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Tartu Women's Shelter

Violence is not the way out.
There is a way out of violence.



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Introduction

The DIS.CO project is a strategic partnership supporting innovation in the field of vocational education and training, aiming at enhancing the work-based skills of counselling practitioners through networking and capacity building on the topic of Distance counseling, when working with women victims of domestic or sexual violence or abuse. It aims to create specialized training material and tools, to enhance the work-based competences of counselling practitioners and to facilitate the creation of virtual workspaces and alternative forms of victim support.

Traditionally, psychological therapies have been conducted face-to-face, but in recent years different ways of engaging in therapeutic contact have emerged. This includes systems utilizing written communication (such as e-mail or online “chat”), along with systems for audio communication (using, for example, public telephone networks) or for audio-visual communication (videoconference).

What unites all three of these systems is that the therapist and client are not physically present in the same space and may not be present at the same moment.

There are many communication tools that can be used for distance counseling, such as live-chat, e-mail, calls via mobile phone, teleconference, videoconference, Skype and blogs. Distance counseling holds several advantages, namely affordability, anonymity, convenience and flexibility. Equally important is that it provides access to counselling for persons that might otherwise not be able to get help, such as those with special needs, some disabled people, low-income patients without means of transportation, persons with busy lives, or otherwise isolated persons. It is also helpful in situations in which the client needs daily follow-up contact but distance prohibits regular contact.



“Traditionally, psychological therapies have been conducted face-to-face, but in recent years different ways of engaging in therapeutic contact have emerged.”

As online communication is quite prevalent in our daily lives nowadays, we consider it essential for victim support organizations and counselling practitioners working with women victims of violence or abuse to develop distance counseling competencies so as to provide alternative, accessible and modern support services to beneficiaries.

DIS.CO. proposes an innovative approach based on the needs of both counselling practitioners and women victims of violence and abuse. In our project, analytical activities and exchanges of knowledge and good practices between project partners were

undertaken in order to develop appropriate training materials and tools. Despite the fact that the majority of victim support organizations conduct distance counseling through helplines, counsellors and volunteers often do not receive specialized training on counselling at a distance as there is little training material available on the topic. Our project addressed this issue by developing DIS.CO. training material and distance learning tools that have been made available for free on project webpage discoprojectcom.wordpress.com and on Erasmus+ Project Results Platform online, in all project languages.

Main objectives of the Project:

- Strengthen cooperation, exchanges and networking between partners on the topic of distance counseling for women victims of violence or abuse;
- Improve work-based skills of counsellors working with women victims by developing distance counseling skills through the development and delivery of vocational education and training;
- Promote innovative practices in the field of counselling women victims and exploit ICT potential by developing/ improving ICT related skills and setting up virtual workplaces;
- Provide educational tools to assist counseling professionals in providing distance counseling to victims of domestic or sexual violence;
- Improve the capacity of participating and other interested organizations through the production and dissemination of training material and courses for staff and volunteers;
- Deliver efficient high quality services for victims of violence or abuse.

This report, “Lessons learned”, shares our experience from the project activities, and provides a practical guide explaining how DIS.CO results could be used by other organizations.

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Needs Assessment

The first intellectual output of the DISCO project, IO1 Needs Assessment explored issues about women who have experienced abuse, including intimate partner violence/domestic violence or sexual violence and analyzed their needs at the context of on line search for help, describing in general their behavior. We analyzed their needs in the context of search of psycho-social counselling services at a distance.

The Queens University of Belfast (QUB) led the Needs Assessment with contribution from the other academic partners, namely the University of Tartu, University of Crete, Frederick University and from the service provider partners, namely the NexusNI – Northern Ireland, Organizations Union of Women

Associations of Heraklion Prefecture – Greece, NPO Women’s Support and Information Center – Estonia.

The needs assessment output included a literature review and a survey. The survey covered the four participating partner countries. The final sample included 266 women. Forty-eight percent of women were from Northern Ireland (UK), 27% from Greece, 17% from Cyprus, and 8% from Estonia. This reflected the number of partners from each country and the number of service users within each of the organizations. The questionnaires were completed between mid-April to mid-June 2018. Ethical approval was granted by the School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work of Queen’s University Belfast.

Main questions that were answered:

1. Are women in abusive relationships/situations reaching Victim Support Organizations through online means (including Helplines)? What is the trend and what can we do to facilitate victims' online access?
2. Is there a difference in alternative types of counselling and help between different sections of the population?

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- Women/survivors of domestic violence and sexual abuse mostly engage online in order to locate services related to their experience;
 - Not all women search the web for online advice. There is a small group of women who stated that they have not used internet to search for help or information with regards to the issue discussed. The reasons for non-use by age groups among those that stated that they had not searched the internet for help or information are: the oldest age group 45 and older was the highest percentage in relation to barriers to access, and over

Summary of survey results

35% said the reason was not having access to a smartphone or computer, almost 20% stated the reason was because they did not know how to use the internet for this cause, and 14% was because they were not confident using the internet for this cause. Among 18-24 years old the highest percent stated they were worried about who can view their information. The findings suggest safety issues as a primary concern for women survivors.

