

Study to Examine the Potential Usefulness of E-Counselling

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by

Anne Byrne

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Abstract

This study explored the views of twelve men about the potential usefulness of E-counselling. The men, ranging in age from 18 to 59 years of age, identified benefits of E-counselling in terms of time efficiency and anonymity. However, they also reported major ethical considerations relating to counselling services on the Internet. In addition, participants identified the importance of trust in a relationship as a key factor in deciding whether or not to share information on personal issues. The Internet was not considered to be the most appropriate vehicle to convey personal information for these men. A model of E-counselling which combined initial face-to-face counselling with follow up E-counselling was identified as a potential area for further exploration.

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The Internet can be a very useful medium of health information in general and psychological information in particular. Its character as a medium facilitates both broadcasting and opportunities for person to person communication. It can also be seen as a vehicle to discuss personal issues through for example chat rooms and this function can be extended to the provision of psychological services.

This study explored the relationship between men's preferences for discussing personal issues and the potential usefulness of E-counselling. It is suggested that given men's dominant sex roles and desire to avoid personal embarrassment, they may be more likely to prefer disclosure through writing over the Internet compared to other forms of support. In addition to preferences for E-counselling, the study explored the particular ethical or other considerations in the use of E-counselling by men.

A qualitative methodology, based on Grounded Theory principles, was used to collect information from twelve men, aged between 18 and 59 years of age. Essentially, the approach adopted was to seek the views of participants on a range of E-counselling issues and to explore the data to develop emerging concepts and themes that could usefully address the issues under consideration. There was a broad agenda for the interviews but this was used flexibly to allow the participants to discuss issues that they felt were relevant to them. The researcher adopted an open approach to build upon the information given by participants rather than rigidly sticking to a pre-determined agenda. This enabled the interviews to be as purposeful as possible.

Based on an analysis of the information derived by the researcher from the discussions with these men, some tentative propositions were developed about the relationship between sex roles and personal disclosure and the types of considerations that are important for men seeking E-counselling. Where possible, the propositions were related to other evidence from the literature.

In summary, it was found that men gave central importance to the establishment of an effective relationship between counsellor and client. This finding is consistent with the counselling/psychotherapy literature that has found that an effective therapeutic relationship is a prominent factor in the achievement of positive therapeutic outcomes. Men were only likely to use the Internet to discuss personal issues after a positive trusting relationship had already been established with a counsellor through a face-to-face interaction. While men could see advantages in the speed of interactions over the Internet and the anonymity afforded to them, including to disclose information on potentially embarrassing issues, these advantages were not considered an adequate alternative to the establishment of a genuine therapeutic relationship with a counsellor. There was however some suggestion that E-counselling could be a useful adjunct to face-to-face counselling, once a positive therapeutic relationship had been established.

Chapter 1 presents an overview of evidence relating to men's development of a sense of masculinity and its implications for communication preferences. It also explores the value of traditional face-to-face counselling for men and the potential benefits of Internet services.

Chapter 2 outlines the aims of the study together with the methodological approach adopted.

Chapter 3 summarises the findings from the research. Chapter 4 presents an overview of what the implications of the findings might be for the utility of E-counselling for men and the considerations for psychologists providing services on the Internet to men. Chapter 5 then sets out some suggestions for future work in this area.

Chapter 1

Masculinity, Preferences for Communicating about Personal Issues and Counselling

This Chapter explores men's notions of masculinity and their impact on their ways of communicating. It will be argued that men often believe that communicating about personal issues can be embarrassing and that it is safer not to discuss personal matters in a face-to-face setting. This in turn has implications for the type of personal and social support that they may seek. For example, men might be more likely to choose mediums that do not expose them to excessive personal scrutiny or potential embarrassment.

There is a lot of anecdotal evidence that suggests that men are more attuned to technology than women and use it more frequently for a range of purposes. Given men's comfort with new technologies, it could be assumed that men are likely to feel comfortable discussing personal issues over the Internet. This Chapter describes some of the evidence relating to men's gender roles and their link to communication patterns and the means by which men might comfortably seek social support. It does not attempt to provide a comprehensive overview but rather highlights some key considerations for the current study.

The Meaning of Masculinity

Males in Australia experience difficulties in growing up. Over the past decade, there has been an increase in the number of adolescent boys in Australia experiencing mental health related problems, including suicide and attempted suicide. Adolescent boys in regional areas of Australia appear particularly at risk of experiencing problems of adjustment and coping.

Growing up to become a mature, and responsible man is a confusing developmental challenge for many boys. Throughout their formative years, boys and adolescent males receive contradictory messages about the meaning of masculinity that can lead to uncertainty about what it means to be a man (Kiselica & Home, 1999). For example, the concepts of traditional males as tough, competitive and non-emotional are often presented in stark contrast to the softer, more sensitive and caring new-age guy (Edley & Wetherell, 1999).

Adolescence is a very interesting development phase with respect to how adolescents think about what it means to be a man or woman in their culture (Jackson & Tein, 1998). In Australia, the dominant culture has the stereotype that men must be tough. There is also a sense in which boys themselves become the “police of masculinity” (Connell, Ashenden, Kessler & Dowsett, 1982, p. 95) by putting each other under pressure to conform to a particular view of masculinity. In addition to peer group pressure, there is also evidence that the development of a masculine sex role in boys is impaired by the father’s absence, particularly if the father leaves when the boys are very young. Within intact families, boys develop more when the father has a warm relationship with his son, is seen as a powerful decision-maker and competent, and when he has masculine interests and encourages the same in his son (Argyle & Henderson, 1990). In the cases where boys are raised in father-absent homes, they are likely to be confused about their gender role, unsure about how to define themselves as men and how they should relate to women (Kiselica & Home, 1999).

Marshall and Arvay (1999) have also examined the issue of adolescent boys’ values regarding gender as part of a broader study of young adolescents’ perspectives on sense of self. In terms of values regarding gender, boys in this study were found to be mainly concerned about the threat of losing their power or status in a constantly changing society. They also tended to focus on immediate peer pressures to be masculine. Marshall and Arvay (1999) conclude that one of the considerations for counsellors is to challenge the problematic and stereotypical values and beliefs that adolescents internalise. In particular, counsellors need to openly address the vulnerability that boys face in creating a positive, healthy sense of self.

The challenge for adolescent males is to free themselves from the limiting gender role that has been prescribed to them. Edley and Wetherell (1999) describe the debate about gender as an ideological battlefield and note that while there are still large differences in gendered relations, the old ways of thinking about these issues are breaking down.

By focussing only on masculine sex roles, boys are limiting their self-concepts to only one view of manhood (Cunningham, 1990). Connell (1997, p. 73) echoes this sentiment, noting that there is likely to be a negative impact on boys of narrow models of masculinity and obsolete ideas about men's and women's work. He says: "Such stereotypes, if adopted by the boys, severely limit their cultural experiences, their vocational choices, and their expectations about future personal relationships, *both with men and women.*"

Therefore, one of the major developmental tasks that young men must complete is to work through the many conflicting messages about maleness and somehow create an integrated sense of self (Kiselica & Home, 1999).

The development of concepts of masculinity in boys clearly has an impact on their self-perceptions as men. In Australia, the stereotype that men must be tough has implications for boys' self-perceptions. As Cunningham (1990) puts it:

So long as males are taught to think in terms of strength and weakness, or winners and losers, and to think of masculinity as strength or success they will be tempted to think of femininity as weakness, to be avoided at all costs. Only when such positive feminine traits as warmth, caring, and understanding are valued as important human traits will adolescent boys' sex roles become more androgynous. ... Regardless of the stereotypes, healthy adolescents – and the healthy adults they will become – need both kinds of qualities. (p. 147)

The issue of gender roles is therefore considered to be important in any broad consideration of the mental health of men. In the light of the discussion above, however, it is also clear that some kinds of gender roles, and particularly those which are archetypically masculine (Cunningham, 1990), may impact on the ways in which men may feel comfortable in talking about their own problems in a counselling or helping situation.

Approaches to Discussing Personal Issues

The ways in which young men talk about themselves and their relationships with significant others can be problematic. There is evidence that in many cases when boys and adolescent males are seeking professional help for their problems, their needs are not being met by the counselling professionals charged with helping them (Kiselica & Home, 1999). Other approaches may need to be adopted to enable young men to discuss their problems in an environment that is not alienating, ie where they feel supported to discuss issues free of any judgement. For example, simply communicating via the Internet has been shown to alleviate “feelings of embarrassment” and “fears of penalty and disapproval” (Siegel et al in Shepherd & Edelman, 2001). These same considerations are likely to be relevant to older men as well since the same concerns about avoiding embarrassment and disapproval are likely to be just as pertinent to them as to younger men.

