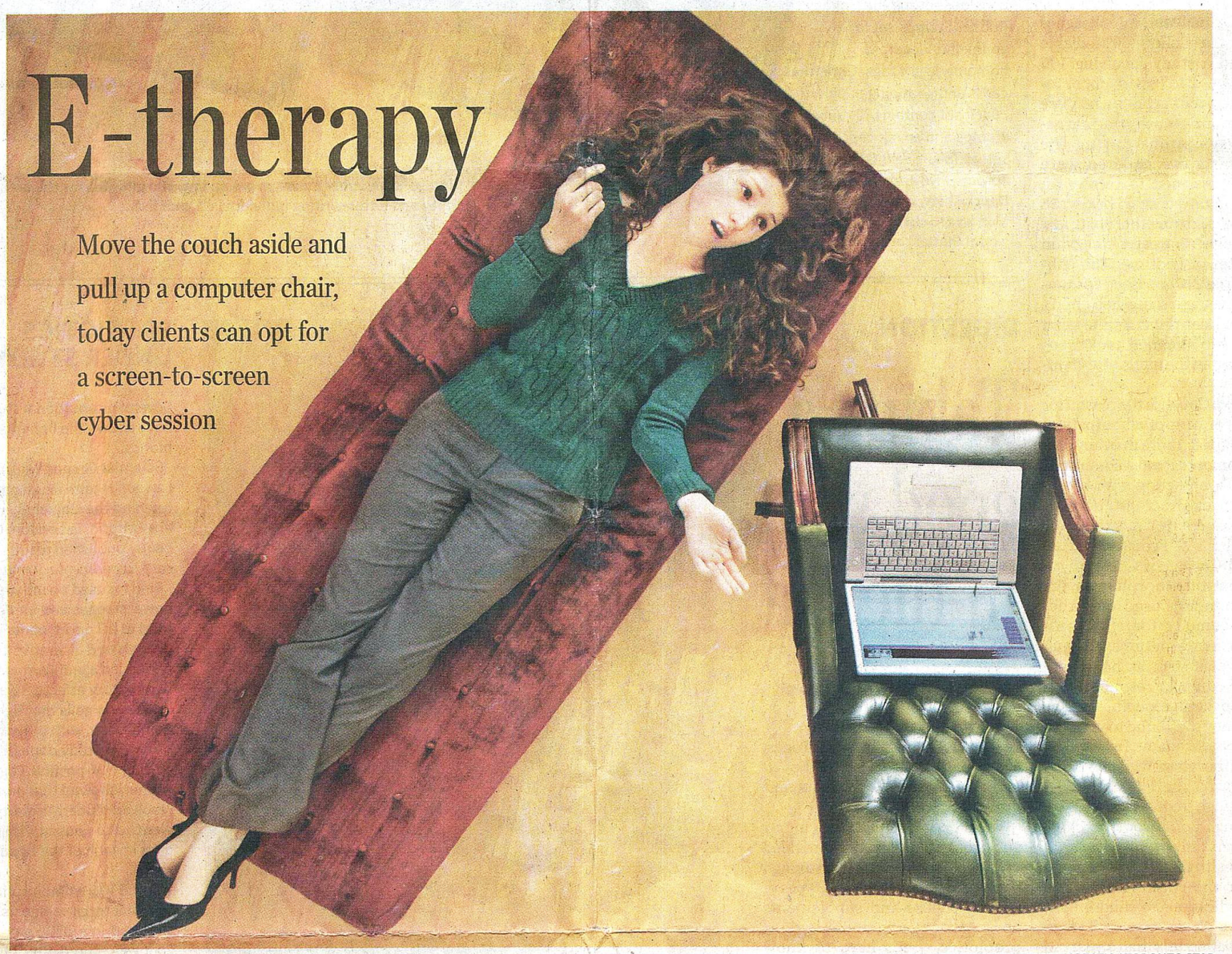
COUNSELLING

E-therapy

Move the couch aside and pull up a computer chair, today clients can opt for a screen-to-screen cyber session



KEITH BEATY / TORONTO STAR

Internet sessions with your therapist can have distinct advantages, like a record of their comments to review and time to really think about what's on your mind.

NANCY J. WHITE
LIVING REPORTER

Late at night when his children were asleep, the 45-year-old software developer would brew a pot of Earl Grey tea and head to the computer in his rural Prairie home. He'd pour out his troubles in an email — to his psychotherapist in Toronto.

She'd respond within 48 hours, he'd write back, and so went his therapy over the course of a year.

