PROFILE OF COUNSELLOR
“AT A DISTANCE”
Leading Organization: University of Crete

Participating Organizations

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Intellectual Output 2 - Profile of Counsellor “at a distance”

The main aim of IO2 can be described as follows: “Research and analysis to identify the necessary competences for counselling at a distance 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 Counsellor Profile with the assistance and contribution from all partners.

The activities that were employed in this IO were the following ones:

1. Collected structured information from all partners;
2. Identified the skills & abilities needed for counselling at a distance;
3. Identified the skills gap, needs of counsellors & challenges;
4. Identified the competences that need to be developed;
5. Data analysis of collected data;
6. Developed the profile based on current state of art; and
7. Finally, the counsellor profile will be revisited and revised after receiving feedback during project implementation (end of 2019).

This report is structured as follows:

1. Describing the skills & abilities needed for counselling at a distance
   Information based on literature review is presented in this section.

2. Describing the skills gap, needs of counsellors & challenges
   Information based on literature review is presented in this section.

3. Presenting the competences that need to be developed
   Information based on literature review is presented in this section.

4. Developing the profile based on current state of art
   In this section the necessary competences for establishing the profile of “at a distance” counsellor working with women victims of domestic and sexual violence and abuse are presented.
1. Describing the skills & abilities needed for counselling at a distance

Counselling is a process of engagement between two people, both of whom are bound to change through the therapeutic venture. At its best, this is a collaborative process that involves both the counsellor and the client in co-constructing solutions to concerns. Counsellors are not in business to change clients, to give them quick advice, or to solve their problems for them. Instead, counsellors facilitate healing through a process of genuine dialogue with their clients. The kind of person a counsellor is remains the most critical factor affecting the client and promoting change. If practitioners possess wide knowledge, both theoretical and practical, yet lack human qualities of compassion, caring, good faith, honesty, presence, realness, and sensitivity, they are more like technicians. It is essential that counsellors explore their own values, attitudes, and beliefs in depth and work to increase their own awareness. In summary, some of the basic skills and abilities needed for counselling at a distance are the following ones:

**Excellent listening and communication skills**

The essence of counselling is the establishment of a therapeutic relationship in which the client experiences being heard and understood with sensitivity. An effective counsellor can communicate empathic understanding as well as being able to listen carefully.

**The ability to develop a non-judgemental approach**

A counsellor’s job isn’t to pass judgement or give advice on a client’s actions or feelings. Instead through talking therapy they aim to help clients see things clearly, from a different, more optimistic viewpoint. To do this client’s needed to feel free to express their thoughts and feelings without judgement, criticism or rejection. Counsellors need to contain and manage their own reactions in a supportive and professional manner.

**Confidentiality**

- Counsellors should inform clients of the standard limits to confidentiality (e.g. child abuse reporting mandates) and the threats to confidentiality that are unique to electronic transmission of information (Fisher & Fried, 2003).
- Counsellors should take steps to mitigate the risk of potential security breaches for example, secure websites and e-mail encryption should be used (Manhal-Baugus, 2001).
**Jurisdiction/Culture**

- Online counsellors should be familiar with the licensure restrictions and exemptions in their jurisdiction and the jurisdictions in which they clients are located (Zack, 2008).
- Counsellors need to develop sensitivities to the differences in meaning and nuances across cultures. They must be careful in making conclusions about things such as names and idiomatic expressions (Fenichel et al., 2002).
- Counsellors should prepare for a client in a particular location by becoming familiar with local cultural norms and recent local events (Sampson Jr., Kolodinsky, & Greeno, 1997).
- The intake form could contain information regarding the ethnic and cultural background of the client (Frame, 1997); however, this may be perceived as bias on the part of the therapist (Midkiff & Wyatt, 2008).

**Boundary Issues**

- Counsellors must take steps to avoid encouraging undue familiarity or excessive dependence (Bailey, Yager, & Jenson, 2002).
- Counsellors can attempt to maintain boundaries with respect to expectations for immediate responses by establishing a time frame for responses (Kanani & Regehr, 2003).
- Counsellors must work with clients to establish rules with regard to appropriate use of e-mail communication (Tate & Zabinski, 2004).
- The tone of e-mails should always be professional (i.e. avoid anger, annoyance and other unprofessional tones) (Silk & Yager, 2003).
• Counsellors should use the same professional tone and language that is used in the office. Inappropriate jokes, unprofessional social or self-disclosing remarks should be avoided (Gutheil & Simon, 2005).