There is evidence that use of counselling strategies involving non face-to-face contact can be beneficial. For example, there is evidence that simply writing about events has been helpful as a method of counselling. According to the work of Pennebaker and his colleagues (in Donnelly & Murray, 1991), writing about stressful and traumatic events (disclosure writing) can be as useful or perhaps more useful than talking about these events in a therapeutic context. Smyth (1998) has also found that disclosure writing can have positive health outcomes in healthy participants. Disclosure writing has also been shown to positively influence immune responses (Petrie, Booth, Pennebaker, Davison, & Thomas, 1995). While the focus of this past research has not been on the use of the Internet, there is no reason to think that disclosure writing on the Internet would be any less useful than disclosure writing in other forms. In fact, E-counselling may just be disclosure writing achieved electronically.

Explosion of Growth in the Use of the Internet and E-counselling

Over the last decade or so, there has been an explosive growth in the use of the Internet both for work and leisure (Shepherd & Edelman, 2001). As a result of the increased use of the Internet, there has been increased contact between people via the computer, either through one on one e-mail exchanges or as part of group discussions.

The Internet can also be used for a variety of transactions including the provision of psychological services. The Internet could be viewed as just a further extension of technology being used to transmit and receive communications between the helper and the helped (Griffiths, 2001). So called E-therapy or E-counselling describes the process of interacting with the therapist/counsellor on-line in ongoing conversation over time (Manhal-Baugus, 2001).

Men's Reluctance to Access Counselling and the Potential Attractiveness of B-Counselling for Men

It is claimed that men are reluctant to use traditional face-to-face counselling services, particularly to discuss personal and relationship difficulties. Government policy reflects this. It was for this reason for example that the Commonwealth Government announced in 2001 a 24-hour national men's telephone counselling service as part of its Men and Family Relationships initiative. Along with telephone counselling, the Internet provides a potential vehicle for providing relationship support services for men.

There is evidence that young men may find traditional counselling methods inappropriate for their needs. As mentioned above, in a study to examine the issue of adolescent boys' values regarding gender as part of a broader study of adolescents' perspectives on sense of self, Marshall and Arvay (1999) found that adolescent boys were mainly concerned about the threat of losing their power. They also tended to focus on immediate peer pressures to be masculine. This leads to a challenge for counsellors to reframe the stereotypical values and beliefs that boys are internalising to assist in the development of positive self-concept. Internet based counselling services could provide an effective alternative for those men.

In this particular regard there is evidence that in many cases when boys and adolescent males seek professional help for their problems, their needs are not met by the counselling professionals charged with the task of addressing those needs (Kiselica & Home, 1999). Other counselling approaches may therefore need to be adopted to enable young men to discuss their problems in an environment that is neither challenging nor alienating (Siegel et al in Shepherd & Edelman, 2001). One possibility is through the use of the Internet. It has been shown that simply communicating in a counselling interchange via the Internet can alleviate “feelings of embarrassment” and “fears of penalty and disapproval” (Siegel et al in Shepherd & Edelman, 2001).

As mentioned above, older men may also be reluctant to use traditional face-to-face counselling services.

There is some evidence that given gender differences in technology use and communication patterns, men might use the Internet differently from women (Green, 2001). This includes the possibility that men will more willingly embrace the mode of counselling the Internet offers than women.

One potential advantage of counselling via the Internet for men is that it utilises a medium with which men could be expected to feel a reasonable level of comfort. Writing about issues of personal concern within the relatively more anonymous medium of e-mail and the Internet may provide a vehicle for open and effective communication in counselling which might otherwise be avoided or impaired by the physical presence of the counsellor. In particular, the Internet may allow a “safe” medium for communicating about issues which men may find uncomfortable, difficult or embarrassing in a face-to-face context.

Appropriateness and Effectiveness of E-Counselling

There is a lot of debate about the use of the Internet in relation to the provision of counselling services. There are also mixed views about the effectiveness of on-line counselling. Part of the difficulty with examining the utility of E-counselling relates to the lack of appropriate and agreed safeguards. In particular, there are a range of practical and ethical issues relating to on-line therapy that need to be addressed. For example, there are concerns about the appropriate technologies to deliver E-counselling, the feasibility of on-line therapy for certain therapeutic interventions

(Griffiths, 2001).

Despite ethical considerations, many counsellors have set up their own Internet sites to deliver psychological services and we can expect this trend to continue (Griffiths, 2001). For example, the Internet is being used to support the maintenance of weight loss (Harvey-Berino, Pintauro, & Gold, 2002), the treatment of Trichotillomania (Boughn & Jaarsma Holdom, 2002), the treatment of posttraumatic stress (Lange, van de Ven, Schrieken & Emmelkamp, 2001), and the provision of marriage and family counselling (Jencius & Sager, 2001).

There is also scepticism among many groups about the value of the using the Internet to provide support services. In Australia, government bodies and some non-government organisations have shied away from hosting chat rooms, fearing consumer to consumer advice may lead to potentially harmful misinformation be distributed about services (Wallace, 2003).

In addition, there are many ethical issues that have arisen with this new technology, including concerns about the impact on the client of the loss of non-verbal communication (Robson & Robson, 2000), matters relating to client confidentiality and concerns about ensuring that the therapist/counsellor adheres to appropriate ethical standards (Caponecchia & Waring, 2001).

There are a range of ethical codes which have been adopted by professional organisations in relation to E-therapy (Manhal-Baugus, 2001). For example, the Australian Psychological Society (APS) has issued a set of "Considerations for Psychologists Providing Services on the Internet" (APS, 1999, www.psychsociety.com.au). While not endorsing the use of e-mail counselling as an adequate substitute for face-to-face counselling, the APS believed that it was appropriate to provide guidelines to contribute towards encouraging best practice in this area, including a setting out of generic principles applying to all materials posted on the Internet, and some additional principles, which apply to specific areas of psychological service, such as psychological tests and E-counselling. The specific ethical considerations in relation to online counselling services relate to:

- Confidentiality
- Communication of client information
- Anonymous clients
- Disclosure of client information
- Client use of psychologist electronic communications
- Record keeping
- Storage of records.

The judgement of the University of Canberra's Ethics Committee is that this document falls short of the status of a code of practice, however.

The Present Study

The potential utility of E-counselling for men was the subject of this study. A key focus was to investigate whether men would prefer disclosure about personal issues over the Internet through E-counselling compared to other types of counselling or helping contexts. The study explored what factors these preferences relate to including the possible influence of men's levels of comfort in therapeutic situations in general and E-counselling in particular. In addition, the study examined ethical and other considerations in the use of E-counselling by men.

Chapter 2

Aims of Study and Methodological Approach

Aims

This study was particularly focussed on examining the views of men about the potential utility of E-counselling as a therapeutic medium. It also explored the considerations which would need to be addressed to E-counselling as a secure, safe, and non-threatening alternative to face-to-face counselling. In addition, it considered what issues should be addressed in a protocol for E-counselling to ensure that ethical standards are maintained for E-counselling.

Methodological Approach

The methodology for this study was qualitative involving a series of interviews with twelve volunteer male subjects. The Interview Schedule is at Appendix 1. The interviews ranged in length of time between 30-40 minutes, depending on the nature of the discussion that emerged.

In the invitation to participate in the study (Informed Consent Form is at Appendix 2) as well as at the commencement of the interview, each participant was advised that if he experienced any distress in providing responses to the interview, he should stop responding to the questions and if needed, seek support/advice from the University of Canberra's Counselling Centre.

During 2002- 2003, twelve male participants were asked to discuss with the researcher their views about the potential usefulness of E-counselling. Each participant was asked to imagine that they were seeking counselling for a personal problem. Each participant was asked to think about this situation in answering questions. This was to ensure that the discussion was focussed on issues relevant to each participant.

The discussion was around a small number of focus questions relating to:

- Preferences for communicating about personal issues
- Use of the Internet – frequency, type of use
- Potential benefits of face-to-face and Internet-based interactions to discuss personal issues
- Considerations in using the Internet to discuss personal issues
- Previous use of the Internet either to seek information about or help with personal issues
- Ethical considerations in relation to E-counselling
- Any gender role issues in the use of the Internet
- Any issues concerning the age of counsellor or client.

In addition, participants were asked to provide details of their age and personal circumstances.

The qualitative methodology was based on Grounded Theory principles (Glaser, 1978; McLeod, 2001; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Essentially, the approach adopted was to seek the views of participants on a range of E-counselling issues and to explore the information collected to develop emerging concepts and themes that could usefully address the issues under consideration. Although there was a set of issues to be discussed with each participant, the researcher took an open approach to the interviews to allow participants to discuss issues that were relevant to them. In this way, the researcher was able to deepen the questions and ensure that the interviews were as purposeful as possible.

