

The American Counseling Association's "Counseling Corner" Weekly Columns

Is Online Counseling An Effective Means Of Help?

from the American Counseling Association

Today, just about any product, service or information is available on the Internet. Yet many people aren't aware that professional counseling is also a well-established and respected online service.

Various forms of therapeutic communication and help go back to the 1980s, but it really was the mid-1990s when online counseling became more established. By the 2000, a clearinghouse for mental health websites listed some 250 websites of private practices, and more than 700 online clinics through which a therapist could be contacted. Today those numbers are much, much larger.

In response to the many qualified professional counselors now offering online services, professional organizations, such as the American Counseling Association, have developed strong ethical standards to provide online counselors with clear guidelines that protect the consumers they serve.

Online counseling, or "cybercounseling" as it's commonly known today, offers special benefits to people for whom a traditional visit to a professional counselor's office would be difficult or impossible. For someone suffering from a fear of crowds or of being outdoors, or for a person who is ill or homebound for other reasons, these online counseling services provide a very clear benefit.

But cybercounseling today can offer benefits to almost everyone, in part due to the many advancements in technology. The majority of homes now have high speed Internet connections which make possible video chat sessions between a professional counselor and a client. These face to face sessions are especially helpful for someone in need of counseling in a rural area where it may some distance to the nearest mental health professionals.

But is online counseling effective? It's a question that many people ask, but studies have found that online therapy almost always produces treatment outcomes that are at least equal to traditional in-office settings. Some studies have suggested that online sessions can sometimes be more effective, since the client is usually at greater ease in his or her home setting, and less intimidated than they might feel in the counselor's office.

Cybercounseling may not be the right approach for every person or problem, but it can be a valuable resource for many. If you think it might have potential for you, a simple online search will bring up a long list of possibilities. Then check carefully. Professional counselors websites should list their degrees, licenses and certifications, as well as the fields they specialize in and their experience and expertise.

"Counseling Corner" is provided by the American Counseling Association. Comments and questions to ACAcorner@counseling.org or visit the ACA website at www.counseling.org

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