- Women who stated that they use the internet for this cause, use a variety of key words when searching for advice, ranging from nouns, such as “domestic violence”, “sexual assault” etc. to questions such as “How to leave the abuser?”, “How abuse can affect my relationship?”, “Who to turn up to?”, “What to do?” “How to cope with symptoms (related to sexual assault)?” etc.

“Online services should be used to complement existing face-to-face services rather than replace them.”

Online services should be used to complement existing face-to-face services rather than replace them. This is based on the needs assessment findings that not all respondents have used the internet (66,7% of the respondents in Estonia and 22,2% in Greece) for this reason. We assume that its not an

issue of access to internet, rather than use the internet for this cause, searching for help. The areas that the largest proportion of women report they would very likely use internet are to find helplines (55%), to find (66%) and locate (64%) support resources/services and to find information about their rights (58%). The areas with the least interest in using internet were video counselling and online support groups with a third reporting “not likely”, followed by text counselling with 29% reporting “not likely”.

As distance counselling requires access to online technology, efforts to increase internet penetration have been very important, such as the EU’s Digital Agenda for Europe. Today, nearly 99% of European households have access to at least one of nine broadband access technologies.¹ However, according to Eurostat, 13% of households remain disconnected. Two major reasons cited for this includes a lack of digital skills and that the needed equipment is too expensive.² This was reflected in IO1, as participants who were financially struggling had higher percentages for not using the internet due to not having access to a smartphone or computer and/or not knowing how to use the internet. Other reasons can be linked directly to feelings of insecurity that often comes with being a victim of abuse: worrying about who can view information, how information is used, and worried about information being hacked. This is one of the reasons that online services should complement existing services rather than substitute them. This recommendation is also supported

1. Study on Broad band Coverage in Europe 2018, URL: <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/study-broad-band-coverage-europe-2018>
2. Why 13% Of Europeans Still Don't Have Internet Access, URL: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ninaangelovska/2018/11/20/why-13-of-europeans-still-dont-have-internet-access/#7ebae-cb47a80>

by the data which present the likelihood of using online support by type, country, and sample type. Financially struggling have higher percentages stating unlikely to use text counselling (58%) than those just getting by (42%) or financially doing well (45%). Those that are financially well off have higher percentages in likelihood to use text counselling (42%) compared to just getting by (34%) and financially struggling (30%). 70% of financially struggling respondents state that they are likely to use the Internet for finding support resources, followed by just getting by (69%) and financially well of (65%) respondents. According to these findings, women respondents were more likely to use the internet to locate services rather than to use online services themselves.

3. For all the figures and precise data please look at the main report available at: https://discoproject.com/files.wordpress.com/2019/08/final_reporto1.pdf

In sum, the main problems faced are barriers to access, especially with older respondents, who do not own or have access to a smartphone or a computer. Another reason is not knowing how to use internet for this reason and cause. With younger respondents, the main issue was with whom can see their information. However, there is still a substantial percentage who are willing to use distant provided services. The most likely distant provided service to be used is Help Lines.³

The conducted survey and literature review give a comprehensive overview of the needs of potential users of online counseling. Collected data supports the literature and the report can be used as a supplementary training material to all parties interested in the topic of online tools and how victims of abuse in different socio-economic statuses use or are willing to use ICT solutions to get help.



Summary of the literature review:

- The content of online services needs to account for the multiplicity of women's experiences;
- Online technology should be used to complement and enhance, not replace therapeutic relationships;
- Professionals need to be aware of how to ensure the safety of the survivors and also need to inform the survivors in terms of what they can do to ensure their safety when using ICT;
- Appropriate security measures must be used (such as emergency exit buttons) and all safety concerns must be documented and addressed.
- Any material developed needs to take into account that controlling perpetrators may monitor women's e-movements and make sure that women are aware how to protect themselves;
- When dealing with technology-facilitated sexual violence (TFSV), special consideration is required by the counsellors that the technological context of providing counselling might intensify the memories of the traumatic experiences of sexual assault induced by the technology;
- Professionals working with survivors of abuse should determine what type of identity information they require from online help seeking survivors prior to engaging in service provision, as identifying information may be needed if the professional will need to respond to an emergency (i.e., suicidal threat, harm to other threat, or admission of child abuse);
- Online services are not appropriate in emergency situations.



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Profile of Counsellor at a distance

The main aim of IO2 was to identify the necessary competences for distance counseling and to establish the profile of such Counsellors working with women victims of domestic and sexual violence and abuse. Frederick University coordinated the development of the Counsellor Profile with assistance and contribution from all partners.⁴

The developed report describes the skills & abilities needed for distance counselling, and the skills gap, needs of counsellors & challenges. It presents the competences that need to be developed and concludes with the distance counsellors profile based on current state of art. All information is based on literature review.