Based on the discussions, the researcher prepared a record of each interview. Each participant was asked to review the record and provide whatever changes he wished to ensure that the record captured the discussion from the participants as well as the researcher's perspective.

The researcher then examined the issues raised by participants in relation to the aims of the study. The approach adopted was to utilise the information obtained during the interviews with participants to develop categories of issues and themes that could fit together in a coherent manner and were consistent with the data collected.

As well as descriptive concepts to explain the data, the researcher also attempted to develop some explanations for the data. Where possible, linkages were made to evidence from other sources that supported the emergent theory. Consistent with Grounded Theory principles, the literature was secondary to the evidence from the current research.

This enabled the presentation of the results from the qualitative inquiry in the form of a series of propositions relevant to the aims of the study. The next Chapter outlines the key findings from the study.

Chapter 3

Findings

Participants

Participants were aged between 18 and 59 years of age and had different personal circumstances (Table 1). Six subjects were currently enrolled in an undergraduate psychology course at the University of Canberra; four subjects were currently enrolled at the University of Canberra in a post-graduate programme in psychology and two subjects had recently completed post-graduate studies at the University of Canberra and were working in information technology roles.

Table 1

Characteristics of Participants

<i>Age</i>	<i>Relationship Status</i>	<i>Living Arrangements</i>
18	Single	Lives with Parents & Siblings
18	Single	Lives Alone
20	Single	Lives with Parents
22	Single	Lives with Parents
22	Single	Lives with Parents & Siblings
23	Single	Lives with Sister
24	Defacto Relationship	Lives with Partner
31	Single	Lives Alone
36	Single	Lives Alone
40	Defacto Relationship	Lives with Partner
49	Married	Lives with Wife
59	Married	Lives with Wife

Key Themes

Below is a summary of the key categories of findings that emerged from the data.

Preferences for Communicating about Personal Issues

Most participants reflected a preference for face-to-face communication for discussing personal issues. While the specific reasons for preferring face-to-face communication varied, a number of common reasons were given:

- More comfortable with direct rather than indirect communication
- Better able to build relationships face to face which is an essential precursor to discussing personal issues
- Face-to-face communication allows immediate responses to be gauged from the reactions of participants
- That it was important to sense who the “person you were relating to, actually was”
- Sharing personal information is easier face-to-face
- Face-to-face communication allows instant feedback for the participant.

In instances where face-to-face contact was not possible, a preference was indicated in most instances for a telephone discussion with someone. One participant noted that he was comfortable talking to a friend or a family member either face to face or by telephone. He said that because he had a relationship of trust with the other person, it didn't matter whether or not he communicated face to face or over the telephone.

One participant indicated that if it was not possible for him to talk to someone immediately about a personal issue, his preference would be to wait until an opportunity became available to have a face to face discussion, rather than use another means of communication.

Participants had different preferences for whom they would speak to. One participant indicated that if he had a personal issue to discuss, his preference would be to discuss this with a close personal female friend. A second participant said that he would either talk to a friend or a family member if he had a personal issue he needed to discuss. The participant noted that he would communicate to family and friends on different personal issues. For example, he was likely to discuss personal finances

with a family member and personal relationship issues with a friend. A third participant expressed a preference for face-to-face communication with someone he knew well, could relate well to and felt comfortable with. He indicated that the person was likely to be a work colleague.

Three participants specifically noted that their preference was not to communicate about personal issues via e-mail since the message that they were trying to convey may be misinterpreted, possibly with adverse consequences. One participant explained that:

“a friend may become overly anxious about what he was trying to communicate and respond in a more extreme way than he had intended. Also, there was often a time delay in sending a message and having a message received and read by the recipient.” For him, communicating about personal issues needed to be done in a timely way and again, direct forms of communication either face to face or via the telephone were preferred.

Another participant indicated that he would not send an e-mail to a friend about a personal issue while a further participant noted that he would be uncomfortable and somewhat suspicious of communicating about personal issues with someone whom you couldn't gauge an immediate reaction from.

However, in one instance, a participant indicated that he would either write or e-mail a close personal female friend if he was unable to either see her or phone her. The participant noted that, for him, sending an e-mail would sometimes be the best option given that it was something he could do immediately and that there are sometimes time restrictions in making phone calls. If the issue was not particularly pressing however, he was happy not to send an e-mail but to “hold the thought” and wait until he could phone to discuss whatever was on his mind.

In summary, there was a consistent and strong overall preference for face to face communication to discuss personal issues. Some participants were also comfortable to phone someone to talk to about personal issues. This was predicated on the assumption that there was a relationship of trust already established with the person who was being contacted.

Three participants noted that they would not e-mail someone about their personal problems. It would appear that for these participants, Internet exchanges were insufficiently direct methods of communication to enable a proper discussion of personal issues.

Use of the Internet

The majority of participants were frequent users of the Internet, ie used the Internet every day for between 1 – 4 hours. Three participants were not frequent users of the Internet, ie didn't use the Internet every day and/or didn't use for any length of time. Of these participants, one used the Internet primarily for study related activities and to collect information on particular areas of interest. While using the Internet to collect information, he was not a routine surfer of the web.

A second participant indicated that he used the Internet for only about one hour per day. Of this time, around half the time is spent on using the e-mail facilities (he estimated that he sent around 6 e-mails per day), while the other half of the time would be spend on looking at news sites and/or information sites about exchange rates. This participant reported he didn't use the Internet to participate in chat/discussion forums; nor did he use it to search for general information.

A third participant also indicated that he was not a frequent user of the Internet. He used the Internet primarily for work related activities and also, in short bursts for personal activities, including participation on a singer's web fan club. The participant indicated that he has never participated in a chat room and that he was always concerned to ensure that his privacy was protected when using the Internet. For example, he might have an interaction with someone else on a particular web fan club for a couple of weeks but then not continue that exchange beyond that point. Another reason that the participant indicated he didn't continue ongoing chats with people over the Internet was that he was easily bored with having to

continuously write back to other people.

Of the participants who were frequent users of the Internet, it was usual to spend the time on the Internet every day and often for lengthy periods of time. Their primary use was for university or work related activities. They also used the Internet for routine personal administration and for communication of a personal nature. This participant noted that he was not involved in Discussion Forums or Chat Rooms on-line.

There was no age variation evident in the type of use of the Internet. Only one participant recorded a different pattern of usage – namely 20 per cent for university studies with the remaining 80 per cent for browsing the Internet for personal interest and chatting with friends.

While it was not possible to exactly quantify the overall type and frequency of use for frequent users of the Internet, a reasonable estimate based on the responses received follows:

Table 2
Type and Percentage Time Use of the Internet

<i>Type of Use</i>	<i>Percentage Time Use</i>
<u>University/Work-related:</u> Access work database Work related e-mails to colleagues Communicate with colleagues via e-mail Preparation of strategy papers Business analysis Professional development	80
<u>Personal:</u> Access databases Check sites for travel information Check sites for material on a particular topic of interest Personal e-mails Personal administration eg arranging travel and banking	20

Ten participants indicated that they had not participated in a chat room or discussion forum over the Internet. One participant reported that he had previously been a frequent user of the Internet at home, including Chat Rooms, but he had stopped his use of the Internet at home after 18 months for several reasons:

- He was wasting too much time on using the Internet at home
- He felt he could be doing better things with his time
- He had become addicted to using the Internet and decided that in order to modify his use he needed to cut off access to the Internet altogether.

Another participant indicated that he had used chat rooms while in senior secondary school to keep in touch with friends who were living in a different location at that time.

Potential Benefits of Face-to-Face and Internet-based Interactions to Discuss Personal Issues

As mentioned above, all participants indicated a strong preference to discuss personal issues in a face-to-face situation. Should that opportunity not be available, the majority of participants preferred to speak to someone over the telephone. Only two participants indicated that they would be comfortable to e-mail someone on a personal issue.

A range of common themes emerged from participants' consideration of the issue of the potential benefit of face-to-face interactions compared to Internet-based interactions.

Participants highlighted the different preferences of people and the potential benefits of both face-to-face and Internet based interactions to discuss personal issues. One participant noted at the outset however that in his view on-line counselling would not be particularly useful for people who had very deep problems such as depression. In his view, deep problems generally required face-to-face work. The participant noted, however, that as people were different, no one hard and fast rule could apply. Another participant commented that:

“the value of any counselling depends on the knowledge and credibility of the counsellor and the capacity of the counsellor to develop a positive relationship with a client. It would be difficult to establish a positive relationship on-line.”

Tables 3 and 4 summarises the categories of issues that emerged on the potential benefits of face-to-face and Internet-based interactions respectively.