**Duty to Warn and Protect**

• Counsellors should have back up resources to avail themselves of in the event of an emergency. Maheu (2003) recommends that backup resources include the emergency department of a local hospital, a trusted colleague, the client’s primary care provider, his or her specialty provider or a family member.

• Counsellors should be part of a network of e-therapists so as to be able to obtain assistance or effect referrals to someone in a client’s local jurisdiction as required (Kanani & Regehr, 2003).

• Crisis situations requiring quick response should not be addressed online and clients who are experiencing such situations should be encouraged to seek face to face counselling (Murphy, MacFadden & Mitchell, 2008).

**Informed Consent**

• Counsellors should fully describe the online services to be provided as well as any factors that might discourage clients from wanting to participate in online counselling (Shapiro & Shulman, 1996).

• Counsellors need to make clients aware of additional risks due to the online medium (e.g. confidentiality, possibility of technical difficulties, possibility of misunderstandings due to limitations inherent in text-based communication and difficulties intervening in the case of an emergency) (Zack, 2008).

• In obtaining informed consent, counsellors must disclose the fact that there is little empirical evidence on the benefits of online counselling (Kanani & Regehr, 2003).

• Counsellors should stay aware of emerging developments in research as to the efficacy of online counselling, including research as to which clients can benefit from online counselling and which modes of online care are most beneficial (Oravec, 2000). Informed consent should be an on-going process that is re-evaluated periodically as new information about online counselling becomes available (Recupero & Rainey, 2005).

**Scope of Practice**

• Counsellors should contact their licensing body to ensure that they are able to practice e-therapy (Kanani & Regehr, 2003).

• Counsellors should contact their insurer to ensure that their policy covers online counselling (Murphy, MacFadden & Mitchell, 2008).
Access

- Agencies should seek grants and other forms of funding to develop and support programs to bring technologies to those in greatest need and actively engage in outreach (Jencius & Sager, 2001).

Time Delay/Technological Failure

- Back-up procedures to be implemented in case of technological failure (such as telephone contact by the counsellor) should be provided to the client in advance of commencing online therapy (Jencius & Sager, 2001).

Loss of the Human Factor/Lack of Non-Verbal Cues/Impact of the Written Word

- Two techniques suggested by Murphy and Mitchell (1998) are emotional bracketing and descriptive immediacy. Emotional bracketing involves bracketing the emotional context behind the typed words to allow the client to hear the intended vocal tone in the words. Descriptive immediacy involves providing the client with images that will give him/her a context for understanding the counsellor’s words.

- The use of metaphor, story-telling and poetry can also be used to convey quality and intensity of emotion, as well as to broaden levels of meaning (Murphy & Mitchell, 1998).

- Use spacing and pacing techniques to exercise a higher degree of control over the online counselling process (Murphy, MacFadden & Mitchell, 2008).

- The use of “smileys”, emoticons and other commonly used symbols can convey not only facial expressions but also a variety of emotional nuances (Fenichel et al., 2002). The client and counsellor can develop a set of standardized emoticons and acronyms. It can be tailored into the software used for online practice or the client can be provided with a sheet of the emoticons and acronyms (Menon and Miller-Cribbs, 2002).

- To prevent misunderstandings, the counsellor should check with the client often to make sure the client understands what the counsellor is saying and that the counsellor understands what the client is saying (Stofle, 1997).

- Counsellors should actively check in with clients with follow-up questions to comments that may cause concern (Zabinski, Celio, Jacobs, Manwaring & Wiffley, 2003).

- Monitor clients for potential barriers to continuing with online counselling (Abbott, Klein, & Ciechomski, 2008).
2. Describing the skills gap, needs of counsellors & challenges

In this section the skills needed for counsellors and the main challenges they face when working at a distance are presented. Some of the main challenges are the lack of human presence, lack of non-verbal cues, technological skills and failures, differences in technology, cross cultural considerations, previous online experience and online victimisation of vulnerable peoples.

**Lack of human presence:** There is much discussion that the essence of counselling is based on human interaction, this is something that is missing from online therapy as therapist and clients are not in the same physical space. Therefore, the inability to engage face-to-face may weaken the development of a therapeutic alliance between the therapist and client due to this lack of perceived intimacy (Maples & Hans, 2008).