Data collection was rich and fruitful. The study managed to reveal the necessary competences for establishing the profile of an “at a distance” counsellor working with women victims of domestic and sexual violence and abuse. A brief analysis of each of the identified competences is presented under five categories: professional values; personality features; underpinning knowledge; core skills and necessary training.

Professional values

It was evident that distance counsellors (like face-to-face counsellors) need to have solid professional values, in order to be in a position to offer services online. Apart from professional codes of conduct (e.g. Social Workers, Psychologists, etc.), it was revealed that most of the organisations offering online counselling (OC) do not have an ethical code regarding the provision of distance counselling. This should be a starting point for any future interventions and/or improvements in organisations offering online counselling.

Personality features

Personality features were considered to be additional characteristics that are desirable for a distance counsellor to have. For example, the ability to “distance him/herself somewhat”, “show integrity” and being “free of prejudices and bias” are important competences for a distance counsellor.

Underpinning knowledge

Three categories were identified as being especially important for distance counsellors to have:

1. knowledge regarding the particular group of clients,
2. legislation/legal issues, and
3. IT knowledge.

Thus, distance counselling programmes should seek to provide training to staff in each of the above. It is believed that further exploration is needed to better understand the knowledge and competencies.

4. The report is available on project website in five languages (English, Estonian, Greek, German and Spanish), URL: <https://discoprojectcom.wordpress.com/results/>

Core skills

There is a great similarity between the core skills identified in the literature review and those stated by participants of the study implemented under IO2. However, it is important to highlight that some skills were revealed only by participants who have great experience in the field as “at a distance” counsellors. These include:

1. readiness to respond quickly,
2. ability to “read” the situation quickly and
3. ability to stay focused on one topic rather than discussing various issues at once.

Necessary training

In addition to the topics identified above, it was revealed that training in other areas should be compulsory for distance counsellors. It was stated that crisis management, crisis counselling and conflict training should be a priority for “at a distance” counsellors. Also, the necessity of supervision from experienced counsellors was highlighted.

Future use of IO2 findings

Data presented under IO2 could be of value for a variety of stakeholders:

1. Professional organizations regarding the development of counselling services,
2. Organizations who offer counselling services,
3. Individual professionals,
4. Departments of human resources, and
5. Life-long training centers.

It was also an important input for developing the training curriculum (IO3). The material produced in IO2 could be used as (1) a starting point for professionals who would like to focus their practice on distance counselling, (2) a resource to train and educate at distance counsellors and (3) a reference for distance counselors.

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Training Curriculum on Distance counseling

5. It is available on project website in five languages (English, Estonian, Greek, German and Spanish), URL: <https://discoproject.com.wordpress.com/results/>

Intellectual output 3 “Training Curriculum on Distance Counselling” was developed by the University of Crete. Development included adopting pedagogical approaches, integrating results from IO1 (Needs Assessment) and IO2 (Profile of Counsellor at a Distance) and inserting relevant resources. This is a potential training curriculum for counsellors at a distance, who work with women victims of domestic or sexual violence or abuse.⁵ The curriculum focuses on Online Counselling (OC) via mobile tools, e-mail, live-chat, video conference / Skype-like tools and Teleconference, with a specific focus on crisis management through help lines. The curriculum was fully transformed into the online course that is now freely available on our website.

The IO 3 output could be used in the future in both supervisory and educational contexts. To be effective, counsellors who offer their services in an online setting need to possess certain skills and values for this type of counselling procedure. When the online counsellor works with women victims of domestic/sexual violence, the necessity and importance of specialized supervision is increased. IO3 can be adapted by organizations that provide online counselling to train their staff, to make sure they have the skills needed to do so effectively. The manual can also be used by supervisors as a basis for evaluating the work of distance counselors. It can also be used by organizations that conduct training for others who engage in distance counseling (for example supervisory state agencies).

The training curriculum is structured as follows:

1 Counselling “at-a-distance” Introduction and Fundamentals,

including a brief history of online counselling (OC), domestic violence and OC, benefits (i.e. accessibility, anonymity, convenience), shortcomings (e.g. lack of nonverbal and verbal cues, text-based miscommunications, problems in communicating during emergencies), Internet culture.

2 Ethical, Security and Technological issues,

including issues on encryption, protection, anonymity, confidentiality and privacy, technical issues, etc.

3 Promotion and facilitation of counselling “at a distance”,

including issues on what do beneficiaries, i.e. victims, need to know and how to inform them. It also addresses how the Internet environment affects facilitation of counselling services.

4 Assessment of the suitability of a beneficiary for counselling “at-a distance”,

including issues such as the factors that determine the client's ability to benefit from "at-a-distance" counselling, instances when OC may not be appropriate for victims and specific questions for assessing the client's suitability for OC

5 Managing the therapeutic relationship at-a-distance – Rules and Boundaries,

includes issues on facilitating factors for the therapeutic relationship at a distance (e.g. rapport, presence, openness, productive direct and indirect communication, mutual agreement on problems, roles, tasks and goals, collaboration). The section also addresses management of online therapeutic relationship boundaries – e.g. the client might assume that the relationship with the counsellor is a less professional one due to the immediacy of contact, the out of office setting and after-hours timing. Therefore, appropriate hours and content etc. should be discussed prior.