Table 3

Potential Benefits of Face-to-Face Interaction

<i>Category</i>	<i>Responses</i>
Develop Trust:	Counsellor able to establish and build trust with the client and provide encouragement and support
Immediacy of Interaction:	Immediacy of communication and exchange enables the discussion to flow better Able to explore issues in detail and have immediate responses provided
Check Nature of Relationship:	Able to directly assess the nature and quality of the relationship eg whether it is a genuine exchange
Multiple Cues:	Able to read body language and probe issues Able to see the emotions being expressed Able to pick up non-verbal cues Able to check facial expressions and gestures Able to gather information from a range of sources Able to assess tone of voice which is important if someone is feeling distressed and which may not be apparent from reading text Able to check consistency in information provided

<i>Category</i>	<i>Responses</i>
Quality of Information:	<p>Able to better judge whether what the counsellor is saying is good or bad</p> <p>Able to get quality information on the “real essence” of the issue</p>
Develop Strategies:	Able to develop more approaches to coping with personal issues and problem solving strategies
Reassurance:	<p>Increased comfort because the person seeking support knows who the helper is</p> <p>Direct physical presence and contact assists the flow of personal information</p> <p>Able to get a greater sense of relief once the person has told the counsellor about the issue</p>
Confidentiality:	Face-to-face could provide reassurance about the confidentiality of the interaction

Table 4

Potential Benefits of Internet-Based Interactions

<i>Category</i>	<i>Responses</i>
Anonymity:	Anonymity of interaction may assist discussion of personal issue
Easy Access:	<p>Ongoing availability of the Internet</p> <p>24-hour service would ensure help was available any time</p> <p>Speed and convenience of on-line communication</p> <p>Enables access for people who otherwise would not be able to discuss personal issues through other means, eg people who were shy or had some kind of social phobia or who couldn't access public transport, either because of the cost or some form of disability</p> <p>May suit people with specific disabilities (eg hearing difficulties; social phobias; physical immobility) which reduce their capacity to participate in, and benefit from face-to-face counselling</p> <p>Helpful for people who do not have access to face-to-face support eg people who live in remote areas</p>
Privacy:	Greater privacy on line than face-to-face
Self Management:	<p>The level of interaction can be more easily controlled than face-to-face interaction</p> <p>Interaction can be easily terminated</p>
Supports Discussion:	<p>Interaction might be easier for a first discussion of personal issues</p> <p>Helpful for people for find face-to-face interaction awkward</p> <p>Able to obtain alternative points of views on line</p> <p>Helps to get different perspectives on an issue</p>

<i>Category</i>	<i>Responses</i>
Free Expression:	<p>Less pressure because there is no direct communication</p> <p>Acts as an outlet – people can “dump” their stuff quickly</p> <p>May be particularly useful for people with high levels of anger</p> <p>More likely to write about difficult issues</p> <p>More time to compose thoughts and tell it like it is</p>
Safe Forum:	<p>Interaction could feel “safer” and less judgemental than face-to-face interaction, particularly in relation to discussion of embarrassing personal issues – this could be particularly helpful for young people</p> <p>Helpful for people who find face-to-face interaction awkward</p> <p>Less pressure because there is no direct communication</p>

Overall, the benefits of face-to face interactions could be categorised as the development and maintenance of a trusting relationship, reassurance about the process and access to multiple sources of information.

By contrast, the benefits of Internet based interactions can be categorised as relating to anonymity of the process, the ease of access and the privacy and safety of the interactions as well as the capacity of the user to self manage the interaction.

All participants, irrespective of age or rate of Internet use, expressed the view that face-to-face interactions were essential to establish a quality relationship. The establishment of such a relationship was seen as a precursor to utilising E-counselling.

Considerations in Using the Internet to Discuss Personal Issues

A range of categories of responses arose from the participants' feedback on this issue.

1. Qualifications of E-counsellor

A key theme that emerged related to the importance of appropriately qualified counsellors. Specifically, participants noted that:

- ensuring that counsellors responding to E-clients are appropriately qualified is a top priority
- reassurance needed to be given to clients about the legitimacy of the E-counsellors in terms of qualifications and adherence to professional standards
- checking of qualifications could be managed by providing clients with contact details for the relevant Psychologists' Registration Board to enable them to independently check on the registration details of the E-counsellor, prior to commencing a dialogue
- E-counsellors could also undergo police checks to ensure there were no matters arising from a criminal record which could impact onto their capacity to undertake this role
- if the qualifications of the person receiving the message is not known:
 - the client could become anxious about what will happen to his information
 - questions could be raised about the integrity of the therapeutic process.

2. Client Confidentiality and Security of Information

Participants agreed that the lack of confidentiality and security of information over the Internet could reduce the likelihood of people sharing personal issues over the web. Client confidentiality and the security of information were key considerations for most participants, as follows:

- noting that it was never possible to completely guarantee client privacy and confidentiality over the Internet, it was important to provide advice to clients of E-counselling services about the steps being taken to ensure privacy and confidentiality while acknowledging the potential limitations of the Internet in

relation to these matters

- security of personal information and in particular, whether or not the information is passed on to third parties is a priority
- reassurance needs to be given to clients about where their information is going and who will access the information
- if information is retained, there needs to be a process to check the accuracy of the information. At present, once an exchange of e-mails had occurred, the information cannot really be checked for accuracy or corrected if there were errors. This is a major consideration in using the Internet to discuss personal issues, namely the nature of the record being kept
- the permanence of the record needs to be considered. Clients will not want their record to be shared around with other people which is comparatively easy over the Internet and with the use of e-mail.

In relation to the last point, there seemed to be little recognition of the legal requirements on record keeping, including for registered psychologists. A related concern was the need to ensure that there was no third party advertising on E-counselling sites. This was seen as potentially damaging to clients in terms of putting unwanted additional pressure on them at a time when they were already vulnerable.

3. Trust and Authenticity

Participants commented that to be effective, the counsellor needs to build up trust with the client and this would be hard to achieve over the Internet. As one participant put it, it may be difficult for the counsellor to get the “full story” from the client over the Internet.

In addition, a number of participants raised the concern about the authenticity of the E-counselling exchange. Counsellors may be concerned about the identity of clients and may feel that they are wasting their time with clients who are not genuine. One participant noted a concern that:

“The client may adopt a “handle” (name/persona) on the Internet that might reduce the likelihood that the client would present his/her real issues to the E-counsellor.”

Similarly, the client may not know the true identity of the counsellor. This could lead to breaches of privacy for the client. One participant expressed concern that there could be instances where both client and counsellor are fabricating their identities.

4. Access, Skills Development and Quality Assurance

Some participants noted considerations about access to E-counselling for some groups of people. A need for support to develop skills in using the Internet was also identified together with a need for as well as quality assurance procedures:

- Many people who are not familiar with using the Internet may reject the technology as a tool for communication
- Access may be difficult for some people, eg the elderly who may not be familiar with using computers in general or with the Internet in particular
- People with literacy skill difficulties - English literacy in general or computer literacy in particular - may not be able to utilise the Internet
- Ensuring that people have the necessary skills to use the Internet is a priority if E-counselling is to be utilised by a wide group of people
- The technical support for the communication channel between client and counsellor over the Internet needed to be of high quality to ensure that the communication exchange could be as immediate as possible.

Finally, participants noted that clients would need to be assured that E-counsellors were not working with more than one client at the same time as this would risk the quality of the service being provided to each individual client.

5. Communicating the Benefits of E-counselling

Another consideration related to how the benefits of E-counselling were being or could be communicated. Being clear about the benefits of E counselling was seen as important. The focus needed to be on things like the ease of Internet use, particularly to discuss personal issues that might be embarrassing to discuss face-to-face.

6. Loss of Meaning

The fear of a loss of meaning in communicating the message via the Internet may reduce the likelihood of people using the technology to seek help with personal problems. Concerns raised include:

- the way words are interpreted –when you communicate in text the counsellor may interpret the words in ways that the client didn't intend. For example, one participant noted that:
 “the client may put something in writing to the counsellor which comes across as “harder” than the client intended and the counsellor could read more into it than was mean by the client”
- there is a risk that the discussion on line will be less valued by both parties because of the lack of any direct personal involvement between the E-counsellor and the client
- written messages may lose the subtleties that can be conveyed in a face-to-face encounter and therefore misunderstandings may occur between the E-counsellor and the client
- the language of the E-counsellor needs to match the language of the client to ensure that the intent of the communication is accurately conveyed. For example, Internet counsellors may need to be matched for age with client groups (ie youth counsellors for young clients and adult counsellors for adult clients)
- the message could be lost because as the client tries to make the transcript suit the needs of the counsellor, he doesn't really say what he means
- the focus on ensuring that the client's message makes sense to the counsellor can cause a great deal of anxiety for the client
- clients may feel pressured to get the problem dealt with quickly rather than wasting the counsellor's time – this can result in a loss of meaning in the message from the client.

