e-TRENDS

# A shrink's couch on your desk

## ONLINE COUNSELLING

BY NATE HENDLEY

Can e-mail be therapeutic? The Toronto-based Warren Shepell company thinks so. Officials believe the "disinhibiting effect of e-mail" combined with the convenience of online communication will be a major boon for people seeking short-term therapy.

Founded in 1979, Warren Shepell provides counselling services through company employee assistance programs (EAPs). One of the largest firms of its kind in North America, Warren Shepell has 1,000 counsellors and 1,300 corporate clients, and provides services to nearly three million workers across the continent.

In addition to phone and face-to-face therapy, Warren Shepell offers online therapy or e-counselling. The company's fledgling e-therapy program, launched last fall, offers employees a high-tech way of dealing with personal problems.

E-counselling is not a new concept; some private psychiatrists have been operating online therapy programs since the mid-1990s. They work from Web sites such as Here2Listen.com and generally charge hefty fees for their advice (a half-hour electronic session at Here2Listen can run between US$30 and US$60).

Providing e-therapy as part of an EAP package is a fairly revolutionary idea, however. Warren Shepell is one of the first and largest EAP providers in Canada to offer such a service, free of charge, to clients.

Those seeking e-counselling have to fill out an assessment form on the firm's Web site.

"The company is trying to screen out people in crisis, or with psychiatric or substance-abuse problems — serious stuff that needs to be attended to immediately," says Cedric Speyer, e-counselling co-ordinator for Warren Shepell.

Online counselling is designed to help people cope with stress, personal problems and career and family concerns. In addition to providing advice, e-counsellors can make outside referrals and offer links to other online mental health resources.

Once a worker is accepted into the program, that person engages in an e-mail exchange with a counsellor. Client and therapist do not communicate in real time, but rather send messages back and forth whenever the urge hits them. The model here is a post office, not a chat room.

Mr. Speyer believes the leisurely pace of e-therapy benefits all involved. The time delay gives workers "a zone of reflection" to gather their thoughts. Communicating in real time might actually add to a client's stress, because of the fast-paced nature of such exchanges.

Online counselling offers other benefits as well: People can "e-mail in the privacy of their own home ... outside any time or space restrictions. They can e-mail from anywhere in the world, at any time," says Mr. Speyer.

He says e-mail also has a positive "disinhibiting" quality; people who are reluctant to reveal personal issues during a phone or face-to-face conversation often feel at ease discussing their problems in the anonymous confines of cyberspace.

Mr. Speyer holds master's degrees in education, counselling psychology and creative writing. To join the roughly one dozen counsellors on his e-team, one needs only a single MA, preferably in psychology or social work. Potential e-counsellors should also have several years post-grad experience and the ability to "build a rapport electronically," says Michael Coughlin, vice-president of operations.

Clients can send as many e-mails as they want, although Mr. Speyer has found most issues can be resolved with three or four electronic exchanges.

"Thirty years ago, it was considered revolutionary to have counselling for regular workers through EAPs," says Mr. Speyer. "Then, telephone counselling was considered radical. E-counselling is merely the latest development."

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