"I wasn't constrained by an appointment time," says the software developer, who asked not to be named. "I also find it easier to be more open in an email. My inhibitions and insecurities tend to be stronger in person."

More counsellors — and employee assistance programs — are offering the online alternative, mainly through email but also via instant messaging on secured websites.

E-therapy practitioners point to the convenience with sessions anytime, anywhere, and the privacy. They say clients tend to organize their thoughts better when writing, get to the heart of the matter quicker, and have the therapist's responses to reread. It costs about the same than in-person sessions.

"Online counselling isn't just a second cousin, something you do because you can't get an appointment," says Cedric Speyer, clinical supervisor of e-counselling at Shepell FGI. "In many ways it's better."

Not so fast, say others.

Ian Nicholson, chair of professional affairs for the Canadian Psychological Association, worries about licensing issues, lack of computer privacy, and missed nuances without in-person contact.

"The mainstream view is cautious," says Nicholson. "We don't really have a lot of evidence about its effectiveness."

A 2004 review in the *Journal of*

THERAPY continued on L2

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- A secure online environment, with passwords and, ideally, encryption. "You want your mental health history as private as your banking," says Ian Nicholson, chair of professional affairs, Canadian Psychological Association.
- A counsellor who belongs to a professional association with a complaints mechanism. "If a client is dissatisfied, lodging a complaint should be a straightforward process," says Lawrence Murphy, cofounder of therapyonline.ca. In Ontario, psychologists and social workers must be licensed to practice. Currently, counsellors and psychotherapists generally aren't licensed, but they may be members of professional groups, such as the Canadian Counselling Association, with practice guidelines and an ethical code.
- The professional's experience, and training in online counselling.
- Clear information, such as fees, response time , an emergency contact number, an estimate of sessions needed.

Nancy J. White

Online counselling also has its detractors

THERAPY from L1

Clinical Psychology found few differences in the outcomes of online or in-person therapies.

Gerry Smith, a vice-president at the employee assistance program Shepell FGI, says his firm's client satisfaction rate for online therapy is the same as in-person therapy about 95 per cent.

"Clients experience the same level of resolution of their problems," says Lawrence Murphy, an online counsellor since 1995, "and they tend to complete their therapy in fewer sessions."

While in-person counselling attracts four women for every man, says Murphy, the ratio is closer to two to one for online work. "Men may feel more in control of the information, more comfortable in their own place," says Murphy, co-founder of therapyonline.ca. The Prairie software developer, who wanted counselling for relationship issues, chose the online route mainly to save time.

"With face-to-face therapy you might think, 'I wish I'd asked . . .' right after you walk out," he says. "With email, you can make sure you said what you needed to say."

The big bonus was having the responses to reread. "Life isn't a straight line," he says. "You go up and down. Sometimes I'd find myself needing reassurance about something. It's handy to go back to the emails."

To flush out feelings in cyberspace — forget the smiley and sad emoticons — a counsellor needs training.

"I was skeptical before I did it," says Toronto psychotherapist Kali Munro. "But you pick up a lot by how something's written. I was astounded at how much perceptiveness can come through a computer."

Murphy, who teaches an online training program in collaboration with the University of Toronto School of Social Work, has developed techniques, such as describing emotions inside a pair of brackets — ("feeling concerned").

"Online therapy is an oxymoron as far as I'm concerned," says Brampton psychotherapist Richard Isaacs. "You need the direct relationship with the therapist."

He makes the distinction between psychotherapy, delving into personality issues and making life changes, and counselling, dealing with day-to-day problems. Some counselling could be done online, he says.

Shepell FGI's Speyer argues that the online dialogue can go very deep, overcoming what he calls the "static of personality," the mannerisms, gender, accent, things that might hinder a relationship. Writing, he points out, is a window into a person's thought processes.

"I can hear my therapist's voice in my head although we've never spoken," says a 49-year-old woman who receives counselling through instant message sessions. She and the therapist schedule times to chat on a secure Internet site.

"If I boo-hoo in a session I'm not embarrassed. I would be, face-to-face."

There are caveats, of course. Cyber-therapy isn't for those suffering from severe mental health problems, those who feel suicidal or who need a lot of support with a challenging situation. "Face-to-face is more anchoring," says psychotherapist Munro, who does both. And clients need to be comfortable expressing themselves in writing. It's hard to picture tough guy-in-therapy Tony Soprano pouring out his feelings in an email.

But, Murphy points out, e-therapy is merely a new approach to an old tradition: "Freud wrote letters as part of his counselling practice."