One participant noted that in his experience in using chat rooms on line:

“there was a culture to discuss and resolve issues quickly. This experience would cause him anxiety in E-counselling situations.”

Another participant noted that another consideration related to the possibility that E-counsellors could face legal action in cases where the advice they provide is seen to have contributed to an adverse outcome for a client. While this could be an issue for any counselling service, it may be a particular consideration for E-counselling. For example the liability of counsellors who provide services on line would need to be explicitly addressed.

Previous Use of the Internet Either to Seek Information about or Help with Personal Issues

Participants indicated that they had not previously used the Internet either to seek information about or help with personal issues. However, several participants reported that they had looked at specific health related information but they had not used the Internet to seek advice or help with any personal issues.

Ethical Issues in Relation to E-Counselling

Participants noted a number of major ethical issues in relation to E-counselling. Many of the categories of themes that emerged in this discussion were similar to the broader considerations for E-counselling identified earlier. In summary, participants identified the legitimacy of the E-counsellors in terms of qualifications and adherence to professional standards and privacy and confidentiality issues relating to the use of the Internet as well as several other major ethical issues, as set out below:

1. Qualifications of E-Counsellor

The qualifications of the E-counsellor were a key ethical issue for most participants. The general expectation was that a counsellor on the Internet should be qualified to the same extent as a practitioner providing face-to-face counselling. As such, the general rules that apply to all psychological services would need to apply to E-Counselling. Specifically, participants commented that:

- people identifying themselves as the E-counsellors must be who they say they are
- E-counsellors must be appropriately qualified practitioners.

Issues of compliance and policing of standards are important considerations. In short, the concern is that there are no real checks on who the E-counsellor is.

One participant commented that the issue of the qualifications of E-counsellors might not be an issue in practice since clients who found that E-counsellors were giving poor advice or support would not utilise their services in future.

2. Privacy and Confidentiality of Information

As with general considerations for E-counselling, privacy of client information on the Internet was a key ethical issue. Participants shared concerns about protecting the users of E-counselling from:

- Possible embarrassment and/or distress to participants – there is the potential that because verbatim records are kept via E-counselling, participants might be subsequently embarrassed and/or distressed by the material that they provided at an earlier point in time [the issue here it seemed, was more around the sharing of private information from E-counselling sessions rather than the keeping of the record per se which would also be a feature of face-to-face counselling].
- Inappropriate transfer of information – it is easy to transfer personal information provided via E-counselling to a large audience over the web.
- Access to records – care would need to be exercised to ensure that only appropriate people access information provided by participants via E-counselling sites.

There seemed to be general agreement that the same rules should apply to E-counsellors as any other counsellor although there were some extra rules for E-counsellors because of the different environments in which they are working.

Participants highlighted the need for safeguards to be put in place to protect clients using E-counselling, as follows:

- Anonymity of information on E-counselling sites needed to be strictly protected.
- Users of any E-counselling service need to be made aware of how the information provided on-line would be used.

- Users also need to be advised of the length of time that records will be kept.
- Checks need to be put in place to ensure that information is protected and not shared with others.

One participant noted the broader implications of the availability of private information from E-counselling exchanges such as the possible use by Government authorities or insurance companies to ascertain information about people's psychological health which could be used to determine for example health benefits or insurance payouts.

Another participant suggested that with changes in technology, it might be possible in future to protect all parties better because there could be greater control over the types of sites that are established and the rules that would regulate them.

3. Counsellor Bias

An ethical issue for one participant related to counsellor bias against certain type of E-clients. For example, if a client was very slow at keying in messages, the counsellor could form a negative view of the client. Also, the counsellor might show bias in relation to the type of language used by clients. For instance, many young people may use short forms of communications (consistent with their use of text messages on mobile phones) compared to older people. Older counsellors might therefore be biased against the language used by young people. This would reduce the effectiveness of the intervention.

4. Quality of On-Line Service

A further ethical issue related to the quality of the service provision of the E-counsellor.

One participant noted that the workload for people providing services on line could be very high. He saw a parallel in his experiences with Help Desk facilities. He noted that there is a risk that if services are provided on line, they may only be a minimum quality of care because of the limited time available online. He felt that any

models of E-counselling that provided a single session only would be particularly poor in terms of the quality of service provided – again, his experience of Help Desk initiatives supported his view on this.

Other participants also highlighted the importance of quality assurance for on-line services to make sure that E-clients were getting what they expect to be getting, ie “not being taken for a ride”

On-line platforms which are used to establish for example chat/discussion rooms needed to have transparent rules associated with them so that participants were clear about what was involved if they chose to participate. This is essential to ensure quality service provisions.

The issue of children’s use of E-counselling could pose particular problems in terms of quality assurance, namely who gives authority for them to participate (eg parents) and what safety checks will be made to ensure appropriate use.

One suggestion to assure quality of on-line services was for E-counselling web-pages to be properly accredited to ensure that general ethical and privacy considerations were appropriately addressed.

5. Screening of Clients

Screening of clients was also raised as an ethical consideration. As well as the client being advised of the credentials of the counsellor, it was considered important that clients could be screened by the counsellor. As mentioned above, this may be particularly relevant if children are using the service as someone will need to give permission for their participation and special quality assurance processes may need to be put in place for this client group.

One participant offered an alternative perspective, namely that young people were unlikely to have ethical issues regarding the use of E-counselling, since: “they have been brought up to use the Internet and may feel more comfortable to discuss private issues on-line.”

Possible Issues Relating to E-Counselling (Age, Sex)

Participants identified a number of possible considerations for the use of E-counselling for men and women and for people of different ages. Key themes to emerge are outlined below:

1. Importance of Face-to-Face Communication

Participants believed that most people, irrespective of age and sex, would generally prefer face to face counselling than on-line counselling. As one participant put it:

“E-counselling could not provide the full benefit compared to face-to-face counselling.”

The importance of face-to-face communication and in particular the establishment of trust was raised by several participants as a key consideration in seeking support or advice about personal issues. For young men in particular, it was considered important not to reduce face-to-face communication when discussing personal issues.

One participant put it as follows:

“it is important not to apply narrow stereotypes of men in considering the utility of E-counselling ... it might be better to teach young men to communicate face-to-face and build their confidence in direct interactions, rather than “selling them short” with an emphasis on indirect communication methods like use of the Internet.”

2. Reluctance of Men to Seek Help Compared to Women

A common theme to emerge was that men are usually less willing to get help with personal problems than women because it was seen as an admission of weakness. In general, men were considered more comfortable discussing work issues while women are comfortable discussing a broader range of issues. This might relate to the different types of communication that women and men value. Also, men were seen as more detached from women. By contrast, women value social interactions more than men do. As a result, women may be more inclined to access support services than men do. This observation seems consistent with men's use of services.

In addition, one participant thought that many men find talking about personal issues very confronting. By contrast he thought that women were more open to talk about issues and it was socially acceptable for women to seek advice and support about personal matters.

One participant indicated that men and women might have different concerns in using E-counselling. He mentioned that safety issues may be a major concern for women. In particular, not knowing "who is on the other end" of the e-mail may be a consideration for women, particularly if they want to communicate about sensitive personal issues, particularly sexual issues. Men, by contrast, may be more comfortable in using e-mails to communicate about sexual and other problems.

An alternative view was that women would be more open to using on-line counselling than men because of their general willingness to discuss personal issues.

Finally, it was suggested that given that men and women generally present with different problems, it could be helpful to have clients and counsellors matched for sex irrespective of whether or not the counselling was face-to-face or on-line.

3. Counselling Use by Age Group

The view was put that young people generally are probably more open to forms of counselling support, irrespective of gender. Young people were considered more likely to use E-counselling than older people. It was also considered likely that young people would raise different issues in counselling (whether face-to-face or on-line) than older people and that it would be useful therefore to ensure that clients and counsellors were matched for age.

4. Frequency of Use of the Internet and E-counselling

While most participants noted that young men are likely to use computers more than young women, the primary purpose for this use was considered to be entertainment. Younger men, who had a greater familiarity with PCs were considered to be more likely to use the Internet generally and E-counselling in particular than older men who were less comfortable with the Internet.

Older men were considered more likely to use the Internet for business purposes while young men were more likely to use it for entertainment. Also, it was proposed that men who worked in office environments, where the use of the Internet was common, would be more likely to use E-counselling than men who worked in trades or were manual labourers.

Also, one participant noted that women are probably more active users of the Internet in some areas than men are.

Irrespective of the actual usage, participants considered it unlikely that even if young men did use the Internet more regularly than young women, there would be any greater tendencies by young men to discuss personal issues on line than by young women.

5. Use of E-counselling by Young People to Discuss Sexual Problems

One particular use identified for Internet-based counselling was for young people to discuss relationship and sexual problems. Young people are often uncomfortable to discuss these issues face-to-face and E-counselling could enable them to express concerns in a more comfortable environment.

