

WHAT IS ONLINE COUNSELLING?

Online Counselling refers to the delivery of any mental and behavioural health service in an indirect setting through communication technologies such as the telephone, e-mail, synchronous chat, and video-conferencing (Mallen & Vogel, 2005)

Why Online Counselling?

- Convenience:**
 - Clients do not need to travel to agency
 - Increase motivation of clients to be involved
- Comfort of familiar settings:**
 - Less threatening
 - Clients feel more relaxed and willing to self-disclose
- Focused Attention on client:**
 - Less distractions can make it easier for practitioners to focus on session
- Increased privacy:**
 - Only practitioner and client know that they are attending the session
- Increased awareness of self & others**
 - Practitioner & client can self-monitor how they are expressing themselves
- Creativity:**
 - Use and explore new technology and opportunities in unfamiliar circumstances

AGENCY-RELATED CONSIDERATIONS

- 1 Management of risks & safety issues**
 - Have a robust SOP within the organisation to bridge communication in the event of an emergency/crisis
 - Emergency contact number should be obtained during intake before session
- 2 Provision of clinical supervision**
 - Prepare staff before they start providing online counselling regardless of staff's level of experience
 - Review email/text exchanges between staff & client during supervision
- 3 Assessment of client suitability**
 - Ensure that client is not at imminent risk (e.g. suicidality, abuse, etc.)
 - No mental health issues that might render online counselling unsafe for the client
 - Client's access to safe and private physical space to attend the counselling session
- 4 Agency and/or funders' requirements**
 - Clear direction between agency and practitioner on purpose and requirements of online counselling
 - Understanding of intentions behind these requirements help guide practice

CLIENT-RELATED CONSIDERATIONS



Implementation of a clear session structure

Explaining the session structure to the client can alleviate concerns & anxiety, and clarify expectations about online counselling



Adapt assessment & thought process to suit online format

In lieu of body language, practitioners should openly share their thought processes with the client to conceptualise issues & needs clearly online



Informed consent as good governance

Ensure compliance with PDPA at all times, and seek consent when using online recordings for supervision purposes

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METHODS OF ONLINE COUNSELLING



Video-Conferencing

- Provides visual feedback for practitioner & client to self-monitor and regulate expressions
- Convenience of access can reduce withdrawal/no-show from services
- Requires client to have a private location for video conferences



Phone Counselling

- Greater sense of control for client (can terminate call when necessary)
- Greater anonymity for clients increases their willingness to self-disclose
- Requires practitioner to be more directive in exploring options



Email/Text Messaging

- Client can reread emails again - impact of *caring letters* (Luxton et al., 2014)
- Nuances in language without non-verbal cues can lead to misinterpretation or loss of meaning

CHARACTERISTICS OF PLATFORM

PLATFORM SPECIFIC TIPS

- Clarify expectations and limits of online counselling
- Set house rules about use of platform (e.g. no photo/video recording without consent)
- Discuss rules around the use of other devices during sessions
- Be explicit in verbalising thoughts in lieu of visible body language

- Acknowledge emotions
- Ask tentative but direct questions (e.g. "I'm wondering if you have ever thought of harming yourself?")
- Manage silence carefully
- Give empathic responses and assurance that you are present in moments of silence

- Use short, simple sentences
- Use tentative words such as "seems" "feels like" "might"
- Reflect client's perception as perception, not fact (e.g. "It seems like you feel abandoned v.s. You are abandoned")

GENERAL TIPS



- Be verbally active to demonstrate that you are present
- Be attentive to both emotional and practical concerns
- Be directive in your questioning and guidance
- Close-ended questioning or establishing code words/phrases to indicate lack of safety can be helpful if client is near perpetrator

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ONLINE COUNSELLING: WORKING WITH CHILDREN

CONSIDERATIONS WHEN WORKING WITH CHILDREN



Informed consent from parent

Check if parents are comfortable with child being seen by the practitioner. Online counselling is feasible for children who are able to adequately focus during sessions



Whether the parent should be present during sessions

The presence of the parent/s can be helpful in facilitating the session, but can also hinder sessions if clear expectations are not set and agreed upon.



Making referrals to other services

Be ready to refer the child to more appropriate services where necessary.



Initial engagement can be scary for child

Use engagement techniques to start conversation/build emotional safety (e.g. ask them about their favourite toy).

TIPS FOR WORKING WITH CHILDREN



USE AGE APPROPRIATE LANGUAGE

Use language that is easily understood by the child.



DO NOT TALK DOWN TO THEM

Treat your child clients the same way that you would your adult clients.



