Online advice

Cyber counselling being embraced, but some professionals cautious

By SUSAN ZIELINSKI
Advocate staff

Online counselling may be just the thing for people too timid to sit face-to-face with a counsellor.

But it does take someone who can confront a blank computer screen and wait for the words to flow, says a Red Deer online counsellor.

"It's not for everybody. Those who are not comfortable typing, or expressing their feelings in text, will not find it very useful," said Dilys Collier, who operates through Counselloronline.ca and also works as a counsellor for international employee assistance program Shepell.fgi.

Counsellors also have to know how to communicate with the written word.

For example, when Collier types up the first message to a new client, she always explains her first name — Dilys — is a Welsh adjective used as a feminine name.

"When I didn't do that, people would ask are you a man or are you a woman?" said Collier, while sitting in a counselling room set up in her home where she also does in-person counselling.

With online counselling, clients seek advice when it's convenient for them and wait for their counsellor's response.

Collier said some of her clients take to the keyboard like journalists.

"They write — that's their thing. They are just able to lay it all out there, how they feel, because they don't have to look anyone in the eye."

Cedric Speyer, founder of the Shepell.fgi E-Counselling, said for many people, going online is "better than being there."

"Our experience as online clinicians demonstrates that some individuals are more honest, more uninhibited and more expressive in writing than face-to-face," said Speyer, who has been involved in researching, teaching and publishing in this new form of counselling for over eight years.

Isolation from people and supports is probably the biggest issue "right across the counselling board," said Collier, who has been an online counsellor for five years, and spent 25 years as a social worker, adult educator and teacher.

"It's only the strong that come for counselling. The weak never get here. They're too scared. It takes a lot of courage to come into some stranger's office and tell them what your issues are, that you've hardly even acknowledged to yourself. That's huge."

Collier said the biggest misconception about online counselling comes from "dyed-in-the-wool" counsellors who say it's not really counselling if it's not done in person.

Collier disagreed, calling it another option in the counselling spectrum.

"It's very different than traditional counselling. It's just as real. It's just different."

Please see ONLINE on Page B2



Photo by RANDY FIEDLER/Advocate staff

Dilys Collier updates a patient's file as part of her work as an online counsellor: another option in the counselling spectrum.

From Page B1

Online: *New form of counselling service*

But since it's such a new form of counselling, people don't realize it's available, she said.

Psychologist Cory Hrushka, of Insight Psychological Inc. with offices in Red Deer and Edmonton, said he can see online access as helpful for support groups or for "light counselling issues."

It comes in handy for people living in remote areas where there's not a lot of services, he said.

But for deeper therapy, he wants to see his client.

"Half the time when I'm in a therapy session, if I don't have someone who communicates well, I'm looking for a lot of nonverbal stuff. I don't see that over the net," Hrushka said.

Speyer said online communication can promote "remarkable intensity and intimacy" because people feel at ease to reveal more of themselves.

"Research has shown that whatever counselling methods are used, it is the compassionate relationship that helps the most," Speyer said.

Online clients can be more comfortable discussing sensitive topics and writing out their issues can help give them clarity, he said.

"Writing, instead of talking, helps some people to focus feelings and can speed resolutions by seeing it in print. The very process of composing, rereading and re-wording increases self awareness."

Counsellors with Shepell.fgi get advanced training on making assessments and responding by paying close attention to their client's text.

Hrushka said he'd wonder whether online clients are really who they say they are. And he's waiting for online counselling guidelines being developed by the Canadian Psychological Association.

Speyer said Shepell.fgi supervises its counsellors, has a secure website and is regulated by the same ethics and standards as other counselling.

Shepell.fgi online counselling is only available to employees of companies registered with Shepell.fgi. Clients must also register and are screened in case they are in serious crisis and need immediate assistance.

With Counselloronline.ca, Collier protects client confidentiality with an encryption program and suggests her clients do the same, which does not cost much. People also need to be careful they are using a qualified counsellor.

Collier specializes in information counselling. She provides different perspectives or information to her clients and support.

Resources can easily be made available online to help clients make decisions.

She said once they have the information, it's up to them to make the changes in their lives.

"Many of them already know what their issues are. They know what the answers are. But often times they need some kind of validation — it's OK to think this way, it's OK to feel this way — and that they have within them all the qualities that they require to handle whatever it is they're facing."

Workplace and parenting problems, and more recently economic anxiety, are high on the list of issues causing people stress, Collier said.

People also seek help to improve their relationships.

"Women especially, and lots and lots of men, it's hard for them to say what they need and what they want. They've been taught that if we say those things we're selfish when really we do have legitimate needs and wants.

"Most of them are negotiable unless they are values-oriented and values aren't negotiable and that causes a lot of problems."

She said many adults are trying to figure out what they want out of life.

"They say I don't know what's the matter. I feel so lost. It's like I don't know who I am anymore.

"They realize kids have ages and stages. But they don't realize adults do too and that we go through a reflective stage every 10 years or so, so we can keep on growing emotionally."

Collier said online counselling has "humongous" potential for people because the majority of issues don't require a great deal of therapy.

"What they require is somebody to talk to, bounce their ideas off of, and get some new information," Collier said.

Hrushka can also see online counselling growing. But it's buyer beware.

"Just make sure who you're talking to is who they say they are. What is stopping a high school student putting stuff up on the Internet saying, 'I do Internet counselling at $160 hour.' He's half your age, had no formal training, but is marketed well. And he's got your credit card number.

"You can't govern the Internet."

Contact Susan Zielinski at szielinski@reddeeradvocate.com