However, it was considered that major clinical issues for young people, such as depression would need to be handled through face-to-face counselling.

6. Use of E-Counselling by Senior/Executive Men

As mentioned above, there was a view that men who worked in office environments would be more likely to access E-counselling than men who worked in trades. Related to this, one participant highlighted the potential use of E-counselling by senior executive men. Men in senior roles may be reluctant to see a counsellor for face-to-face support because of the stigma attached to seeing a counsellor and/or because of the time it would take out of a busy workday to have a face-to-face meeting.

Another participant contrasted the potential usefulness of E-counselling for men in high and low status occupations. He observed that men in high status occupations might be very unlikely to seek face to face counselling because it did not seem in keeping with their status. He thought that E-counselling might be an appropriate vehicle for this group of men to address personal issues. This could have advantages in terms of anonymity and capacity to self manage the process.

7. Use of the Internet by Older People

The general view was that older people were less likely to utilise the Internet and/or E-counselling than younger people. However, one participant observed that, despite the stereotypical view that the Internet was primarily the province of the young, increased age was not necessarily a barrier to use of the Internet. He believed that for those older people who had mastered the Internet effectively, there would be

instances where E-counselling could be just as, or more, beneficial for older than younger people.

8. Marketing E-Counselling to Young People

An E-counselling site targeting young people could be effectively marketed through schools, eg through providing the Internet link to the school counsellor or posting the web-address on popular sites that young people frequent.

9. Marketing E-Counselling to Older Men

There was a view that older men were unlikely to utilise the Internet to seek advice for personal problems. Rather they would talk to their friends. Blanket advertising campaigns to older men to use an E-counselling service would not therefore be effective. One suggestion was that a more targeted approach could work. For example, models of E-counselling could be trialled with a number of men in a community who could in turn let their friends know about the service and its benefits.

10. Informing Men about the Benefits of E-Counselling

One participant highlighted the importance of informing men about the benefits of E-counselling. He thought that men might be influenced by anecdotal evidence about the value of E-counselling eg advice from work colleagues or friends who had used it and found it helpful. He did not think men would be influenced by any formal marketing campaign about the benefits of E-counselling.

11. Language Use for Different Age Groups

Several participants believed that the approach to E-counselling might need to differ somewhat depending on the age of the client. Even though the client would probably not know the age of the E-counsellor, there would probably be a difference in the type of language used in the e-mail exchanges by E-counsellors of different ages. In addition, the language used by the E-counsellor for older clients may need to be different than that used for younger clients.

This might mean that particular care would need to be taken to ensure that E-counselling was targeted to particular age groups. One suggestion was that the model for telephone counselling which has different lines for adults and children could be considered for E-counselling.

Other Issues

Participants were also asked to provide any other comments regarding the potential usefulness of E-counselling or any other issue that emerged during the discussion on this issue. A number of themes emerged from the information collected from this part of the discussion:

1. Access to E-Counselling

People who have poor health – the elderly and frail and those in nursing homes and hospitals could also find E-counselling to be a useful way to discuss personal issues. There could also be opportunities to use Voice Activated Computers to support people who are unable to type in information on the Internet.

In addition, some people's living circumstances could mean that it is not possible to seek face-to-face counselling. One participant gave the example of people who are in prison, noting that prison inmates might find E-counselling a useful way to deal anonymously with someone about issues of concern to them.

One participant said that in Australia, challenges remained regarding "the tyranny of distance." Coupled with this, there are challenges associated with the dispersed population of Australia. In many instances, E-counselling might be the only form of psychological assistance readily available to people in remote parts of the country. The participant believed that people in remote locations, particularly men, may find E-counselling useful. He observed that men are generally less willing to talk about personal issues face to face and that remote area men in particular may be more comfortable to e-mail someone about issues.

2. New Technologies

It was noted that in the future technology would enable most interactions over the Internet to involve oral and visual as well as textual communication (eg through Web Cam technology). This could have advantages in overcoming some of the barriers to the use of the Internet for counselling services that were identified by the participant and in particular enable a better exchange of information which could help build trust between the counsellor and client.

3. Cost of E-Counselling

One participant mentioned the issue of the cost of E-counselling. He understood that the costs were comparatively high for E-counselling. For example, it could cost a client \$45:00 for a single response from an E-counsellor. By contrast, face-to-face counselling (around \$90:00 per session) is comparatively inexpensive.

4. Staged Model for E-Counselling

E-counselling was considered to be useful in later stages in counselling once trust had been established between the client and the counsellor. This approach would assist in dealing with some of the ethical issues particularly those relating to the authenticity of the E-counsellor.

One participant suggested a two phase approach to counselling, namely face-to-face counselling in the first phase and Internet based counselling in the second phase, once a good relationship had been established.

Participants identified a wide range of considerations in discussions of the potential usefulness of E-counselling. Despite the breadth of comments provided, there was remarkably consistent themes that emerged from the data collected from the interviews. The next Chapter addresses the potential implications of these findings.

Chapter 4

Implications of Findings

The twelve interviews provided a rich source of data to address the questions posed by the study. Following is a consideration of the main points arising from the interviews and the possible implications of the findings for the utility of E-counselling as a therapeutic medium for men, including consideration of the ethical standards that should apply to E-counselling to make it a secure, safe, and non-threatening alternative to face-to-face counselling.

Preference for Face-to-Face Discussion of Personal Issues

There was a strong preference for face to face discussion about personal issues by all participants.

Face to face contact was mainly preferred by participants because it:

- was direct and involved oral and verbal communication with immediate feedback opportunities, and
- involved a relationship with another person.

Only in circumstances where this was not possible, did participants indicate that they would consider the use of a different medium. In most instances, participants indicated that they would not use e-mail to convey a very personal message.

In terms of who to talk to about personal issues, participants agreed that he had to be someone whom they knew well, could relate well to and felt comfortable with.

Being comfortable was a key consideration. Comfort increased with being able to see the other person and to gauge an immediate reaction. There was a level of suspicion with communicating about personal issues with someone whom one couldn't see.

Trust was another key consideration. The choice about whom to communicate with was predicated on the assumption that there was a relationship of trust already

established with the person. While this is a reasonable expectation if talking to a friend or colleague about a problem, it would not be realistic in a face-to-face counselling setting, since no such relationship would exist on the first face-to-face consultation.

The concerns expressed by participants for a trusting relationship that is safe and comfortable are consistent with the general principles that underpin most approaches to general counselling (Dryden & Feltham, 1999). It needs to be noted however that trust evolves in a relationship rather than existing at the outset. However, the literature indicates that trust is typically able to be built up in the first one or two face-to-face counselling sessions (Truax & Carkhuff, 1967).

These concerns were similar irrespective of the training of participants. While four of the twelve participants were undertaking post-graduate studies in psychology and would be expected to have a reasonably sophisticated understanding of counselling theory, including the importance of relationship in counselling, all participants expressed similar sentiments. We can assume therefore that these considerations do not simply reflect the nature of the studies that were being undertaken by participants but rather the broader concerns of all the men interviewed.

Internet Usage and Management of Usage

The majority of participants were frequent users of the Internet. For the frequent users, the majority of time was spent on work- or university-related activities. Participants did not generally “surf the net” or use chat rooms or discussion forums on line. In addition, participants reported little previous use of the Internet either to seek information about or help with personal issues.

One consideration in the type of activity engaged in over the Internet related to the protection of privacy. It was important to ensure that personal information was protected. This was particularly so if the information related to personal difficulties.

Also, some concerns were raised about the appropriateness of using the Internet to discuss personal issues.

One participant reported that while he had previously been a frequent user of the Internet at home, he had stopped using the Internet at home because it was wasting too much time and he felt he could be doing better things with his time.

The participant was able to exercise control in determining if and when he could remove himself from participating on line. This capacity to self manage the use of the Internet to discuss personal issues could be an advantage in some situations.

Overall, men's attitudes to E-counselling reflected their concerns about their needs for privacy and control over what they're doing on-line.

The Importance of an Effective Relationship in Face-to-Face Counselling

Consistent with the preferences of participants to discuss personal issues face-to-face, participants highlighted a number of key advantages in addressing issues face-to-face.

In essence, the key thread running through the responses provided by participants related to the development of a trusting relationship that could be established in face-to-face counselling setting. Trust is built up because of:

- the comfort provided to the client through the physical presence of the counsellor
- the capacity of the client to gauge the immediate responses of the counsellor, including through checking verbal as well as non-verbal cues
- the capacity of the client to assess the quality of the relationship first hand
- the reassurance to the client about the confidentiality of the interaction.