6 Communication and counselling skills “at-a-distance”,

including issues on writing (text based) skills for both synchronous and asynchronous tools, risk and crisis assessment and management skills (with a special focus on Helplines). Practical guidelines are also given for professionals conducting telephone counselling with abused women and counselling women with disabilities (e.g. using proper language to describe the person and the disability, identifying personal and societal barriers encountered by individuals with disabilities, general counselling tips when working with persons with disabilities).

7 Closure of the counselling cycle,

including issues on the types of termination, skills regarding termination phase, engaging in emotions and a model for treatment endings.

8 Scientific Supervision & Assessment of Counselling “at a distance”,

identifies basic problems with supervision in OC, recommendations for professionals providing supervision in OC as well as basic recommendations for trainees in OC.

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**Training Course on Distance counseling –
Structure & Modules**

Based on the curriculum in the previous output a training course was developed by M&M Profuture Training. It features different modules with the following delivery methods: seminars, weekly face-to-face group meetings (introduction, experiential activities, case studies, simulations, etc.), combined with self-paced distance learning conducted through the e-learning platform (MOOC – Massive Open Online Course). The course has been designed as a 4-week (2-3 hours per day) in-depth training course for professionals in the field of counselling.⁶

An evaluation tool was also developed to assess knowledge acquisition by participants as well as to measure their satisfaction in terms of needs and expectations. Knowledge acquisition-oriented assignments are submitted after each module and at the end of the course.

Evaluation tool includes the following elements:

1. Prior knowledge pre-assessment (online questionnaire at start of the course)
2. Ongoing evaluation through online quizzes in Online Training Course (MOOC) at the end of each module (to establish the degree of understanding of modules in the view of being able to proceed with the next module).
3. Post-training knowledge assessments (online questionnaire at the end of the course to measure knowledge acquisition prompted by the training)
4. Feedback form of the MOOC's General Evaluation Tool (to receive feedback on the online course's components/Trainees satisfaction).
5. Satisfaction follow-up evaluation (to provide the instructor with information about his/her teaching effectiveness and to the course developers to be able to assess effectiveness and impact of the course on students).

Learning contents

Eight modules correspond to each of the elements described above in IO3 and provide different assignments, face-to-face activities, exercises and group works to complement the theoretical part of IO3.

6. It is available on project website in five languages (English, Estonian, Greek, German and Spanish), URL: <https://discoproject.com.wordpress.com/results/>

“The course has been designed as a 4-week in-depth training course for professionals in the field of counselling.”



Course's structure:

Module 1.	Counselling “at-a-distance” introduction and fundamentals
Module 2.	Ethical, security and technological issues
Module 3.	Promotion and facilitation of counselling “at a distance”
Module 4.	Assessment of suitability of beneficiaries for counselling “at-a distance”
Module 5.	Managing the therapeutic relationship at-a-distance – rules and boundaries
Module 6.	Communication and counselling skills “at-a distance”
Module 7.	Closure of the counselling cycle
Module 8.	Scientific supervision & assessment of counselling “at a distance”.

After the Modules, the Appendix of the course, is about Training of Trainers (TOT) with an aim to offer a so-called “higher proficiency training pack” for professionals already on the field, who aim to further qualify themselves in terms of formal or informal ongoing professional training. The TOT could target also new professionals or professionals to be without previous experience in the field or serve both purposes at the same time. This part of the course describes types of competencies and skills to be worked on, what should be trainer of a TOT be/act like and how to plan the training.

The course finishes with a section dedicated to safety concerns because the professionals working with survivors need to be aware of the potential of abusive technological and online activities and also need to discuss these with the survivors in terms of what they can do to ensure their safety.

How it will be use in the future

The training course together with Training Curriculum (IO3) can be used to organize and implement the DIS.CO training locally. The users (facilitators) will follow it when administering trainings. It provides trainees with a pedagogical method based on learning through practice, enhancing professional skills and expanding personal abilities.

With this system, simulated distance counseling situations can be experienced in which the participants will have to take strategic decisions on what actions to take when supporting victims.

An important addition to IO3’s curriculum is that the IO4 training course contains different evaluation tools that can be used by instructors and learners to assess how well they are obtaining and retaining information.

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Online Course

The University of Tartu led development of the online course in IO5 based on its competence in creating online university course content. The course was based on the DISCO Training Curriculum (IO3) and the Training Course (IO4) that were developed in the previous outputs of the project. An important aim of the online course was to create an easily accessible set of video lectures that would be understandable for both professionals and a broader audience. We believe that online format of the training might make it attractive to professionals who do not have a counseling background but may be interested in the concept of distance counselling, such as administrators, managers and policy-makers. That's why it was crucial to make sure that the content of the course is accessible to a wider audience.

