

## **The Dawn of E-Counseling in Nigeria: Issues and Challenges**

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### **Abstract**

With the advent of internet services and its spread to every facet of life, the counselling profession is not left behind. The application of computer technology to counselling procedures is gradually creeping into every society and resisting change in Nigeria, will leave us behind. The traditional face to face, office visits will be partially disappearing with time though not entirely replaced by computerized counselling known as e-counselling or online counselling. E- Counselling as a functional approach to the counseling profession, should be embraced by every country. This approach is welcomed in developed countries for its relevance and Nigeria is expected to join the band wagon. This paper therefore explains the concept of e-counselling and the characteristics of the consumers. It highlights the benefits that can be accrued from this mode of counselling and x-rays how it works. Furthermore, it discusses the issues and challenges facing its inception in Nigeria. It is also the concern of the paper that any establishment or licensed counsellor that wants to use e-counselling should consider issues as competence of the counsellors, counselees, the qualities of the counsellors that can engage in e-counselling amongst others. In conclusion, the paper suggests some recommendations for the way forward.

**Introduction**

The use of computers in virtually all aspects of human activities is rapidly expanding. In fact, there is hardly any activity of life in the world today that is not involved with the use of computer. According to Onuekwusi and Onuekwusi (2010), the use of computers appear to be more pronounced in the field of education as it is used in teaching, learning and evaluation processes. Supporting this, Singh cited in Ukegbu and Udechukwu (2011) admitted that computer technology has impacted on education what he called the administrative application of computers and the instructional situations of computer applications in the fields of budgeting and monitoring of finances, keeping students records, maintaining statistics, students billing, preparation of payroll, bill and date ledger, mailing of scores, and monitoring material production register. He also enumerated other benefits of its use to include pre-testing of students' knowledge on enrolment, planning and printing individualized programmes, monitoring students' progress and compiling test and scores which could be stored in the computer. The introduction and use of computers for counseling which is part of educational services in Nigeria should not be a 'taboo' or an exception as this has long been functioning in advanced countries. Distance communication between a therapist and a client is not a new concept as the great psychologist; Sigmund Freud utilized letters extensively to communicate with his clients in his time.

E-counselling/therapy is a term that has been coined to describe the process of interacting with a counselor/therapist online in an ongoing series of conversations overtime. It means deciding to explore deep thoughts and feelings and share them with someone who cares, who will listen and try to help online. It means meeting a counselor for personal counseling or advice from the privacy of your own computer. E-counselling holds the potential to provide high quality health and wellness care and represents a vehicle through which clients can access counselors who are unlicensed, unregulated and who may or may not have the training and education that is essential to ethical practice, (Alleman; Robson & Robson cited in Pamela & Patrick, 2006). This indicates that e-counselling really demands specially trained and skilled, professional counsellor.

In Nigeria, everyone is becoming conversant with cellular phones and their associated text messages, email and subsequently becoming computer literate and many need counselling. They should be introduced to e-counselling as this has enormous benefits as people suffer time constraint for face to face counseling.

In this paper, attempts are made to discuss the following: the concept- e-counselling, the characteristics of its consumers, highlighting the benefits/advantages of this mode of counseling, how it works, the issues and challenges facing its introduction in Nigeria and recommendations for the way forward.

**A. The Concept, E-counselling:**

This implies electronic counseling, counseling that takes place through internet connection. E-counselling is the provision of professional counseling services via the internet. It happens when a professional counselor or therapist talks with a client over the internet to render emotional support, mental health advice or some other professional services. It goes with many connotations like online counseling/therapy, internet counseling, e-mail counseling, web counseling, e-therapy, tele-therapy or cyber-therapy. It is also known as 'tele-presence' which Lombard and Dillon, cited in Pamela and Patrick (2006) described as "the illusion that a mediated experience is not mediated" which produces the feeling of being in someone's presence without sharing a physical space. These services are offered through email, internet

phone (voice-over-IP), real-time chat and/or video conferencing. This is a potentially challenging method of counseling practice that demands extra mile training for the traditional professional counselor. E-counselors are fully and professionally qualified and experienced in face to face counseling with additional training and experience in providing counseling by email. According to Metonia (2011), it is a viable alternative source of help when traditional psychotherapy is not accessible. It is effective, private and conducted by skilled, qualified, ethical professionals. For some people, it is the only way they can get help from a professional therapist though it takes time and does not happen in one e-mail exchange. E-counseling upgrades counsellor's proficiency. It is important to note that e-counseling cannot be considered psychotherapy and can never replace traditional therapy though can be used in conjunction with traditional counselling that involves office visits. It is not all problems that can be handled online and online therapy is not appropriate for everyone, for instance, mental illness cannot be diagnosed or treated online but guidance and advice can be given to people experiencing problems in relationships, work and/or life. In foreign countries, clients use video conferencing, synchronous and asynchronous e-mails with professional psychologists in place of or in addition to face to face meetings. Cherry (2008) in About.com Guide supported this by expressing that online therapy can take place through email, video conferencing, online chat, internet phone or via other online methods. She also posited that online therapy is a relatively new development in counseling in which a therapist/counselor provides psychological advice and support over the internet. E-counseling can take place in real-time such as in phone conversations and online chatrooms or in a time –delayed format such as through e-mail messages.