The recognition of the importance of a trusting relationship in counselling is not of course new. There is general counselling literature that supports the value of establishing and maintaining trust in the therapeutic relationship to achieve positive client outcomes (Dryden & Feltham, 1999; Truax & Carkhuff, 1967). In a recent overview of what works in therapy for Australian clients, Morawetz (2002) analysed evidence regarding the common factors that operate interactively to influence therapeutic outcomes. A key factor was the establishment of an effective therapeutic relationship. Also, in another recent study, Hill and Kellems (2002) conclude that

both helping skills and the therapeutic relationship are major contributors to adult clients' perceptions of therapeutic effectiveness. Therapeutic relationship has also been shown to be related to positive outcomes across a range of child and adolescent therapeutic approaches (Shirk & Karver, 2003).

Participants believed that face-to-face counselling models provided a very supportive environment for people to discuss personal issues. Multiple cues such as facial expressions and tone of voice were important for clients to be able to assess what's happening for them in the interaction and to be reassured about the confidentiality of the process and this could not be provided in Internet counselling.

Anonymity, Easy Access and Self-Management through E-Counselling

A key advantage of E-counselling was seen to be the anonymity of the interaction. Coupled with this, participants saw benefits in the greater personal privacy afforded clients in on line counselling rather than face-to-face counselling.

Easy access to on-line counselling was considered to be an advantage including for people who would otherwise not be able to discuss personal issues through any other means, such as people who live in remote areas or have a disability.

The capacity to manage interactions on-line was also considered an advantage. As mentioned above, one advantage with using the Internet was that the user could stay in control of the interaction. Similarly, for E-counselling participants saw advantages in clients being able to control the level of interaction with the counsellor and being able to terminate the interaction. Also, clients could choose to use the Internet as a outlet to release tension and/or to discuss issues of a highly personal nature that they feel uncomfortable taking about face to face. Staying in control seemed to be a key advantage of E-counselling.

However, participants did not view E-counselling as having utility in its own right as a counselling tool. Rather, participants were of the view that only once a good relationship had been established between the counsellor and client face-to-face, could E-counselling be effective eg as a follow-up, checking on progress, clarification of management strategies with the counsellor etc.

Ensuring the Integrity of E-Counselling

There was remarkable consistency in the types of considerations and concerns that participants identified for using the Internet to discuss personal issues.

Key among these was the importance of ensuring that the E-counsellor was appropriately qualified and met the normal professional standards that apply to counsellors involved in face-to-face interactions.

The importance of ensuring that the client's information was kept confidential and secure was also identified as a key priority. There was genuine concern that client information may be retained without their knowledge and could be shared with other people in a way that could cause harm to the client.

Assurance processes for E-counselling were also seen as priority issues. Ensuring access to quality services on line and appropriate training for people to ensure that they are able to use on-line services were identified as key priorities.

In addition, once E-counselling was underway, there was a need for high quality technical support for the communication channel between client and counsellor over the Internet. Without this sort of quality assurance, the Internet could not be used successfully for counselling services. Once good quality services were established, consideration would also need to be given to marketing the benefits of E-counselling.

A significant issue that was raised about the integrity of E-counselling related to the potential loss of meaning in communicating the message via the Internet. The ways in which information was used and interpreted was one consideration. Also, the pressure on the client to make sure that the counsellor has received and understood the message may reduce the likelihood of the client being able to accurately convey his message. Clients may feel pressure to resolve the issue quickly and therefore reduce the meaning of their message in an attempt to get it done with quickly. The pressure in chat rooms to discuss and resolve issues quickly was an example of the type of pressure that could also be experienced by clients in E-counselling.

Concern was also raised by participants about the need to ensure that people were being genuine in their interactions over the Internet. This was a concern that affected people's use of the Internet in general. A person may take on a persona on the Internet and act out parts on-line that do not reflect who they really are. The concern about genuineness is consistent with the counselling and psychotherapeutic literature which emphasises the key role of genuineness in therapeutic relationships. Truax and Carkhuff (1967, p. 32) put it like this:

“genuineness implies most basically ... a meeting ... without defensiveness or retreat into facades or roles.”

The concern about how people are presenting on line has broader social implications than just E-counselling. In a recent examination of how the Internet is affecting relationships, Morris (2002) commented that it is important that appropriate codes of conduct are developed for on-line behaviour that reflects society's values. It is critical to “see the Internet as a part of real life where ‘real rules’ apply” (p. 47).

Ethical Guidelines for the Use of E-Counselling

All participants believed that ethical standards needed to apply to the use of the Internet for E-counselling. These standards needed to have meaning for clients and could not therefore be of a high level of generality but rather needed to be specific to meet the needs of clients.

Based on the considerations of participants, the Guidelines for E-counselling services would need to encompass information on:

- the accreditation of the E-counselling site
- the E-counsellor, including his/her professional qualifications
- the screening process for clients
- how client information will be protected
- how client information will be used
- how clients can obtain access to their own records
- the length of time that records will be kept
- the quality assurance processes in place for the service
- the cost of the service

- any intended use by Government agencies of information obtained from E-counselling
- [in the case of on-line group discussions] the rules associated with on-line discussions so that participants were clear about what was involved if they chose to participate.

These suggestions are consistent with the general guidelines developed by the APS for “Considerations for Psychologists Providing Services on the Internet” (www.psychsociety.com.au). The priorities identified by potential clients are somewhat different however. Ethical protocols for on-line counselling sites need to be developed that reflect client needs as well as protections for the professional groups involved in the provision of psychological services.

Participants believed that while the same rules needed to apply to E-counselling as to face-to-face counselling, additional rules for E-counselling were needed as set out above. It has also been suggested in the literature that E-Counselling sites should explicitly seek clients’ consent to participate in a therapy that is as yet untested. For example, Shapiro & Schulman (1999) recommend that sites offering E-counselling should include a specific warning to clients that E-mail facilitated therapeutic communication is not therapy and is untested, and its efficacy may be uncorrelated with success of traditional therapies. They also suggest that additional standards for E-counselling be developed to ensure that psychologists make every effort to provide all information necessary to achieve informed consent from the client; to prevent over reliance on advice given via any modality; and ensure that greatest level of privacy and confidentiality practical. Given the likely increase in doing therapy over the Internet, it will be important to give further consideration to these issues (Haas, Benedict, & Kobos, 1999).

Men and Women and the Use of E-Counselling

Participants believed that men were generally greater users of the Internet than women were, although this may be changing. This is consistent with evidence that men tend to use the Internet more often than women, although gender differences have not always been found (Shaw & Gant, 2003). Irrespective of the actual usage, however, there wasn't considered to be a direct relationship between Internet use and the likelihood of being involved in on-line counselling.

Overall, women were seen as more likely to seek assistance with problems than men. This was for a range of reasons, many of them related to men's sense of masculinity and the potential embarrassment in openly discussing personal issues.

This is consistent with the evidence about men not wanting to expose themselves to ridicule (eg Siegel et al in Shepherd & Edelmann, 2001).

Men and women may have different concerns about personal safety on line. In particular, not knowing "who is on the other end" of the e-mail may be a consideration for women, particularly if they want to communicate about sensitive personal issues, particularly sexual issues. Men, by contrast, may be more comfortable in using e-mails to communicate about sexual and other personal problems.

This was also related to a suggestion that it would be better to market E-counselling to men by way of peer relationships, rather than formal marketing campaigns. The suggestion was that men might be influenced by anecdotal evidence about E-counselling from work colleagues and friends rather than through some formal campaign.

The Impact of Age on Internet Use and E-Counselling

Age wasn't seen as a barrier to use of the Internet and there may be instances where E-counselling could be just as, or more, beneficial for old as young people.

Young people were generally seen are probably more open to all forms of counselling support compared to older people. Also, there was a sense that young people may be more open to formal approaches to them about the value of E-counselling. For example, an E-counselling site targeting young people could be effectively marketed through schools.

Young people were also seen as more likely to discuss relationship and sexual problems on line compared to older people. E-counselling sites for young people devoted to address this perceive need could be explored.

The type of language that is used by the E-counsellor may need to be modified according to the age of the client. Consideration could be given to different E-counselling lines for adults and children, perhaps following the same model as phone help lines for adults and young people.

Benefits for Men from E-Counselling

One proposition that emerged from the study is the potential use of E-counselling by men in senior positions. These men were considered to be reluctant to see a counsellor for face-to-face support because of the stigma attached to seeking support for personal problems.

Particular advantages to senior men from using the Internet to discuss explore personal issues related to the anonymity of the process, the comparatively shorter period of time out of a busy day, and the capacity to self manage the process.

Older men living in remote locations may also find E-counselling useful. These men were generally less willing to talk about personal issues face to face and remote area men in particular may be more comfortable to e-mail someone about issues.

Ensuring Access to E-Counselling

Many people do not or can not access face-to-face counselling. For these groups, such as the elderly, people with poor health, people living in remote locations; And people who are in special institutions (eg prisons), E-counselling might be the only form of psychological assistance readily available to them.

