E-counselling at the University of Johannesburg:
A Pilot Programme Case Study

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Abstract
With the advent of the Internet and related Web resources and the integration thereof into our everyday life has made it impossible for social work practitioners to ignore the possibilities and challenges that would develop within practice conditions. Practitioners more and more realise that changes due to technological advancement will continue to have a substantial impact on the human services, since information is the key resource used in service delivery. This article reports on some of the results of a PhD study which aimed to design, develop and test an online counselling programme within a naturalised setting via Psychological Services and Career Development (PsyCaD) at the University of Johannesburg. A developmental case study research design, including both exploratory and applied dimensions, was employed and the pilot intervention that ensued was coined the LATS WELL-BeING counselling programme. It encompassed a four session asynchronous e-mail based service and information regarding the experiences of both clients and practitioners were recorded via direct questionnaires and online surveys. The study enabled the researcher to gather information about the application of the online counselling programme and the interaction

between the e-counsellors and actual clients within a naturalised setting.

Keywords: E-counselling, WELL-BeING, LATS, Internet technologies.

1. Introduction

With the advent of the Internet and related Web resources (Brown 2011) and the integration thereof into our everyday life has made it impossible for social work practitioners to ignore the possibilities and challenges that would develop within practice conditions (Speyer & Zack 2003:11). Practitioners more and more realise that changes due to technological advancement will continue to have a substantial impact on the human services, since information is the key resource used in service delivery (Shoech 2002). Kraus, Zack & Stricker (2004:xxxviii) described these developments as, the 'birth of a new field' a 'new psychology'. The last decade has seen the rise in the use of technology in social work practice. More and more it's found that clinical interventions such as psychotherapy make use of telephones, interactive video, and the Web (Parker-Oliver & Demiris 2006:127). As technology-based expectations grow, professions are challenged with how to manage the challenges associated with these tools and resources, and especially so for a discipline traditionally using face-to-face interaction.

This paper is an abstract from the research done for a PhD thesis completed at the University of Johannesburg in 2011. The study which aimed to design, develop and test an online counselling programme within a naturalised setting to gather information regarding the experiences of both clients and practitioners.

2. E-counselling

The New Dictionary of Social Work (1995:15) describes counselling as 'the interviewing procedure aimed at guiding the client towards insight with a view of promoting his social functioning'. Over the last decade online counselling has emerged as an important alternative to face-to-face counselling (Brown 2011) as there is an emerging generation for whom interaction via computer can be described as "common, natural and a fully accepted means of communication" (Boer, 2008:13).

There are various terms that are becoming synonymous with online counselling which include 'e-counselling', 'e-therapy', 'virtual therapy', 'Web counselling', 'online-therapy', and 'cyber counselling'.

According to Abbott, Klein and Ciechomski (2008:360) online therapy or '*E-therapy typically involves the interaction between a consumer and a therapist (e-therapist) via the Internet … The interaction between the e-therapist and consumer frequently occurs via time-delayed means of communication, such as by e-mail, but can sometimes include simultaneous communication, such as chat-based text exchanges, videoconferencing, and virtual reality technology*'.

For the purpose of this article, e-counselling will refer to the use of structured, asynchronous, e-mail exchanges within a short-term counselling framework between clients and e-counsellors with the purpose of providing guidance, facilitation of and coaching on presenting clinical matters.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The research done for this study had both exploratory and applied dimensions with an intervention research design (Mouton 2003:53-54). An intervention research design included experimental social innovation, social research and development, developmental research, model development research and behavioural community research. The most important characteristic of intervention research is the fact that it draws mainly from the behavioural sciences research.

One of the most important benefits of intervention investigation is the ability to provide more established links between research and practice. Faul (1995) in De Vos (2000:385) describes six phases in intervention research:

1. Problem analysis and project planning
2. Information gathering and synthesis
3. Design
4. Early development and pilot testing
5. Evaluation and advanced development
6. Dissemination.

For the PhD study, the process was followed up to the early development and pilot-testing phase. As method of observation the researcher used direct and online questionnaire surveys. The online survey mainly comprised multiple-choice questions (quantitative data) and the questionnaires mainly open ended questions (qualitative data).