Pamela and Patrick (2006) expressed that e-counseling professions have ventured into the computer mediated world of online counseling, leveraging the potential to extend access to counseling services. This service is seen as a qualitative element of human interaction that is duplicated in a virtual environment and should be embraced in our country as it will be beneficial to everyone.

The primary tools for communicating in e-counseling therapy include e-mail, instant messaging (IM), real-time chat, internet phone and videoconferencing.

#### **B. Characteristics of e-counseling consumers:**

According to Pamela and Patrick (2006), users of online counseling are expected to have some characteristics which must be there to enhance the practice. They include the following-

- **Access to technology:** Any individual who wants to engage in e-counseling service must be computer literate. There must also be the availability of computer technology that will support communication with the provider.
- **Comfort with online communication:** The individual must also have a degree of comfort in using computer. For effective e-counseling communication, the individual should be very conversant with typing on the keyboard or/and making use of voice activated software.
- **Ability to express feelings and ideas in text format:** The client should have the ability of expressing feeling and thoughts in text format at a distance and outside a face to face encounter. He should have the ability to compose thoughts, review text, and revise text if so desired or “pause” between writing and sending messages to the counselor. Pamela and Patrick (2006) were of the view that the time to privately think through expressions before communicating them to the counselor may be a significant attraction to online counseling especially for individuals who need greater control over the process of interaction or who

may be struggling with issues of shame, perceived stigma or embarrassment about the topics being discussed.

- Convenience of online interaction: E-counselling has removed time constraints and geographical barriers as it is an any-time, any-where activity that is supported by portable technology like laptop, handset, etc and the availability of internet connectivity for sending and receiving communications.
- Disinhibition of online interaction: According to Alleman cited in Pamela and Patrick (2006), in the online counseling context, the level of disclosure by clients to the counselor can be remarkable. The anonymity i.e. not real name, not face to face of the interaction facilitates the sense of personal freedom and privacy. This frees the client to talk to the counselor with a sense of personal safety and security.
- Efficiency of online counseling/therapy: The ability to engage in e-counselling relationship at any time of the day or night avoids delays from travelling to an office and is cost effective as well.

**C. Benefits of e-counselling:**

A typical voluntary feedback from a client recorded by Speyer and Zack (2010) gives a clear advantage and experience of recipients of e-counselling which goes thus:

*“After my first exchange with my e-counsellor, I knew that I had made the right decision. He wrote in a tone so similar to mine that I immediately felt comfortable and dropped any inhibitions that I may have had. I was able to share thoughts and feelings with him that I know I wouldn’t have dared express in a face to face session. It was really like writing to an old friend. A really wise friend who knows when to challenge you and when to support you. I never knew that someone on the other side of my computer could mean so much to me as my e-counselor.”*

According to Speyer and Zack (2010), the benefits of e-counselling are enormous. They include the following-

- Online counseling offers convenience and remote access: It saves clients with limited mobility, time restrictions or anyone seeking help who is unable to see a counselor in person. It allows the client or patient to attend sessions at a higher rate than traditional sessions. Online counseling does not bother about keeping appointments at a specified time and place. The number of missed appointments is much less than with in-person therapy. There is no geographical barrier or time zones and no need to meet receptionists in the office.
- Online counseling provides help to many who may not otherwise receive it. People in the remote areas, those travelling or re-locating in foreign countries, the physically disabled or housebound (or their caregivers) and those who are too busy in their work schedules benefit from the service. It is helpful when one is away from campus or if he has limited daytime availability.
- There is perceived privacy: The counsellor’s physical absence reduces or even eliminates the client’s initial shame or need to “save face” while presenting a problem. Some individuals feel that a stigma is attached to visiting a counselor while some may be phobic, trapped in abusive situations or merely shy and afraid to face someone. It is good for those who feel uncomfortable attending traditional face to face support. There is an “inhibiting effect” as the client is not seen in person. The client feels free to express himself as he likes without reservations.