REFLECT THE CLIENT'S PERSPECTIVE

Parents may read their child's emails or ask them about their sessions, hence it is important to state clearly when something is your client's opinion



DO NOT TAKE SIDES

Do not be too quick to criticise or dismiss potential resources (e.g. teachers, parents or peers).

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ONLINE COUNSELLING: ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

ENSURE INCLUSIVITY

Ensure that vulnerable groups are not excluded due to lack of access



Assist the elderly who may not be familiar with using technology



Be aware that some clients may be slower at typing/reading from a screen. Do adjust sessions accordingly



Explore alternatives such as phone or text for clients with unstable internet connection



Provide alternatives and adapt services for Persons with Disabilities (e.g. Visual or hearing impairment)



Address considerations related to working with children (Refer to Infographic #3)

SEEK CLARITY IN AGENCY SOP



Provide boundaries for practice and between the personal and professional self

- Designate a specific area at home for work
- Use organisation Zoom accounts & office phone numbers
- Agencies should set boundaries between workers and clients such as replying text messages only during office hours, except for critical cases
- Provide training to staff to ensure competency
- Refer to Infographic #6



Provide clarity on escalation procedures for emergency/crisis cases (e.g. informing supervisor, involvement of police)

ENSURE PRIVACY



Privacy for the practitioner

- Use virtual backgrounds to protect practitioner's private space



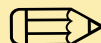
Privacy for the client

- As clients may not have private space, allow them to turn off their videos if needed
- Seek consent when recording session for supervision

UPHOLD SAFE PRACTICE



Dress appropriately in sessions with clients



Write simply and clearly

- Use appropriate language
- Avoid acronyms and jargon



Be mindful of tone used

- Written communication does not convey tonal variations as clearly as verbal communication

ENSURE SAFE PRACTICE



Maintain contact regularly through various modes

- Remote means to support face-to-face (e.g. zoom)



Ensure client confidentiality

- Use passwords to encrypt documents with client data



Seek regular supervision to explore unfamiliar experiences of working online



Maintain connection with client's support network for crisis support (e.g. neighbours, family nearby)



Ask to sight vulnerable members of the family during sessions and be alert of signs of breach of safety plans (e.g. bruises on child)

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ONLINE COUNSELLING: CHALLENGES & RESOURCES

CHALLENGES OF ONLINE COUNSELLING



Technological difficulties

- Poor WiFi connection
- Clients might struggle with technology and compatibility issues



Accessibility increases client multi-tasking

- Clients might be easily distracted by work, chores or even social media



Suicidal or family violence risk

- Dealing with client disclosure when there is a lack of access to the client physically



More fluid boundaries

- Less control over client's movements and environment
- Client & practitioner's physical locations might be exposed



Privacy concerns

- Difficulty in finding a private space to attend counselling sessions
- Potential for clients to take photos/videos of the session without practitioner's knowledge

MANAGING CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

- ☑ Be the one to raise privacy & safety issues
- ☑ Prepare ahead of sessions with safety plans and coping skills
- ☑ Be flexible & willing to make exceptions
- ☑ Be creative in finding solutions
- ☑ Acknowledge limitations and manage expectations

TECHNICAL RESOURCES

Common platforms for online counselling:

- Doxy.me
- Zendesk
- Zoom
- Skype
- Cisco Webex

Tips for using Zoom:

- Hiding self-view (for self-conscious clients)
 - <https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/115001077226-Hiding-or-showing-my-video-on-my-display>
- Virtual Backgrounds:
 - <https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/210707503-Virtual-Background>