In developing the online course, the Training Curriculum was simplified and visualized in short video lectures, where the material is presented in a clear way making use of graphics and images. Exercises and quizzes from the Training Course were adapted for an online format. The course is fully translated into the five partner languages: English, Estonian, German, Greek and Spanish. Video lectures in every language were recorded with the help of native speakers. This contributed to making the course relevant for the different local contexts so that it is accessible to students from different parts of Europe.

The course consists of eight Modules, based on those identified in the curriculum and each has a video lecture and short quiz for individual self-assessment. The course also includes a prior knowledge assessment and a post-training assessment to evaluate the improvement that the student achieved in the process of completing the online program.⁷

The video lectures are available on the Panopto platform. This platform was chosen due to the way its tailored for the needs of online course production. For example, it allows to see not only the person who is giving a lecture, but the slides that are used to illustrate what is being said. Panopto also provides easy navigation through the menu with slides, where you can start watching the lecture from any place.

Course's structure:

1. Counselling “at-a-distance” introduction and fundamentals
2. Ethical, security and technological issues
3. Promotion and facilitation of counselling “at a distance”
4. Assessment of suitability of beneficiaries for counselling “at-a distance”
5. Managing the therapeutic relationship at-a-distance – rules and boundaries
6. Communication and counselling skills “at-a distance”
7. Closure of the counselling cycle
8. Scientific supervision & assessment of counselling “at a distance”.

7. The course can be accessed on the DISCO project webpage URL: <https://discoprojectcom.wordpress.com/online-course/>



Evaluation of Online Course

While testing the course, partners created a control group of 15 students that took the online course only. This was done to assess if the online course can be effective when taken alone and not in conjunction with an in-person training. The feedback that we received from students indicates that the online course should not be considered as an independent tool to train counsellors. As indicated above, it purposefully lacks practical knowledge and does not specifically cover day-to-day issues of online counseling. Overall satisfaction for those taking the online course was lower than those who did online and in person training. Almost all students from the control group mentioned that face to face activities and exercises would have helped their learning process.

Therefore, based on the results from the feedback, we cannot recommend the online course as an independent learning activity that fully replaces in-person training. It should be taken as a part of face to face training to educate the counsellors on distance counselling. If you base your training on the Training Course offered by our project, you can easily build in the online course into the training. Just ask participants to do two Modules from DISCO online course before every in-person training. Topics covered in the course perfectly correspond to the ones in the Training Course program.

How the online course could be used

According to the initial project plan, the main purpose of this online course is to accompany the in-person training program. Thus, the online component mostly focuses on theoretical not applied aspects of distance counselling. This was done so that in-person training would have room to cover all the practical details and tools that could be used by counsellors. The online course could also be used to introduce the topic to non-counseling professionals who may be interested in the topic, such as administrators or policy-makers. However, for example, Modules 5 and 6 gives some practical advice in communication with client depending on a situation.



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Safety Planning Application

Intellectual Output 6 was developed by Union of Women Associations of Heraklion Prefecture and entails the design and development of an online Safety Planning Application to guide Distance Counselling Professionals in developing a safety plan for victims/patients and monitoring their progress.⁸ The design of the Safety Planning Application content was based on the experiences of partners, especially UWAH, NEXUS and WSIC with the safety planning process.

As part of a complete and integrated service, the psychologist/counselling professional needs to be fully aware and prepared for all possible dangers each case might encounter, so that the professional will inform the client and act appropriately.

Based on professional experience with victims of abuse, the importance of immediate action when a woman (and possibly her children) are in severe danger was recognized. They need to be well prepared, informed, and equipped with the essentials (i.e. ID/passport, money, keys, medications) at all times. The danger that exists when living with a perpetrator is great and constant. Taking this into consideration, in addition to the different forms of abuse and domestic violence that women can experience, safety plans should cover all the dangers they must protect themselves (and/or their children) against.

When a woman is being abused and her own safety is threatened, she must be careful and prepared in all different settings and environments. Therefore, safety plans should include information regarding their homes, working environments and even when they are walking or driving to work.

Children have a special focusing our safety plan to ensure their wellbeing and safe escape along with their mothers. Children should be informed of the dangers so that they show understanding and cooperate.

The evolution of technology raises questions about the appearance of a new forms of domestic violence, with digital or electronic methods. Issues about most kinds of technological abuse (i.e. hacking/bugging devices, spyware cameras, GPS tracking) are also considered, again to overcome most possible dangers.

A woman in panic is unable to think and see clearly, and therefore, her decisions are made hastily and in lack of experience. The purpose of all safety plans is to prepare the women for most of the possible outcomes and situations they might encounter during their escape procedure with an experienced point of view. They need to know in advance what to look for, what to avoid, and how to keep themselves and/ or their children, safe in life threatening situations.

