Chapter Overview

This chapter reviews the ethical implications of the use of digital technologies in counselling and the distinctive ethical benefits and challenges involved. Issues including security, educating clients, relationship boundaries, and working across legal jurisdictions are considered.

Key words: internet, digital, hyperspace, on-line, email, social forums, technological competence, jurisdiction
The use of digital technology and on-line communications has transformed the living and social environment over the last thirty years for everyone who has access to it. People aged over 50 have witnessed a revolution in the speed of communication, with letters replaced by email, expensive international phone calls replaced by Skype and other on-line audio and video communications, and a proliferation of different applications of social media such as Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook and on-line forums. New technology is eroding the significance of national boundaries by making international communication so much easier, and thus changing the context in which lives are lived locally. Distance is no longer the barrier to communications between people that it once was. For this older generation, it is a process of catching up with new developments. For younger people who have grown up alongside this rapidly developing technology, the experience has been very different. The virtual world is not an add-on but is experienced as integral to how they communicate with people. The distinction between the virtual and the real world of face-to-face interaction no longer exists for many young people. Emotional well-being and identities are being transformed by interactions on-line for good or bad. It also appears that ideas about public and private space appear to be shifting in the younger generation as so much of other people’s lives is made visible digitally.

These changes provide a combination of challenges and opportunities for counsellors. There is accumulating evidence from on-line counselling services that the new media make it possible to access sections of the community that were previously hard to reach, for example the Big White Wall (www.bigwhite wall.com) has pioneered a range of mental health services on-line in England that are used by a higher proportion of men and people in the uniformed services than was possible with traditional face-to-face services. Two-thirds of the members of BWW would not normally have sought help for mental health issues. A broadly similar initiative in Eire (turn2me.org) has 45 per cent male users, with one-third aged 18–25. Extending the reach of services designed to promote mental well-being is highly desirable ethically in terms of enhancing the capacity to do good. Providing services to hard-to-reach groups, particularly those with significant issues and challenges in their lives, enhances our ability to satisfy the principle of justice. As with any new development, particularly on this scale and developing so rapidly, there are substantial ethical challenges. Before I start to consider some of those challenges, I ought to give a word of warning.

It is in the nature of digital technology that changes are constant and new developments may be short-lived. To be static is to be superseded in the digital world. In writing this chapter I am writing in old media about new media, which is much less constrained in how it develops. This means that I am guessing, hopefully in an informed way, about what will be sufficiently enduring for the lifespan of this edition. As with all guesses some will be right but some will be overtaken by new developments. The most I can hope to do is provide the
basis for some ethical principles for counsellors to follow up on-line in the new media in order to check their current status.

Most national professional bodies provide some guidance on on-line counselling. There are also specialist organizations who work at the cutting edge of new developments:

- American Distance Counseling Association: www.adca-online.org
- International Society for Mental Health Online: www.ismho.org
- Online Counselling and Therapy in Action: www.octia.org.uk

There are also a steadily growing number of useful specialist publications (Anthony and Merz Nagel 2010; Evans 2009; Jones and Stokes 2009; Weitz 2014) all with examples of actual practice and suggestions for good practice.

The internet and digital technology cannot be ignored in contemporary counselling practice in developed economies. They have become the medium for routine communications between people. There will be few counsellors, and these in declining numbers, who do not use the internet for some aspects of their work with clients, even if their use of cyberspace is restricted to arranging appointments and sending reminders by email or text. Most of us will have migrated into blended services that combine digital communications with traditional face-to-face sessions. Increasing numbers of counsellors are moving, or appear to be moving, to providing a range of services on-line. These include:

- on-line synchronous services, for example live video counselling sessions, live chat rooms and social forums, and Second Life in which both client and counsellor are represented by avatars;
- on-line asynchronous services, for example counselling by email correspondence or any method of communication on social media that involves a time delay between sending and responding to messages;
- administrative and professional support for counselling services, for example setting up and managing appointments, organizing routine communications and monitoring client progress or take-up of services;
- the provision of supplementary information and self-help activities, for example self-assessment forms, links to other related services, on-line guidance;
- the use of on-line social forums, for example where users can post messages to which other users can respond in ways that often have parallels with traditional groupwork in terms of sharing experiences and offering mutual support;
- the use of apps (applications) on smartphones, for example for clients to log their sleep, changes in mood, energy levels and other features of their emotional lives rather than rely on memory alone.

Each of these services raises distinctive ethical challenges to which can be added the ethics of managing the technological basis of the work and the distinctive legal issues.
Digital Interaction between Counsellors and Clients

From Face to Face to On-line Counselling

Emily is exploring the possibility of continuing to work with one of her clients on-line after she moves away. Supervision is an ideal opportunity for ethical problem-solving. Use the ethical problem-solving model to identify the issues that the counsellor ought to consider. What are the issues that need to be considered and how ought Alice to resolve them in her practice? How might you use the ethical problem-solving model in supervision?

During my preparations for this chapter I have been looking for examples where working on-line might challenge or require changes to ethical principles that have been historically developed for working face to face. Discussions with members of all the leading UK professional bodies for counselling and psychotherapy have failed to find any exceptions or the need to alter existing ethical principles. This is also the case for published guidance for doctors, nurses, practitioner psychologists. The ethical challenge in all these cases lies in how to meet the guiding ethical principles within a new context and in new methods of communication. We need to take each ethical principle in turn.

Being trustworthy With clients and colleagues on-line this is every bit as important as it would be in face-to-face communications. Working on-line creates opportunities to use web-based applications that enable counsellors to create and exchange content with each other and with the public through blogs, micro-blogs (such as Twitter), professional internet forums, content communities (such as YouTube and Flickr) and social networking sites (such as Facebook and LinkedIn). How you present yourself on-line will influence your client’s perceptions of your integrity and trustworthiness and may also have implications for their perceptions of other members of counselling and related professions. Many practitioners have told me about the potential for clients to disguise their identity or location in ways that would not be professionally acceptable for the counsellor providing the service to do so. What is striking about searching on-line services is how many of these provide the identity of counsellors and information about their professional background and qualifications with a photograph. The accuracy and integrity of this information are probably better protected on-line because that information is so public and therefore so easily questioned or challenged. Nonetheless, it is the ethical responsibility of the counsellor to ensure its accuracy. It is also for the counsellor to take reasonable steps to be trustworthy as this is within their direct control, but no-one can guarantee that they will be trusted as this depends on the responses of others.