The study set out to understand two main aspects when conducting online counselling:

1.   Gain an understanding of patient/client satisfaction when utilizing online technology as an alternative to direct counselling practice.
2.   Gather information regarding provider comfort when practicing online.

The direct questionnaire was developed to gather information regarding the e-counsellors' experience of delivering online counselling. The counsellor respondents were to be questioned within a pre- and post-test manner. Questions included aspects regarding their attitude towards using and knowledge regarding the method of the online counselling.

The e-counsellor qualitative data was analysed with the qualitative computerized programme MAXQDA10. For the numeric, quantitative data that was gathered from the online survey (Mouton 2003:108) the services of Statcon (a department rendering professional statistical data analysis) at the University of Johannesburg was used.

In order to gather information about the application of the online counselling programme and the interaction between an e-counsellor and an actual client within a naturalised setting, a cross-sectional, case study approach was applied. This choice was made as it allowed the

researcher to gather information in a purposeful manner in order to gain in-depth information regarding the further development of ideas (De Vos 2000:125).

The application of the online counselling programme was done within the student counselling and guidance setting at the University of Johannesburg (UJ), Psychological Services and Career Development (PsyCaD). The researcher identified and negotiated with PsyCaD who, at the time, was interested to explore online counselling as a part of their service delivery repertoire.

The pilot samples consisted of two groups, the first, career and guidance counsellors, psychometrics, social workers, educational and clinical psychologists, and the second, random students utilizing the online counselling programme within a specific time frame from October 2009 to September 2010:

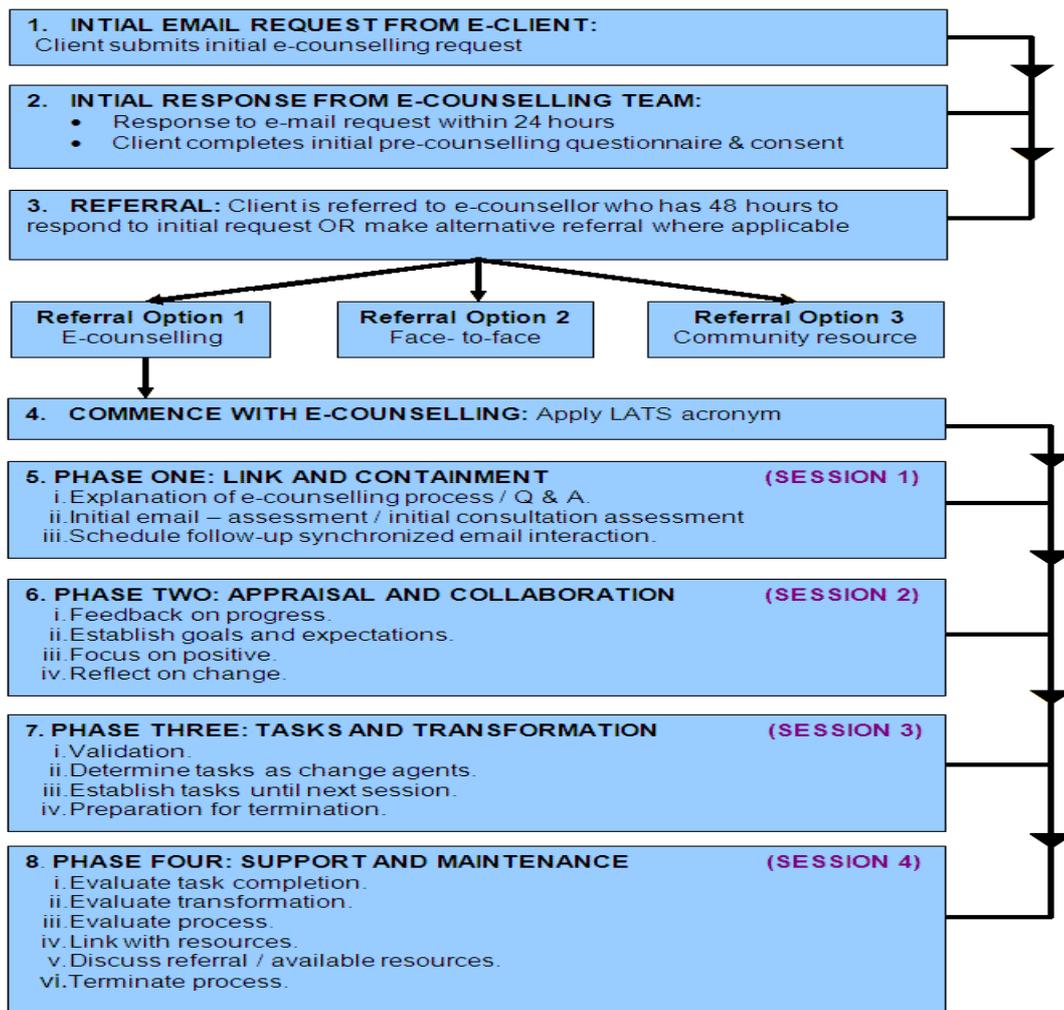- **E-counsellors (PsyCaD Staff Members)**