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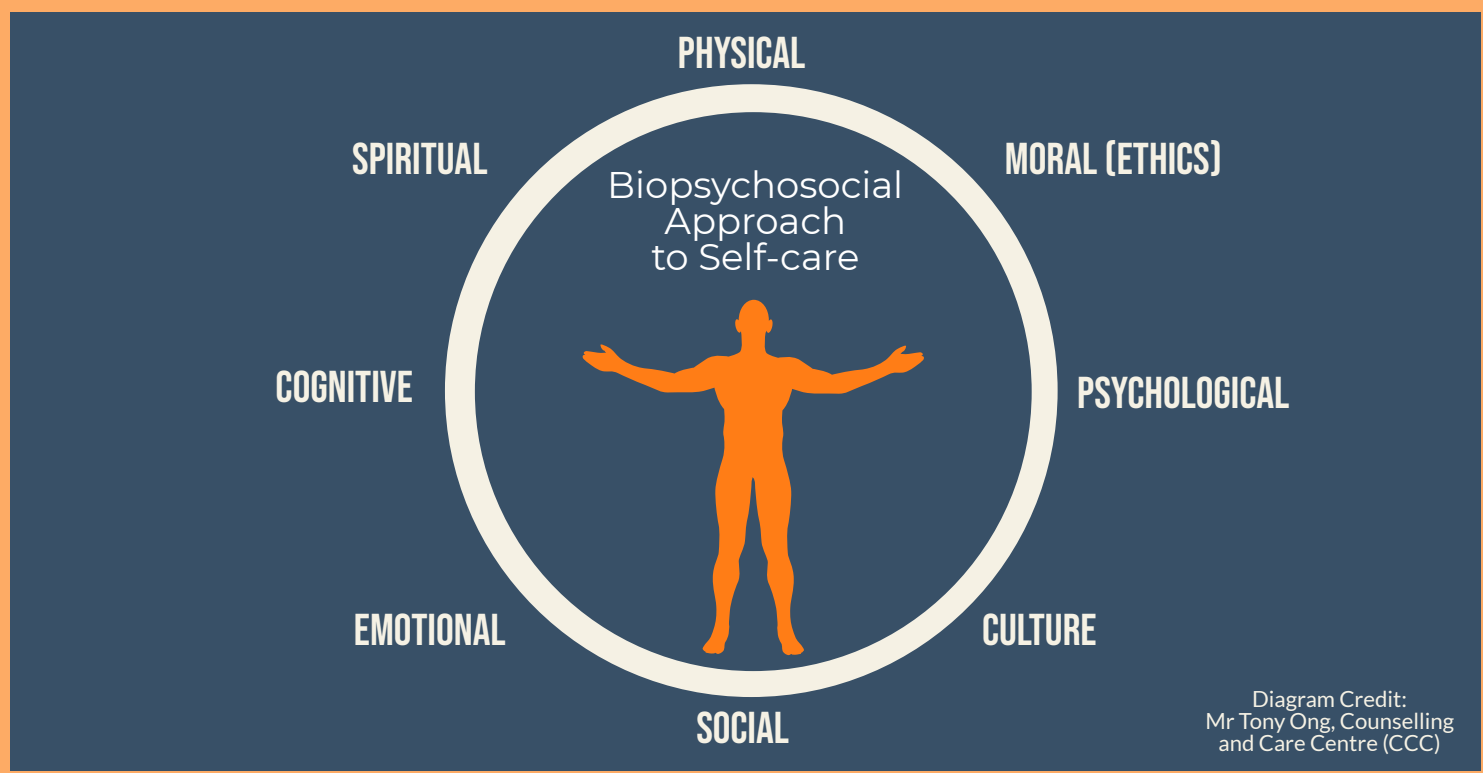
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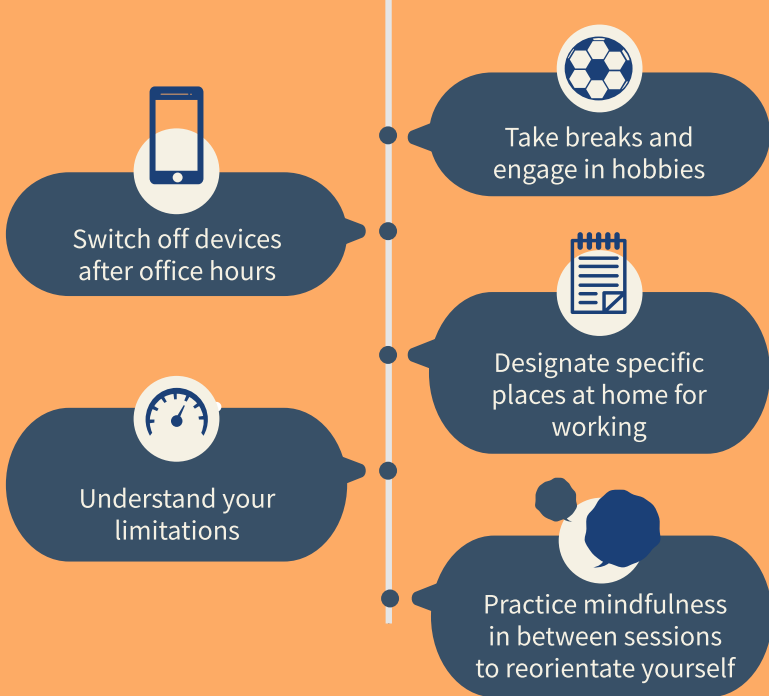
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ONLINE COUNSELLING: IMPORTANCE OF SELF-CARE



Setting Boundaries & Practising Self-Care



Considerations for Supervision

- For Practitioners
-  Speak to your supervisor if you need additional emotional support or training on using unfamiliar techniques
 -  Seek consultation with supervisor either during or immediately after emergencies/crises
- For Supervisors
-  Check in on your supervisees regularly to find out how they are coping
 -  Listen to what's happening to your supervisees instead of merely hearing them

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