8. The Application is available on the project website in all project partners languages (English, Estonian, Greek, German and Spanish) URL: <https://discoprojectcom.wordpress.com/online-safety-planning-application/>

“Safety Planning Application guides Distance Counselling Professionals in developing a safety plan for their patients.”

Technological Aspects of Safety Plans

The Safety Planning Application aims to guide distance counseling practitioners in designing and monitoring personalized safety plans for victims/clients.

In the application, personalized safety plans can be created utilizing a rich pool of pre-organized and approved content material i.e. content templates. A Safety Planning Content Template is categorized into thematic Sections or Steps, (e.g. safety during a violent incident, safety when preparing to leave, safety with an order of protection etc.). Each Section has: (a) an indicative title, (b) introductory text for general guidance and (c) a set of specific guidance statements or recommended actions that are applicable to the thematic category the section defines. Furthermore, the application has multilingual support for all project languages, so that an element of a plan can be translated during its composition or after it is completed. Furthermore, Safety Planning Content Templates can be authored, organized, revised, translated and deleted only by authorized users that have the Content Administration system privilege.

Authorized counselling practitioners, utilizing the pre-organized Safety Planning Content Templates are able to create personalized safety plans for their clients. The customization is achieved by enabling counselling practitioners: (a) to choose the preferred language of their client, (b) to choose only Sections or Steps that are applicable to the case, (c) for each chosen Section or Step, only related statements and recommended actions that are applicable to the case can be selected in a specific plan. In that way, each Safety Plan is unique and assigned to a single victim/client.

As soon as a Safety Plan is created by a counselling practitioner, the assigned victim/client has access to view it online, using the Safety Planning Application by entering her unique client identifier. The client can view all sections, statements and recommended actions that the counsellor chose for her case, as well as the date and time that the plan was created. Furthermore, the client has the option to print the safety report, so she can keep it safe offline, filling designated input fields with appropriate information applicable to her case.

As a security precaution, both the proposed process and all aspects of the Safety Planning Application are designed to avoid storage of any kind of victims' personal data.

In sum, the Safety Planning Application is a valuable tool for practitioners to use when conducting online counselling. It provides a safe way for the victims to access needed information to protect themselves and their loved ones.

Pilot trainings

To assess the training outputs of the project, local Pilot Trainings were conducted. The goal was to target at least 100 learners in total, i.e. social scientists, psychologists & counsellors who would participate in the local Pilot Trainings (Local Seminars). UWAH, WSIC, Nexus and FU each selected 25 people to participate in the trainings. In selecting participants, partners practiced the principles of equal opportunities and gender equality, taking into account their background and experience in Counselling, Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse. All participants engaged in feedback, evaluation and recommendations on the training material and pilot. Feedback from the pilot trainings would be used to update the material before finalization and launching.

The trainings combined weekly face-to-face workshops and self-paced learning through the e-Course over four weeks. Using the online platform all participants were able to assess their gained knowledge through tests, evaluate the course and give feedback. Feedback from training facilitators was also collected and assessed to further improve the learning platform.



One of the issues that most facilitators faced concerned usage of online feedback forms. Our experience showed that it might be more effective to collect the feedback from the participants once the training is over via paper print outs. In our case participants were asked to fill in the online questionnaire from home after the end of face to face activities. Many of them were reluctant to come back to the feedback once they had already finished the learning process and received their certificates. This negatively affected the quality of feedback data that we had to work with, as only 71 persons out of 111 (63.9%) had filled in the form. Thus, as a general recommendation it could be advised to prepare feedback forms as printouts. The DISCO Post-training questionnaire could be used as an example and adapted for the needs of your training.⁹ Below you can find some general information about the background of participants and more detailed information about training sessions in the project partner countries.

9. Available via URL: <https://forms.gle/7pdkTEbZX7bJJYiw8>



In Greece & Cyprus

In Heraklion, Crete, the trainings were conducted between 21 June - 12 July 2019. In order to enroll the participants, different dissemination channels were used. For example, facilitators published the invitation to the training in local newspapers for several days. The invitation explained the purpose of the training, the fields that were to be covered and the kind of professionals it was intended for. Facilitators also used the network of professionals in Heraklion: the invitation was sent to their mailing list that included social services organizations and other consultation centers. Information about the training was also published on the official Facebook page of UWAH and shared by the staff of the organization on their personal Facebook profiles. Facilitators also contacted academic institutes with social care students and invited them to the online training.

Relatively soon, the number of applications exceeded the required minimum, so the training was provided to 25 people. Five additional people interested in the training were invited to complete the online training and form the control group. Unfortunately, two of the online trainees, dropped out during the course, so only 3 completed the post training evaluation assessment forms.

In Nicosia, Cyprus, the training took place between June 19th and July 15th, 2019. In preparation for the training, the organizers at Frederick University sent an invitation out to their mailing list. The contact list included professional groups, social services and other consultation centers in Cyprus. At Frederick University they also have an extended list of social work professionals who used to be under and/or post graduate students. The call for the

training was forwarded to this network as well. In addition, the invitation was put on the University's Facebook page, and reposts were made to the personal Facebook profiles of the staff to reach the required number of participants. In total 25 people participated in the training and an additional three people formed the control group, doing the online part only.