This group consisted of 30 professionals (career and guidance counsellors, psychometrics, and educational and clinical psychologists) who were full-time staff members and/or interns at PsyCaD during the period of January 2009 - October 2010. These professionals took part in four, different, three hour training workshops on the LATS WELL-BeING e-counselling programme during April and October 2009.

- **E-counselling Clients (UJ Students Who Made Use of the Service)**

The service was made available to all registered students of the University of Johannesburg. The sample group consisted of students who made use of the e-counselling programme. The programme was marketed and implemented as an additional facility to the existing services rendered by PsyCaD. The research outcome was totally dependent on the participation and willingness of students to utilize the online programme versus face-to-face services or other services rendered by PsyCaD. This was one of the unique features of this study, as participation was natural, anonymous and voluntary. Students were requested to complete two online surveys, one prior and on post their utilization of the e-counselling programme. A total of 35 students participated in the study during the timeframe of October 2009 and September 2010.

3.2 The E-counselling Process

The e-counselling programme use for this study was coined 'LATS WELL-BeING'. This pilot, a short-term online counselling programme, provided the clients with up to four e-mail exchanges with their e-counsellor, which the counsellor initiated after receiving the presenting issues and primary problem outlined in the clients' initial counselling request e-mail. The e-counselling programme specifically drew on the Four-session model developed for by Cedric M Speyer for the Warren Shepell Consultants (Centore 2006:47). The figure below is a representation of the process that was followed for the e-counselling programme.

Figure 1: The LATS WELL-BeING e-counselling process

1. INTIAL EMAIL REQUEST FROM E-CLIENT:
Client submits initial e-counselling request

2. INTIAL RESPONSE FROM E-COUNSELLING TEAM:
- Response to e-mail request within 24 hours
- Client completes initial pre-counselling questionnaire & consent

3. REFERRAL: Client is referred to e-counsellor who has 48 hours to respond to initial request OR make alternative referral where applicable

| **Referral Option 1** E-counselling | **Referral Option 2** Face- to-face | **Referral Option 3** Community resource |

4. COMMENCE WITH E-COUNSELLING: Apply LATS acronym

5. PHASE ONE: LINK AND CONTAINMENT   (SESSION 1)
  i. Explanation of e-counselling process / Q & A.
  ii. Initial email – assessment / initial consultation assessment
  iii. Schedule follow-up synchronized email interaction.

6. PHASE TWO: APPRAISAL AND COLLABORATION   (SESSION 2)
  i. Feedback on progress.
  ii. Establish goals and expectations.
  iii. Focus on positive
  iv. Reflect on change.

7. PHASE THREE: TASKS AND TRANSFORMATION   (SESSION 3)
  i. Validation.
  ii. Determine tasks as change agents.
  iii. Establish tasks until next session.
  iv. Preparation for termination.

8. PHASE FOUR: SUPPORT AND MAINTENANCE   (SESSION 4)
  i. Evaluate task completion.
  ii. Evaluate transformation.
  iii. Evaluate process.
  iv. Link with resources.
  v. Discuss referral / available resources.
  vi. Terminate process.

These phases are represented by the acronym LATS, although an individual e-mail leads to and anticipates the next exchange, that e-mail also ideally represents a self-sufficient or stand-alone therapeutic intervention. As each exchange takes place, the client is enabled to build on the LATS process in order to facilitate growth, change and development. The e-counsellor follows these guidelines as a therapeutic outline for the creation of both the e-mail text and the online counselling relationship.