**Lack of non-verbal cues:** Many counsellors feel that non-verbal cues are even more important than verbal cues in some therapeutic settings (Sussman, 2004). Due to the lack of facial expressions, body language and tone of voice, therapists are missing vital information and clues to how a client is feeling and being and this may result in miscommunication (Hunt, 2002).

**Technological skills and failures:** Online counselling makes the assumption that both therapist and client are familiar with certain available technologies, however many people may lack the necessary skills required to engage in this kind of therapy. The counsellor and client must also be fairly good writers and typists (Speyer & Zack, 2017). According to Hunt (2002) points out that certain people may be considered as not suitable for online counselling in this respect such as illiterate people, elderly people, people with specific medical conditions such as dyslexia, mental illness such as schizophrenia, or people from certain cultural groups such as first nations peoples. Technological failures or difficulties with software or hardware may result in delays or interfere with therapy causing unnecessary harm towards the client if he or she needs to urgently speak with their counsellor (Lee, 2010).

**Differences in Technology:** There may be differences between telephone, synchronous chat, asynchronous e-mail, and videoconferencing regarding quality of care. Yet, at this point,
the research largely neglects these questions. It is possible that counseling by telephone and videoconferencing is superior to synchronous chat and asynchronous e-mail because nonverbal cues are transmitted instead of text. It could be argued that videoconferencing would be most successful in connecting a client with a counseling psychologist because of the technology’s video and audio capabilities. However, text-based communication such as synchronous chat and asynchronous e-mail may also be useful in certain situations.

**Cross cultural considerations:** According to Suler (2001) states that while cross cultural considerations are important in in-person counselling, the issues presented may be unique and augmented to online counselling when the client is living in a country that is geographically distant or unknown to the therapist. The communication might be impeded by differences in language or should the therapist not be familiar with the client’s culture in order to conduct successful counselling.

**Previous Online Experience:** According to Mallen et al. (2003) the dynamics and process of online relationships should use some measure of online experience. Communicating effectively through asynchronous e-mail, synchronous chat, and videoconferencing takes time and practice. They found that as online experience increased, participants reported a greater amount of closeness in synchronous-chat conversational dyads.

**Online victimisation of vulnerable peoples:** According to Finn and Banach (2000) the internet is not regulated and thus is a breeding ground for online harassment, cyber stalking and victimization. They indicate some of the risks that may be encountered when people, particularly women, seek online counselling via the web. Due to no regulations established, anybody may set up a website and offer counselling. Therefore, if clients are not vigilant they can place themselves at risk by not confirming the identity and credentials of whom they are communicating with (Finn and Banach, 2000).

**Danger and Duty to Warn:** One of counselor primary ethical responsibilities in practicing therapy is to avoid harming the client and they have an ethical duty to warn or duty to protect if clients present a danger to themselves or others. As a result, clients who pose a danger to themselves or others may not be good candidates for online counselling. This caution applies to a range of possible clients, including serious substance abusers and clients
presenting psychotic or actively suicidal concerns. Furthermore, to help ensure that therapists can take steps in an emergency, it has been suggested that they must know the identity of any client that they work with in an online setting and be aware of emergency services in the client’s area. Counsellors are able to intervene in the case of an emergency only if they have information (Kraus, 2004; Suler, 2001).

**Scope of Practice:** Online counsellors must be licensed in each state or province where they provide services or perform activities that fall within the “scope of practice” of that jurisdiction’s psychology licensure or practice act. As with the practice of different types of counselling, specializations, and working with various types of clients, it is counselling psychologists’ ethical obligation, both in training and in practice, to ensure that they have received adequate preparation and training to demonstrate competence in their selected areas of work. Although it is true that determining “competence” in the area of online counselling is currently more ambiguous than in other areas of counselling psychology or specializations, this lack of clarity does not mean that counselors should abandon standard scope-of-practice guidelines.

**Confidentiality:** Another problematic ethical issue related to online counselling is maintaining confidentiality. For instance, to conduct online sessions through synchronous chat or asynchronous e-mail, a counsellor must take steps to limit the risk of a third party’s receiving or stealing the information shared during an online session. The most common security step is to use encryption to safeguard the data transfer when communicating to a client. The process of encryption can be accomplished in multiple ways, with different products and programs available, and with varying levels of protection (Zack, 2004).