According to the data from the registration form, most of the attendees were social workers (53%) and psychologists (31%) from social services and private practice. Most of the participants had heard about distance counselling before the training but didn't have a clear idea how to use it (57%). A majority of the participants (90,2%) were never previously trained on distance or online counselling. The audience was mostly female (84%) and had less than two years of experience in the profession (56%).

The trainings were successful according to the professionals who attended it, due to its practical form. The role playing, the face to face activities, and all the other activities that were used kept the counselors motivated and interested throughout the training. According to the feedback data, the most insightful topics concerned encryption tools; assessing the appropriateness of clients for distance counselling; and how to effectively supervise

and end the counselling process. Participants shared the opinion that they were positively surprised from the training methods used, as they were different than other lectures they have attended. Some suggestions for improvements to the online platform, included better synchronization of the audio to the slides shown. Also, some difficulties were encountered during the processing of the results from the questionnaires in the platform (i.e. each time a participant visited the platform from a different computer to view the modules and their questionnaires, he/she had to register from the beginning, which resulted in having a vast number of registrations in comparison to the number of participants that completed the training and the questionnaires).

“Participants shared the opinion that they were positively surprised from the training methods used, as they were different than other lectures they have attended.”

Finally, the purpose of the training was overall

achieved due to the in-person component of the training and the interactive learning activities. The in-person component is integral part of the online course. This is the reason the control group which took only the online course was less satisfied. In general, facilitators and participants expressed satisfaction with the training. The majority of the participants were overall satisfied (Agreed or Strongly Agreed) with the learning activity (in-person+online 100%/online only 80%), with the lecturer/instructors (100%/80%), with the training environment and with the quizzes after each Module (100%/80%).

In Estonia

The Pilot Trainings were held in Tallinn, in August 2019. Prior to the training a Facebook event was created and shared among relevant stakeholders, including paid Facebook event boost, and a registration poll was set up. Invitations were also sent to different agencies who deal with counselling in Estonia via email and contacted directly by phone as were previous and current partners of Women's Support and Information Center. Outreach was also done through the Estonian Social Insurance Board, who distributed information about the training in their circles. 16 people were registered for the course, 13 finished it and 2 people took the online course only. A major reason for the relatively low turnout was that during the summer in Estonia it is quite hard to get people to participate in different trainings, since it is the vacation season.

Most of the participants in the training were from help lines/women's centers and victim support services. Most had 5-9 (22,2%) and 10+ years (38,9%) of experience in working in their profession. 89,9% of the participants had

not been trained regarding online counselling before, but 50% of the attendees claimed that they could explain what online counselling is and how it works and had used it previously. This indicates that in Estonia many professionals use online counselling without receiving relevant training on the topic.

Overall the feedback from the participants was positive. On a scale 1-10, 100% answered 8, 9 or 10 when rating the overall learning experience and 100% agreed, that they gained useful information on the benefits & challenges of working at a distance with women victims of abuse.

The course was set up in the way that there were 3 different trainers for 4 training days. As lecturers were different, students liked the variety of experience lecturers provided. Participants would have liked to have more practical examples from life/experiences and suggested that instead of meeting once a week for four weeks, it would be better to have the in-person trainings more frequently. For example, 4 half-day in person sessions in course of two weeks.

In Northern Ireland

The training took place in Belfast from July 20 to August 15 and had 20 participants. Additionally, five people did online component only and formed a control group. To reach out to potential participants, the organizer emailed their own staff and other counselling professionals and people working in the helpline and invited them to participate. The response was very good as counselling practitioners in Northern Ireland are keen to get involved in distance counselling as this is the way forward, especially in working with the younger generation.

Majority of the attendees were from a counselling center, mainly counsellors and psychologists. Most of the participants had 5-9 (44%) and 10+ years (47%) of experience in working in their profession. 82% of the participants encounter victims of violence in their daily work “often” or “very often” and nearly two thirds of the participants had some ideas what at a distance counselling is, but they didn’t know when or how to use it. All the participants consider at a distance counselling “important” or “very important” and that the priority level of using it is “medium” or high”.

The course flagged up a lot of practical questions, especially around what to do with notes, whose responsibility it is to destroy them, how long are they kept, etc. Also, questions about legal responsibilities and the legislation around online work were very



Comparison of trainees in Greece, Cyprus, Estonia & Northern Ireland

	Greece+Cyprus	Estonia	Nothern Ireland
Social workers	53%	5%	6,4%
Psychologists	31%	14%	19%
1st time trained	90%	90%	87%
Female	84%	100%	89%
# of Years of Experience			
0-2	56%	24%	9%
2-4	13%	14%	6%
5-9	13%	19%	40%
10+	18%	43%	45%

apparent. In terms of the course, the feedback suggested to plan more time to implement it and address legal and relevant legislation questions and integrate using Skype or other online means to the course.