The Potential of New Technologies to Enhance E-Counselling

A key impediment to the potential take up of E-counselling was the lack of direct relationship between the client and the counsellor. In future, technology would enable most interactions over the Internet to involve oral and visual as well as textual communication. This could have advantages enabling a better and more immediate exchange of information between client and counsellor and the establishment of a positive and trusting relationship.

Staged Approaches to E-Counselling

As mentioned above, a proposition that emerged from the study related to the utility of E counselling at the later stages of counselling. Given the importance of establishing a trusting, positive and comfortable relationship at the beginning of counselling, one possible model is to utilise E-counselling only once trust has been established between the client and the counsellor. This approach would have advantages in combining the efficiency of E-counselling with the authenticity of the therapeutic relationship.

Summary

Overall, while participants clearly identified benefits of E-counselling in terms of time efficiency and anonymity, there were major ethical considerations relating to the professional qualifications of the psychologist providing the services on the Internet, concerns about confidentiality of information and the potentially inappropriate use of information collected via the Internet.

In addition, participants identified the critical importance of the establishment and maintenance of trust in a relationship as a key factor in the decision to either share or not share information on personal issues. The Internet was not considered to be the most appropriate vehicle to convey personal information for these men. The development of detailed ethical protocols to govern on-line counselling sites was considered to be important.

The use of more sophisticated technologies that enabled oral and visual as well as textual communication could be a vehicle to overcome some of these concerns in future. Models of E-counselling which combine initial sessions of face-to-face counselling with follow up E-counselling sessions is also an potential area of exploration. Such approaches build on some of the advantages of E-counselling while acknowledging the importance of relationship building which are best established through face-to-face interactions.

The information gathered as part of this study has also raised other areas for possible exploration which are set out in the following Chapter.

Chapter 5

Possible Future Work

This study involved a qualitative assessment of the views of twelve men about the potential usefulness of E-counselling. These perspectives provided a rich source of information about the issues under review in this study. They have also pointed to several areas of possible future work.

The view that it is embarrassing for men to communicate about personal issues appeared pervasive. Men do not want to expose themselves to excessive scrutiny or potential ridicule.

Despite this, men preferred face-to-face communication to discuss personal issues and could see real benefits in seeking personal and social support from close friends and family.

This appeared somewhat of a contradiction and the relationship between men wishing to avoid embarrassment but valuing personal contact might need to be explored further.

It would appear that the solution might be being put before the problem. That is, assumptions are made that because men are uncomfortable discussing personal issues face to face, they should do it through other mediums that make them more comfortable. Perhaps a closer examination of what makes men feel unable to talk about personal issues would be a better area for inquiry. This would enable us to get a clearer picture about what is safe or not safe communication for men.

The concepts of traditional males as non-emotional are often presented in stark contrast to the more sensitive male image. Perhaps these images are not contradictory at all but rather two aspects of the one continuum. We need to move away from simplistic models of what it means to be male. Again, further exploration of what it is to be masculine and how this links to preferred styles of communication would be worthwhile. For example, sex role scales could be used to examine the relationship between masculine roles and Internet use and attitudes to E-counselling.

The study also provided some suggestions about what does and doesn't work in relation to the use of E-counselling for men. More detailed work on what facilitates or impedes men using the Internet to discuss personal problems would be helpful. Again, linked to the concerns about men wanting to avoid embarrassment and disapproval, exploration of what is alienating about on line counselling would be useful.

The role of peer support for men is clearly something that needs further consideration. The views of work colleagues and friends are important to men and might be more potent sources of information about the value of E-counselling rather than more formal avenues. Exploration of the degree to which men listen to and use information provided about E-counselling from a range of sources would be useful in terms of exploring the potential future use of on-line services for men.

The ethical issues relating to on-line counselling are complex and require further detailed examination. For example, participants in the current study believed that clients are concerned about the potential misuse of E-counselling. Clients' concerns about the provision of on-line counselling services need to be given careful consideration in the establishment of protocols, guideless or on-line site credentials for E-counselling. This is another area that would benefit from further work.

The issue of the feasibility of on-line counselling for a broader range of problems needs to be examined further. At present a range of services are offered on line including to support the maintenance of weight loss and the provision of marriage and family counselling. Certain types of short-term counselling eg advice about ways to manage anger might be appropriate for on-line services while therapeutic conditions that require long-term counselling such as depression might not be appropriate. Specific considerations for men in terms of appropriate use of E-counselling for certain types of intervention could usefully be examined. For example, would issues relating to sexual dysfunction be appropriately dealt with on-line?

One proposition for this study was that a real advantage for men of counselling via the Internet is that it might allow a “safe” medium for communicating about issues which men may find uncomfortable, difficult or embarrassing in a face-to-face context.

Men writing about personal issues within the relatively more anonymous medium of e-mail and the Internet was seen as potentially providing a vehicle for open and effective communication in counselling which might otherwise be impaired by the physical presence of the counsellor.

This study did demonstrate the potential usefulness of E-counselling for men, including for discussing issues that were potentially embarrassing. The information collected from the study can not be explained by a single model but a number of common concepts were derived and some working propositions developed.

The study did not however demonstrate a specific preference by men for disclosure through writing over the Internet. Rather, counselling interchanges via the Internet were not found to be preferable to traditional face-to-face counselling services. Open and direct communication through face to face interaction was seen to be the most effective way for men to discuss personal issues.

In terms of the potential use of E-counselling by men, the study also identified a range of ethical and other issues that require further examination.

While recognising the limitations of the present study that involved a qualitative assessment of the views of a sample of twelve men, the findings do pose some interesting considerations for the potential use of E-counselling by men.

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Appendix 1
Informed Consent Form

Study to Examine the Potential Usefulness of E-counselling

I am undertaking a study to examine the views of a sample of males on E-counselling, that is, counselling provided over the Internet.

You will be asked to participate in an interview about E-counselling and in particular, you will be invited to comment on a series of issues relating to your:

- Preferences for communicating about personal issues
- Use of the Internet – frequency, type of use
- Potential benefits of face-to-face and Internet-based interactions to discuss personal issues
- Considerations in using the Internet to discuss personal issues
- Previous use of the Internet either to seek information about or help with personal issues
- Any ethical considerations.

In addition, you will be asked to provide some basic personal and demographic information in relation to their age and family circumstances.

The interview should take about 30-40 minutes and will be conducted at a meeting room in the School of Psychology at the University of Canberra.

I will be taking notes of the interview so that the content can be transcribed later.

Participants' responses to the interview questions will be analysed by qualitative methods. All information will be kept confidential and not released for any purpose.

I am seeking volunteers to participate in the study.

You can withdraw from the study at any time if you wish to do so.

If you experience any distress in responding to the questions, you could seek support/advice from the University of Canberra's Counselling Centre (Phone: 62012351).

If you agree to participate in the study, please complete and sign the Informed Consent Form (copy attached).

Study to Examine the Potential Usefulness of E-counselling

I have read and understood the information provided in the Informed Consent Form regarding the study to examine the potential usefulness of E-counselling.

I agree to participate in the study.

Name:

Signature:

Date:

Appendix 2

Interview Schedule

Interview Schedule: Study to Examine the Potential Usefulness of E-counselling

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. The major aim of the questions that I will be asking is to seek your views about the E-counselling, that is, counselling that is provided over the Internet.

The interview should take about 30-40 minutes.

I will be taking notes of the interview so that the content can be transcribed later.

If at any time you decide that you wish not to answer a particular question or you wish not to participate further please let me know. You do not need to give me an explanation about why you've decided not to continue.

If in answering any of the questions there are matters raised for you that require further discussion, please consult the University Counselling Centre (phone: 62012351).

Issues

I'd like to ask you to imagine that you were seeking counselling for a personal problem. Thinking about this situation, I'd like you to comment on six sets of issues. We'll take them one at a time.

- Preferences for communicating about personal issues.
- Use of the Internet – frequency, type of use
- Potential benefits of face-to-face and Internet-based interactions to discuss personal issues.
- Considerations in using the Internet to discuss personal issues.
- Previous use of the Internet either to seek information about or help with personal issues.
- Any ethical considerations in relation to E-counselling.
- Possible age and gender differences relating to E-counselling.

Would you like to add anything else?

Background Information

Could you please tell me:

- How old you are?
- Your relationship status?

- About the situation you presently live in?

Results

The results from the study will be used to inform the preparation of a thesis in the area of Counselling Psychology. The results will be analysed using standard qualitative methods to determine any patterns in the findings. All information will be kept confidential and not released for any purpose.

If you are interested in the findings from this study, a copy of the report will be available on request once completed.

Conclusion

Thank you again for participating.