- The psyche of the person is free for therapeutic self-reflection in many other ways: Speyer and Zack (2010) are of the view that online counselors have found that text-based self-exposure can have the effect of inducing a high degree of intimacy and honesty from the first exchange of emails. They opined that beyond providing a sense of privacy, the disinhibiting effect of not being seen also allows the client to quickly hone in the core issue. In fact, clients present themselves in a 'naked' way, without presenting defenses.

- Once the relationship has been established, Suler cited in Speyer and Zack (2010) expressed that both parties enter into what he termed, the "zone of reflection" as the time-delayed e-mail exchanges slows down the process and allows both parties to pay close attention to their own thoughts and feelings while still engaged in a dialogue.

- The client's inclination to ventilate is naturally channeled by the need to frame thoughts in writing: The composing of mails that involves re-reading and reviewing what is written on both sides naturally leads to the client's ability to externalize and re-frame thoughts, thereby increasing objectivity.

In the act of e-mailing, new associations, memories and insights arise in the bid to 'get it down in writing': It is believed that in an in-person session, a client can talk for an hour and not still reveal the main issue while an online counseling client may sit in silence for an hour and say more in one typed line than he has revealed to anyone.

- The client enjoys a certain degree of ownership in the process: The client sets the pace, tone, volume and parameters of self-disclosure without facing threats or leads either positive or negative. The client is in control of the 'send' button and all these encourage him to feel free and reveal his inner self.

- With time, the client can always (even years ahead) re-read, rehearse, and reinforce the solutions and resolutions it contains: Speyer and Zack (2010) opined that when the client has "words to hold onto", hope is established. Many clients end up carrying their counseling sessions' printout in their pockets, purses, and briefcases which they fall back to. In this way, online counseling becomes an open-ended, ongoing session with 'healing words' accessible at any time.

- Another advantage of e-counselling as enumerated by Speyer and Zack (2010) include the accountability facilitated by the medium. This makes expert and peer consultation, as well as ongoing supervision, available "mid-session".

#### **D. How e-counselling works.**

Because there is no virtual connection, clients feel safe as they are not seen. The e-counselling works most by email, some by chat, a few by web massage system, video conferencing and internet phone. The therapist usually responds to client's first contact by e-mail at least. to arrange further interactions. E-mail is the most common way of interaction online. This is because both counselor and client have to be online at the same time and they can take time with their thought and write extensively. E-mail is usually preferred by people who like to write and people who have very busy schedules.

Web-based message systems are also used because they offer the best possible security. The correspondence is not saved on the computer so, it is safe from prying eyes. Negatively, the client cannot retrieve the correspondence for future use.

Chat is done 'live' and real time. It is usually preferred by those who want right-now response from the therapist. It is a very slow way of communicating and if the therapist is charging by the minute, it becomes very expensive for the client.

In video conferencing, the therapist sees the client on the screen and therapists believe it is most ideal mode to interact with clients online. This is because it gives them the opportunity to get more information and probably more helpful to the client.

Metanoia (2011) was of the view that in the entire situation, the counselor cannot help if the following conditions are not met.

- The client is not comfortable using the internet.
- The client does not like to write (unless he uses video or internet phone).
- The client conceal important information from the therapist because it involves in-depth self-exploration, and
- The client is not willing to fully embrace the process of growth and change.

Before the onset of online therapy, the individual client should think about issues such as confidentiality, ethical and legal issues as well as the qualifications of the online therapist. On the other hand, there should be voluntary feedback from the client after cases are concluded.

### **E. Issues and challenges facing the introduction of e-counselling in Nigeria.**

E-counselling is a new and beneficial method of helping individuals work through life's challenges and issues without being in the same physical proximity of their therapists. Introduction of the service in Nigeria is no doubt, a gigantic venture. As such, there are numerous constraints facing its delivery. They include the following-

- **Lack of trained e-counsellors:** In Nigeria, there are professionally trained and licensed counselors but three quarters of the population are not yet conversant with the skills and rudiments desired for internet counseling. A counselor cannot be expected to counsel or operate on the website when he is not acquainted with the computer. Implementing e-counselling in Nigeria means that every professional counselor/therapist must be computer literate and must have the desired extra training for counseling clients online. There is also lack of counselor competence in integrating e-counselling in their services.
- **Insufficient clients:** The numbers of people seeking for e-counseling are very minute in Nigeria. Importantly too, most clients are not computer literate too. Professional counselors may be willing to try e-counselling but there is a notable lack of consumer demand as expressed by Cherry, (2012).
- **Lack of e-counselling awareness:** Majority of the Nigeria populace have not heard about e-counselling not to talk of experiencing it. E-counselling has not actually been introduced in Nigeria and individuals have not recognized online counseling. Clients have not found it easy and are very naïve to meet counselors face to face not to talk of having online connection.
- **Financial constraint:** E-counselling involves the use of ICT related components which is never available to all counselors and not also affordable by every individual in Nigeria. This simply means that it will be long to have e-counselling services experienced and generalized in Nigeria. People may find it difficult to foot the bill of e-counselling charges that they will always resort to informal advice seeking.
- **Mishran (2007) expressed that the advantages of ICT are out of the reach of most developing countries, Nigeria inclusive.** Where power and telecommunication facilities are poor, resources and well trained personnel are also scarce and computers that can be used in service delivery are still problematic, everyone is limited from benefiting from e-counselling.
- **Poor power supply:** Power supply throughout Nigeria is epileptic and the situation worsens daily while e-counselling depends entirely on good network facilitated by electricity.