Suggestion from participants were that the online course should include practical elements so counsellors can cement their knowledge in a practical way (e.g. having template emails for counsellors to respond to and working in pairs for practice in synchronous counselling).

All in all, the course made students and counsellors think about actually doing

counselling online. It gave an opportunity as a team for the organizers to consider the positives and negatives of doing counselling work online. It gave food for thought and now as an organization they will be looking for funding to do this work. The counsellors are keen to get involved in this.

To sum up the pilot trainings, the developed curriculum and the content of the online course give a comprehensive insight to distance counseling. It covers all the necessary basics and is a good starting point to get familiar with the topic.

Practical guide

Traditionally, psychological therapies have been conducted face-to-face, with immediacy both in terms of responsiveness & physical presence. In recent years different ways of engaging in therapeutic contact have emerged, partly predicated on the rapid development of communication technologies with which the general population is familiar & comfortable. This includes systems for written communication (such as email or online “chat”), along with systems for audio communication (using public telephone networks or internet-based telephony) or for audio-visual communication (videoconference). These provide the opportunity for synchronous communication (where each person’s response is responded to immediately) or for asynchronous communication (eg. exchanges via email, where there is a delay between sending a message & receiving a response). Some of these technologies operate through the internet, others do not. What unites all of them is that the therapist & client are not physically present in the same space, & may not be present at the same moment.

As online communication is prevailing in our daily lives nowadays; we consider essential for victim support organizations & counselling practitioners working with women victims of violence or abuse to develop Distance counselling (CaaD) competences so as to provide alternative, accessible & modern support services to beneficiaries.

In DIS.CO. project, analytical activities, exchanges of knowledge and good practices between project partners were undertaken in order to develop appropriate training material & tools. These activities aimed at investigating

the needs of the recipients of support services, i.e. women that are victims of violence or abuse, as well as the needs of the providers of victim support services, namely the counselling professionals. DIS.CO. addressed the necessity for the development & dissemination of comprehensive material (curriculum & course) on CaaD focusing on counselling practitioners working with women victims of domestic or sexual violence or abuse. Despite the fact that the majority of victim support organizations conduct distance counseling through teleconference (Helplines) or other means; counsellors & volunteers did not receive specialized training on CaaD and had

“Despite the fact that the majority of victim support organizations conduct distance counseling through helplines or other means; counsellors and volunteers did not receive specialized training on CaaD and had no training material that complied with ECVET principles.”

no training material that complied with ECVET principles and would be openly accessible. Through DIS.CO., training material as well as distant learning tools are now available for free, online and in all project languages (English, Spanish, German, Greek and Estonian). More specifically, the needs of the providers and

of the recipients of counselling services were investigated in order to produce extensive educational material and online Course (e-learning) as well as a Safety Planning Application to guide and facilitate counselling professionals.

Moreover, the project is complementary to the mainstream research and teaching activities of the Departments of the participating Higher Educational Institutions (ie. Counselling, Victim Support); as well as for the preparation of students regarding counselling services. It is equally complementary to the work of the Civil Society Organizations that provide counselling services to women victims of violence or abuse and wish to improve their capacity and expand their services.

Recommendations for practice:

- Online counselling services should be used to complement existing face-to-face services rather than replace them;
- Survivors of violence who cannot afford online technology (by any means) cannot benefit from the provision of distant counselling;
- Online services are not appropriate in emergency situations;
- The professionals participating need to be aware of how to ensure the safety of the survivors and also need to inform the survivors in terms of what they can do to ensure their safety when using ICT;
- Professionals working with survivors of abuse will need to determine what type of identity information they require from online help seeking survivors prior to engaging in service provision, as identifying information may be needed if the professional will need to respond to an emergency (i.e., suicidal threat, harm to other threat, or admission of child abuse);
- Counsellors need updated knowledge and additional training on knowledge regarding the particular group of clients, legislation/legal issues, and IT knowledge;
- Integral features of a distance counsellor are the ability to



“distance him/herself somewhat”, “show integrity” and being “free of prejudices and bias”;

- Core skills of at a distance counsellor are readiness to respond quickly, ability to “read” the situation quickly and stay focused on one topic rather than discussing various issues in once;
- The training of online counsellors must include information about the special issues involved in OC and close supervision while learning the necessary skills;
- The Safety Planning Application will guide and enable the counselling practitioners working at-a-Distance to propose and design a safety plan for the victims/clients and monitor their progress;
- The training material and online course complement each other and are best implemented together;
- For collecting feedback, printouts should be provided;
- The training tools and Safety Planning application can help Counselling Practitioners such as social workers or psychologists working with victims of Domestic Violence better serve existing clients & reach new ones;
- Training Material, e-Course and Safety Planning Application are all accessible for free online on <https://discoprojectcom.wordpress.com/>.