**Record Keeping:** Another issue surrounding confidentiality, specific to online counseling, is the ease with which one can save what transpires during a therapy session. Either the counselor or the client could save transcripts from synchronous-chat sessions or from asynchronous e-mails to have an accurate log of what transpired. This has both potential benefits and negative outcomes. It could be beneficial for a counsellor to have an accurate account of what occurred with a client to refer back to when developing future treatment plans. This may allow counsellor to make sure that they are focusing on client strengths and assessing
how much growth has occurred during the course of treatment. In addition, it may also have potential benefits for the client to reflect on important statements generated in counselling and to facilitate further work on the material independently.

There are also several risks associated with saving transcripts. Most important, if the client or the counsellor decides to save the messages, then another person might be able to retrieve them. As such, the counsellor should inform the client about the potential benefits and confidentiality risks associated with either party’s having a transcript of the sessions or discussions. In addition, if a counselor was planning to save transcripts from synchronous-chat sessions or from asynchronous e-mails, he or she should inform the client of this practice and gain consent in a fashion similar to that required for videotaping and saving face to face sessions (APA, 2002).

**Use of Information:** The ability to store what transpires between the counselor and the client also raises the issue of how this information is used. While it is possible for the counselor to review entire session logs to monitor a client’s development, the client or someone related to the client could also use the transcripts in a legal proceeding. Counselor can minimize these potential ethical and legal dilemmas by forming a common agreement with precise language in an informed-consent document. The process of informed consent can be replicated in online counselling and can be updated to include policies in regard to what might happen in specific situations. Counselor should continue to adhere to standard ethical codes regarding careful documentation, supervision and consultation when ethical or legal dilemmas do arise (Arredondo, Shealy, Neale, & Winfrey, 2004).
3. Presenting the competences that need to be developed

In this section the competences that need to be developed by counsellors when working at a distance are presented. Some of the basic competences are the multicultural competence and the computer-mediated communication competence.

**Multicultural competence in counselling:** Multicultural competences require a combination of cultural awareness and sensitivity, a body of knowledge and a specific set of skills. Counsellors have to:

- Learn more about how their own cultural background has influenced their thinking and behaving. Take steps to increase their understanding of other cultures.
- Identify their basic assumptions, especially as they apply to diversity in culture, ethnicity, race, gender, class, spirituality, religion, and sexual orientation. Think about how their assumptions are likely to affect their professional practice.
- Examine where they obtained their knowledge about culture.
- Remain open to on-going learning of how the various dimensions of culture may affect therapeutic work. Realize that this skill does not develop quickly or without effort.
- Be willing to identify and examine their own personal worldview and any prejudices they may hold about other racial/ethnic groups.
- Learn to pay attention to the common ground that exists among people of diverse backgrounds.
- Be flexible in applying the methods they use with clients. Don’t be wedded to a specific technique if it is not appropriate for a given client.

**Computer-Mediated Communication Competency:** Although counsellors may be extremely skilled in face to face therapy, they may not be able to successfully transfer these skills to an online environment. To effectively deliver online mental and behavioral health services, it is vital to gain experience in the necessary communication technologies. It would not be wise for a practitioner to conduct online sessions through synchronous chat if they were unfamiliar with the technology.
Counsellors interested in providing online-counseling services may also need to practice how to communicate effectively through text based asynchronous e-mail and synchronous chat. A counsellor may be very skilled in verbalizing empathy during face to face sessions; however, text-based online counselling renders those verbalizations irrelevant unless they can be communicated through the text-based program. The counsellor must learn to adapt, or the working alliance and outcome of the session could be negatively impacted. In face to face sessions, a counsellor can use body language to communicate emotion and understanding, but he or she must translate this communication into text. Therefore, counselors would benefit not only from gaining experience with CMC technologies and with general typing skills but also from becoming more educated about writing.

**Online Competences**

- Counsellors should seek out training necessary to acquire competence in online counselling (Zack, 2008).
- Online counselling training should cover technology, theory, applications and ethics (Fenichel et. al., 2002), as well as licensing laws (Maheu, 2003). It should also include skills in text-based communication (Murphy, MacFadden & Mitchell, 2008) and protecting client information online (Wells, Mitchell, Finkelhor, Becker-Blease, 2007).
- With respect to technological competence, counsellors should only use software that is congruent with their capabilities or if new software is used to expand competencies (Sampson Jr., Kolodinsky, & Greeno, 1997).
- Counsellors must develop an ability to interpret the style and content of e-mails written by the client; this is especially important with youth given that youth have developed their own language on the internet that is “characterized by abbreviations, spelling phonetically, and the absence of many of the rules of grammar” (Kids Help Phone, 2005, p. 21).
- Counsellors must assess the client’s suitability for online therapy, looking at such factors as knowledge of computer systems and internet technology, motivation and capability of experimenting with new communication environments and techniques; and physical or cognitive problems that may limit ability client’s typing ability and/or ability to read and write (Suler, 2001).
### 4. Developing the profile based on current state of art