The power network usually disrupts communication and actual use of facilities for e-counselling.

- **Limited service:** It is not all cases that can be handled online. Cases involving threat to life such as violence, suicidal ideation, serious substance abuse or an immediate and urgent crisis are not handled online though online counseling can be used to initiate the relationship. In many settings according to Speyer and Zack (2010), web-based intake procedures are designed expressly to screen out clients who would be better served offline.
- **Time-delayed allows reflection but can also breed misunderstanding:** The absence of spontaneous response and clarification in online counseling is usually a constraint as both parties are trapped in delay from both ends.
- **Compulsory professional demand:** Counsellors must work within ethical parameters and advise clients regarding limitations. Both parties must have trust and confidence in the medium for it to work well.
- **Computer literacy:** The counselor and client must be comfortable with the technological platform used in the online counselling process. Both should possess sufficient technical expertise to cope with skills required for the service. Both must be reasonably good writers and typists. They must be comfortable with what is essentially a letter-writing process. They must be able to express their thoughts and feelings clearly and interpret messages carefully.

#### **F. The way forward.**

E-counselling has been working in other countries of the world and can also work in Nigeria. It only requires will, awareness and the facilities. It is therefore pertinent to recommend what should be done to ensure successful introduction of e-counselling in Nigeria.

- Counselors are the key figures in arranging and carrying out the e-counselling service and message so government should ensure that institutions that train guidance counselors anticipate new development and prepare prospective counselors for their future roles by enshrining e-counselling and making it compulsory in their training programmes.
- Counselors can learn from others. Government should organize in-service training programme for counselors on e-counselling and even send some to experience and learn it in developed countries where the service has been functioning effectively. They can go for the extra knowledge and acquisition of skills required for the practice.
- Online counselors are usually viewed as well meaning, well intentioned and committed to upholding ethical and legal standards of practice for their discipline so, counsellors should be challenged to function up to the expectations of the profession.
- There should be public awareness about the service therefore government should throw public enlightenment programmes to ensure its publicity and letting people know about its benefits. The public should be encouraged to boast the provision and accessing of e-counselling service.
- If this becomes successful, government should regulate the fee for such service to avoid extortion on the part of the clients and subsequent abuse of the service.
- Government should also make internet service affordable and accessible to everyone at reduced rate so that people can access facilities at any time.
- The issue of electricity and power failure plus problem of interconnectivity should also be addressed by the government and philanthropists so as to facilitate the service.
- In-service counsellors should be compelled to upgrade themselves in e-counselling.

- Pamela and Patrick (2006) noted that in America, the National Board for Certified Counsellors (NBCC) has Standards of Practice for the Ethical Practice of Webcounselling and there is yet another set of standards of practice for internet delivered counseling available through the International Society for Mental Health Online (ISMHO) that is available on the web (<http://www.ismho.org>). These can be replicated in Nigeria while it is followed up for proper implementation and utilization.

### **Conclusion**

It is a fact that the standpoint of using e-counselling is crucial in life, everyone should not only be expected to be able to obtain knowledge but also master and explore ICT applications and their utilization to facilitate online interaction. Everyone is not supposed to be out of date but open their mind to accept, accommodate and utilize current technology since this is a veritable tool for globalization. The face of counseling is changing and Nigeria should adapt to the change. The more we hold onto “the old way is the only way”, the more obvious it becomes that we have an unhealthy fear for change. The problems of utilization of e-counselling notwithstanding, the need, significance and prospects of using it in handling peoples’ problems should direct our focus. Counselors should therefore be able to understand the concept.

Our world is changing and we need to be prepared to change with it, the world of counselors should be prepared to make adjustments as well. Traditional counseling cannot be replaced though but a combination of both is more ideal. Counselors today need to be fully prepared to assist with the counseling delivery of tomorrow which will certainly be different from today’s methods of counseling.

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