client)

Many who have tried their hand at online counselling find that beyond the built-in benefits of privacy, convenience, and increased accessibility, the medium itself offers an enhanced therapeutic experience. For some people, lack of visual contact is actually an advantage; they reveal more of themselves while writing. Without verbal and physical cues, the counselling relationship takes place behind the scenes of self-presentation, without being "on the spot" in front of someone, and that can have a "heart-to-heart" effect. Like the connection we feel with characters in a novel, the words of a gifted E-counsellor like Ralph Friesen are suffused with what we call "non-local presence." It's the feeling of being in someone's presence without sharing a physical space. The written word has the power to traverse time and distance. Yet it is through language that we also relate in the closest of ways. Thanks to the modern miracle of the internet, you can now have it both ways when you "see a counsellor" and feel heard and seen without being there – maybe better than being there! ■

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