Phase 1: Link and Containment (1st e-mail exchange)

The main goal of the first exchange was to demonstrate an emotional, empathic understanding of the client's presenting problem. The e-counsellor, therefore, needed to create a sense of understanding of the specific problem presented. In addition the first e-mail had the particular goal to normalize the client's behaviour, understanding the client's way of dealing with stress, emotional pain, conflict and crises.

Phase 2: Appraisal and Collaboration (2nd e-mail exchange)

In the second exchange it was important that the e-counsellor avoid being distracted by attractive detours and interesting diversions, which can cause the correspondence to wander

and get caught up in tangential issues. While maintaining the initial empathy, the e-counsellor revisited the difficult and often distressing circumstances in the client's life, from the point of view of the core issue. The second e-mail exchange gave the e-counsellor the opportunity for direct reinforcement, bridging, and task setting aspects of case management and has a re-motivational approach that may introduce readings and resource material, homework assignments, or behavioural coaching as advice. It is the affirmation of the client's capacity for self-help.

Phase 3: Tasking and Transformation (3rd e-mail exchange)
The third response from the e-counsellor was designed to confirm and validate positive transitions in the perception and/or behaviour that the client may be making at that stage in the correspondence. In assisting the client to view the issue differently, the e-counsellor focuses on the solutions that the client has applied. The e-counsellor then moves towards reaffirming and maintaining the new perspective and focuses on the goals that the client would like to achieve. The third e-mail also addresses the issue of termination and how the client will be able to maintain the changes. The e-counsellor assumes the role of coach by affirming to the client that they have the ability to be in control. Interventions shift toward action planning and specific behavioural tasks outside of therapy are discussed (Speyer 2005).

Phase 4: Support and Maintenance (4th e-mail exchange)
In the fourth and final exchange, client progress is summarised and validated against a background of unconditional positive regard for the person. The client's efforts towards issue resolution are celebrated, while the pursuit of continued growth and self-mastery are acknowledged. The client is reminded of the qualities contributing to the transition that has been made, and discussions on poetical relapses. Acknowledging the fact that he/she now has their own adaptive pattern and should continue by reading/ joining self-help groups, etc. formed the focus of the support and maintenance phase.

3.3 Results and Discussion of Survey

In the following sections is a discussion of some of the results from the research done for the PhD research project. In addition, some of these results have been presented at a conference.

3.3.1 Biographical Profile of the E-counsellors

The study was dependent on the willingness of professional staff from PsyCaD to participate in the project. These professionals consisted of representatives from various, different clinical professional backgrounds. From table 1 it is clear that the largest amount (79%) of participants were registered psychologists.

**Table 1:** Distribution of e-counsellors' professional discipline

PROFESSION	%	Cumulative %
Health Care professional	6	6
Social Worker	4	10

| Psychologist	79	89
Psychometrist	11	100
TOTAL	**100**	

From an academic qualifications point, most (61%) were qualified at a master's degree level and 7% on doctorate level. Most of the professionals had between 4 to 6 years practice experienced with 21% more than 11 years (figure 2). The average age of participating PsyCaD staff was 35 years with 29% of the participant falling within the 30-35 age category. The gender distribution reflected 29% males and 71% females.

Most (89%) of these professionals mainly use face-to-face counselling in their current clinical work, with 7% making use of telephone counselling. A large group of the participants (86%) made use of general online driven activities at least once a day, which would indicate that there was a high level of familiarity regarding the use of online technology for example 32% once every month make use of Internet Banking, 86% once a day send and receive emails and 43% once a day doing information searches. Participants indicated a 57% rating of good to excellent regarding their proficiency regarding the use of emails and 46% rated a good to excellent regarding their use of the Internet (figure 3).