In this section the necessary competences for establishing the profile of “at a distance” counsellor working with women victims of domestic and sexual violence and abuse are presented (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional Values</th>
<th>Personality Features</th>
<th>Professional Values</th>
<th>Core skills</th>
<th>Necessary Training</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>high standard of professional and ethical competence</td>
<td>remain professional even in difficult cases</td>
<td>a sound knowledge of issues regarding your particular client group</td>
<td>emotional resilience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>trustworthy</td>
<td>respect</td>
<td>suicide awareness</td>
<td>able to listen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>protect client confidentiality</td>
<td>learn resilience</td>
<td>life experience</td>
<td>respond in an appropriate manner</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>establish professional boundaries</td>
<td>distance yourself somewhat</td>
<td>up to date knowledge of current practices in counselling</td>
<td>be flexible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Consistency</td>
<td>be first and foremost un-judgmental</td>
<td>be educated about counseling techniques</td>
<td>read the situation quickly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>directness</td>
<td>be open minded</td>
<td>solving a crisis (shock reaction, trauma)</td>
<td>modify approach, e.g. language use, tone, voice</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>immediate</td>
<td>keep calm</td>
<td>legislation</td>
<td>reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>empathy</td>
<td>show integrity</td>
<td>welfare issues</td>
<td>put the client at ease</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>genuineness</td>
<td>self-collected</td>
<td>intimate relations</td>
<td>excellent listening skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>unconditional acceptance</td>
<td>determined</td>
<td>risk management</td>
<td>paraphrase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>being as much problem-solving oriented</td>
<td>understandable</td>
<td>safety planning</td>
<td>stay focused on one topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>discretion</td>
<td>free of prejudices and bias</td>
<td>higher stress tolerance</td>
<td>capacity to identify and decode characteristics, situations, incidents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>put your client first</td>
<td>be in therapy of his/her own personality</td>
<td>expert in domestic and sexual violence</td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>non-judgemental attitude</td>
<td>ability to investigate the incident</td>
<td>IT and electronics knowledge (technical)</td>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>being patient</td>
<td>self-control</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>orienting clients</td>
<td>to recognise and manage his/her taboo/ideologies</td>
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<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>trustiness</td>
<td>open to listen</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>reliable</td>
<td>not imposing their opinion</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>respecting human rights and dignity</td>
<td>politeness</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>appreciating the variety of human experience and culture</td>
<td>accepting of a need for supervision</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>adhere to code of conduct</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1.** The necessary competences for establishing the profile of “at a distance” counsellor working with women victims of domestic and sexual violence and abuse.
It is obvious that data collected was rich and fruitful. A brief analysis of each of the identified competences is attempted in this section.

**Professional Values**

It is evident that at a distance counsellors (like face-to-face counsellors) must 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’ code of conduct, Psychologists’ code of conduct, etc.), it was revealed that most of the organisations offer online counselling 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**

The personality features are considered to be additional and “supplementary” features that can support at a distance counsellor. For example, the ability to “distance him/herself somewhat”, “show integrity” and being “free of prejudices and bias” are competences that have to be integral features of at a distance counsellor.

**Underpinning Knowledge**

It is believed that data collected in this section has to be carefully considered for further exploration. In particular, there are three categories in which there is need for updated knowledge and additional training is required on: 1) knowledge regarding the particular group of clients, 2) legislation/legal issues, and 3) IT knowledge.

**Core Skills**

There is a great similarity between the core skills identified in literature review and those stated by participants. However, it is important to highlight some skills that were revealed only by participants, who have great experience in the field as “at a distance” counsellors. These are the following ones: 1) readiness to respond quickly, 2) ability to “read” the situation quickly and 3) stay focused on one topic rather than discussing various issues in once.

**Necessary Training**

Lastly, it was revealed that training should be compulsory for at a 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 deemed to be another necessity for “at a distance” counsellors.