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Help for emotional and psychological problems is just a mouse-click away, Ian Cuthbertson reports.

IF your emotional craft suddenly capsized in life's heavy seas, what would you do about it?

Would you call a friend? A counsellor? A psychologist? If a problem that had been bothering you for a long time suddenly escalated, becoming unbearable, threatening your sanity -even your survival - what would it take before you asked for help?

For each of us, the threshold may be different, but increasingly when individuals reach that point they are turning to the Internet instead of more traditional forms of counselling and support. In fact, the Net is positively brimming with therapists offering advice. There are hundreds of sites ranging from the free to the fairly expensive and personalised.

Free counselling is an expectation that many bring to the Web, which in part, is a symptom of Web culture. Another factor is the kind of support required for a particular problem.

While alcoholism and other problems of dependency can be treated by licensed professionals, folk wisdom has it that the best people to learn from are people who have kicked their own habit. At www.geocities.com/HotSprings/4738/ there are links to many helpful peer-support sites ranging from alcohol and drug problems to help for survivors of sexual abuse.

But in moving to the Web, it is hardly appropriate for professional counsellors to offer their services for free. As Dr Tim Austin, the Texas-based president of the Concerned Counselling service (www.concernedcounseling.com) explains: "We get e-mail from people all the time who are upset that we charge for our services, that somehow because we are dealing with mental health, instead of being the grocery store, we should donate our services.

"Unfortunately, we can't do that. The counsellors need to make a living, too. They have families to feed, like anyone else. And we have expenses for maintaining our business, like every other business. If we don't make money, we can't stay in business."

Which is not to suggest that psychologists and counsellors don't feel the tug of the call to service. "There are many cases each week where someone will write to us, say, about a teenager with a problem, or an adult just needing a little insight into an issue," says Austin, "and we will answer their e-mail for free. You can't be in this business and not have a heart or compassion for people who need help and turn to you for some advice or comfort."

Australian counselling psychologist Christine Bennett knows well the difficulties involved in charging for online support. A former secondary teacher, Bennett gravitated to psychology because of her interest in people. But in her third year of "rats, stats, figures and graphs" in a traditional psychology degree, she jumped ship to complete a counselling course at the College of Applied Psychology.

Bennett went on to do a master's degree in critical psychology (as distinct from clinical psychology, a title reserved for graduates recognised by the Australian Psychological Society) before setting up her practice in the northern Sydney suburb of Avalon. But her comfortable counselling room, with its tinkling new age music and fountain, is lost on the people she has treated from all over the world through her three-year-old Web site (www.CBCounselling.com.au).

Perhaps it was Bennett's unconventional training that led her to the Web long before any of her fellow Australian counsellors. She has treated many Americans and Canadians on the Net using her eclectic mix of traditional tools, such as neuro-linguistic programming and narrative therapy, blended with more esoteric approaches such as the "eneagram" (an ancient personality typing tool developed by the Sufis that dates back to Mesopotamia in 2500 BC), and even traditional astrology.

Bennett's personal practice is flourishing. However, she describes the Web site as an experiment. "For the first 12 months, the first consultation was free; thereafter the cost was \$20," she says. "The response was overwhelming particularly for the first consultation -but though people expressed great enthusiasm for the service, and for the information, support and advice they received, they were disinclined to continue when money was involved."

Bennett now offers a flat rate of \$30 per e-mail response, or an unlimited amount of counselling for \$145 per month, considerably cheaper than many of the US sites, and far cheaper than the standard rates charged by face-to-face psychologists. She is, however, open to suggestions through the feedback link on her site as to what clients actually want from the service, and how the financial aspect might operate.

But financial considerations aside, aren't there other issues with online counselling? Traditionally counsellors have occupied the same space

as clients, which gives them access to non-verbal clues such as body language, tone of voice, mood and so on.

While most online counselling services emphasise that online help cannot take the place of face-to-face counselling, what it can provide is a kind of anonymity. According to Tim Austin, "for many people the opportunity to come online or to talk to one of our licensed professional counsellors on the phone is very comforting".

"In problems like sexual abuse, or eating disorders, for example, many people feel ashamed of themselves, or are embarrassed to talk about their problems. It can be very difficult to face a stranger, look them in the eye, and talk about what can be highly painful subjects," he says. "The anonymity [of online counselling] allows them to express their feelings and concerns in a more open manner."

Bob Duncan, a more traditional clinical psychologist with 20 years experience and a private practice in Sydney's Bondi Junction, expresses ethical concerns.

"As a psychologist, there are various obligations to report things," he says. "One of those is child abuse, or suspected child abuse, and another is reporting information about major crimes. I don't know how that might apply in counselling over the Net, where presumably you are without full particulars. One is also obliged to act in the community interest, so if someone tells you that they are going to kill themselves or to harm someone else, you are supposed to take appropriate action -including warning any intended victims of the danger."

On the positive side, Duncan grants that when therapy is conducted by e-mail it would be useful to have the resulting dual record. "If you are in the business of teaching people things, it could be very valuable to be able to go back and look at past discussions," he says.

Tim Austin says the American Psychological Association has decided that online counselling is more than a passing phenomenon, and is developing guidelines for practising over the Net. Dr Peter Cotton, director of communications at the Australian Psychological Society, says the Australian regulatory board is in a similar situation. "Some rudimentary guidelines have been released regarding the implications of counselling on the Web, with further developments to follow," he says.

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