Figure 2: Professional practice experience of e-counsellors
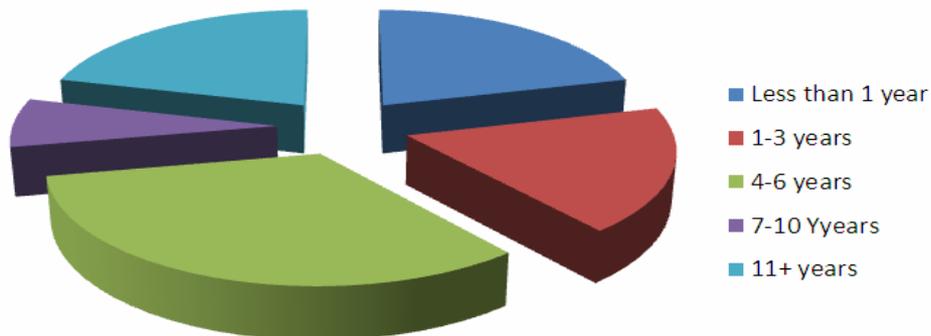

Figure 3: Online proficiency of e-counsellors
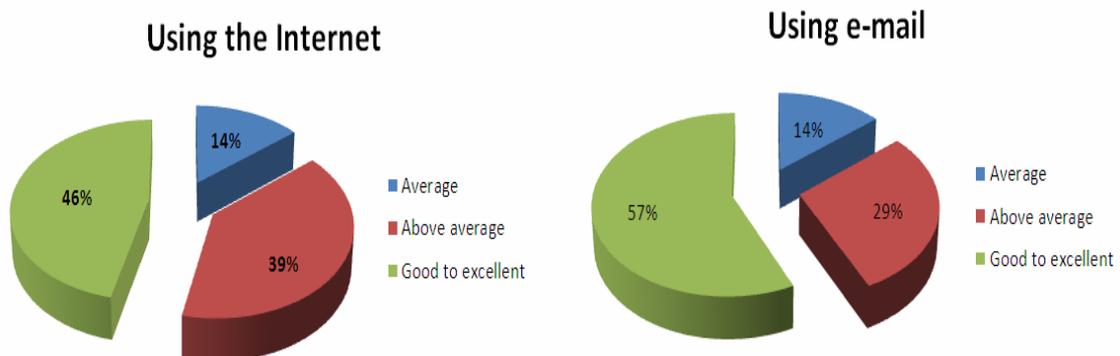
3.3.2 Biographical Profile of the Students (E-counselling Clients)

This sample group consisted of UJ students who made use of the pilot online programme. The programme was marketed and implemented as an additional facility to the existing services rendered by PsyCaD. Participation in the study was random and students were not requested to participate. The largest group (50%) of students were aged between 21-25 years, with 21.4% in the age group 18-20 years (figure 4). Both male (21.4%) and female (78.6%) students made use of the e-counselling programme.

The majority (57.1%) of the students indicated that they were living with a family member or their parents and 28.6% indicated living in a residence on a UJ campus. In terms of current level of study the respondents indicated an even distribution (42.9%) between diploma/certificate and undergraduate students with 14.2% on post-graduate level (figure 5).

Figure 4: Age and gender distribution of the e-counselling clients
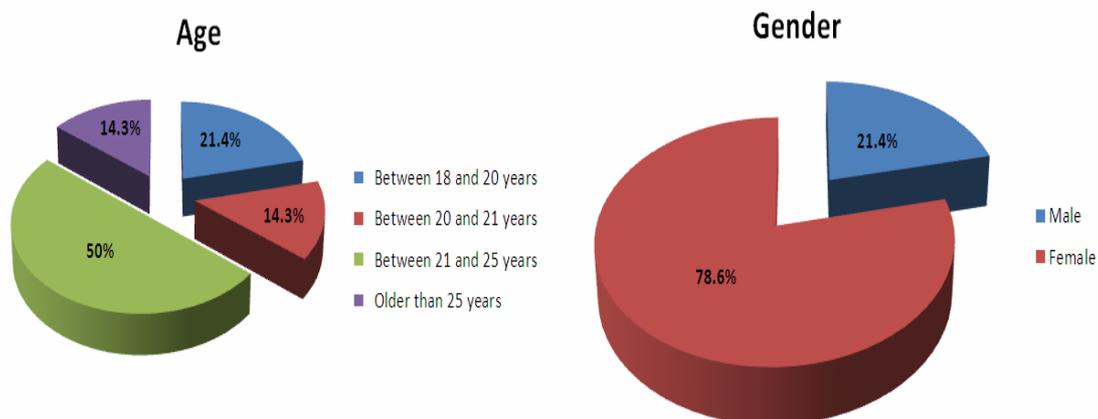
**Figure 5:** E-counselling clients' level of study
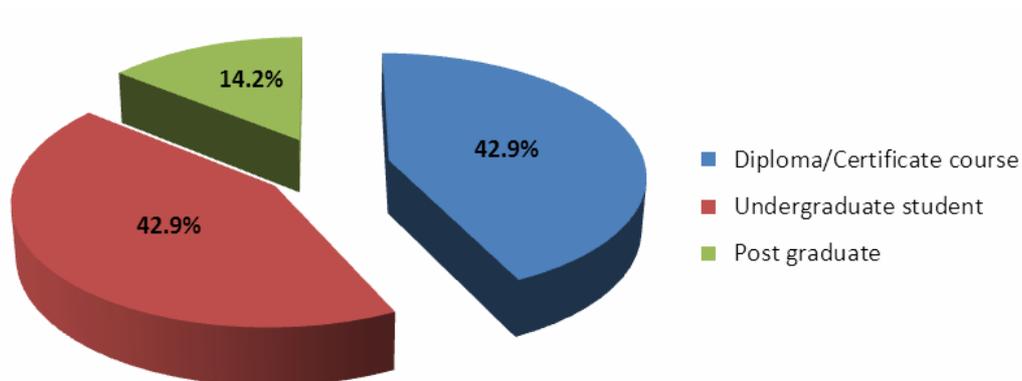
A large percentage (21.4%) was registered in the Faculty of Economic and Financial Sciences. Most of the participants (69.2%) indicated that their main campus of study was the Auckland Park Kingsway Campus, with 23.1% from the Doornfontein and 7.7% from Bunting road. No students from the Soweto campus participated in the survey.

3.3.3 Online Familiarity and Proficiency of the E-counselling Clients

Students indicated a high frequency of online usage in their personal life with 71.9% indicating a usage of at least once a day (figure 6). In terms of academic use, 42.9% indicated using online facilities at least once a day and 28.6% at least two to three times a week. The activity that students seemed to engage in the most was social networking with (61.5%) at least once a day. Other activities that ranked high were the use of chartrooms (35.7%) at least once a day and academic related tasks such as information searches (42.9%) for research projects.

Figure 6: E-counselling clients' frequency of online usage
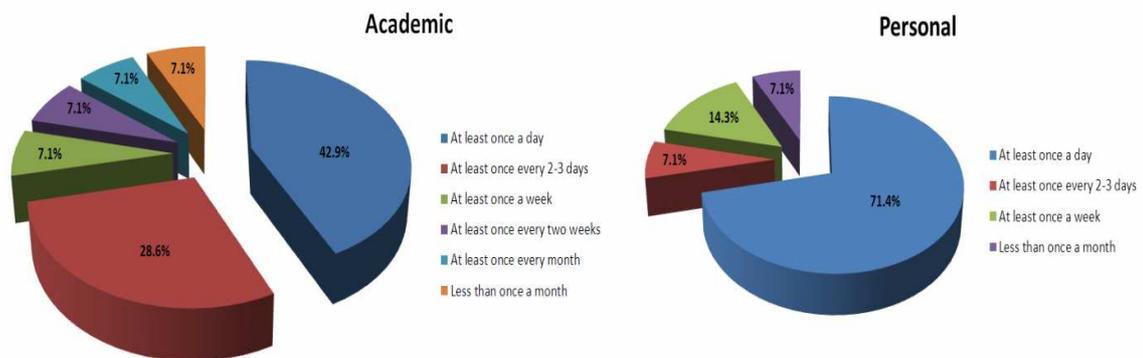
3.3.4 Reasons for Requesting Counselling

Table 2 renders a distribution the kind of problems that students selected as their reasons for requesting counselling. Depression, relationship concerns and general coping problems were identified as the most prevalent (57%) of the cases. The second most reported problems (50%) included family related problems, stress, intra-personal problems, adjustment difficulties and academic problems. The least identified problem (7.1%) was health related issues. In addition the results indicated that their problems had affected their personal life (64.3% to a large extend) more than their academic functioning reported affect to a large extent in 50% of the cases.

Table 2: Distribution of the presenting problems by student participants

PRESENTING PROBLEMS	% of cases
Trauma related violence e.g. being a victim of crime or domestic violence	14.3
Trauma related to issues of loss	21.4
Relationship problems	57.1

Health related problems	7.1
Family related problems	50
Substance abuse problems	14.3
Adjustment difficulties	50
Financial problems	28.6
Intra-personal problems	50
Cultural or religious problems	14.3
Peer group problems	28.6
Academic problems	50
Suicidal thoughts	28.6
Coping with general challenges	57.1
Anxiety	28.6
Depression	57.1
Stress related problems	50
Concern about weight, eating pattern or appearance	28.6
Loneliness	42.9

3.3.5 Perceived Benefit and Comfort Level Regarding E-counselling

The results rendered information regarding the belief held by students regarding their level of comfort with the use of the e-counselling programme and the benefits they anticipated to be evident from online counselling. Most of the respondents (50%) indicated themselves being comfortable to a very large extent, and 35.7% moderately comfortable with the e-counselling process. A large group (42.9%) of the respondents indicated that they anticipated to a large extent that the e-counselling would be beneficial in addressing their problem. Most of the respondents (92.3%) indicated that they believe the greatest advantage of online counselling was the fact that this mode of counselling provides remote access and convenience and that the service is flexible in nature. Furthermore, highly ranked advantage (76.9%) was the fact that e-counselling presented no limitation to time and mobility as well as allowing room for self-reflection. Table 3 renders a visual representation of these results.

Table 3: E-counselling clients' view regarding the advantages of e-counselling

E-COUNSELLING ADVANTAGES	% of cases
Online counselling provides remote access and convenience and the service is flexible in nature	92.3
No limitation to time and mobility	76.9
Cost of therapy is decreased dramatically	53.9
You may develop better insights and take ownership of problems	53.8
Online counselling removes boundaries such as social status	69.2

Allows room for self-reflection	76.9
Privacy	69.2
Lack of visual cues (client nor counsellor influenced by what they see)	53.8

Table 4: E-counselling clients' view regarding the disadvantages of e-counselling

E-COUNSELLING DISADVANTAGES	% of cases
Absence of visual cues and the reliance on non-verbal communication	28.6
Clients have to be skilled in reading and writing	50
Online counselling can encourage acting out behaviour as client may misinterpret responses	78.6
May lead to internet addiction, which in itself is on the increase	42.9
Currently an inability to control the quality of care	42.9
Presents complex ethical and legal issues	14.3

Despite the above, 35.7% of the respondents indicated that e-counselling would be able to address their problems to a large extent with 21.4% indicating to a very large extent.

Conclusion

The e-counsellors reported that the e-counselling service made counselling more accessible to clients who would not generally engage in a counselling programme. Furthermore, it was reported that the concerns anticipated earlier regarding the abuse and or misuse of the service was not experienced. In addition, it was indicated that a high level of disclosure was experienced by the counsellors from the clients' belief that the anonymity had a direct impact on the honesty of clients. Counsellors also felt that clients were comfortable with this mode of counselling as it was part of their day-to-day functioning. The e-counsellors also indicated their acquisition of new skills which included, clarification, heightened sense of perception, adaptation to a more colloquial form of communication and increased reflection.

The profile of the e-counselling clients from this study was consistent with the profile suggested in literature in particular the work sited by Suler (2000). Students rated themselves to be highly comfortable with use of e-counselling and that it would be beneficial in addressing their presenting problems. The results were consistent with their knowledge and beliefs regarding the advantages and disadvantages of online counselling. The most significant result in this aspect was the fact that students felt that e-counselling would be moderately too highly effective in addressing their problems.

The fact that students made use of the programme in a natural setting (in other words not requested or prompted to partake in the study) as well as a high rating in their belief that the programme would be effective in addressing their presenting problems, increased the validity of the results. It suggests a high level of comfort with such interventions. The type of problems presented by the students would suggest that they had confidence in the e-counselling programme in addressing their problems.

In closing, 'Internet interventions are not meant to replace face-to-face treatments but rather to provide an alternative for individuals who might otherwise choose not to receive treatment (e.g. because of embarrassment) or who might be unable to obtain treatment (e.g. because of location) or to find appropriate treatment (e.g. because no provider is available)' (Ritterband, Gonder-Frederick, Cox & Clifton 2003:532).

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