

Online Therapy and Social Interaction

by Scott McNutt

Therapy comes in many forms, with different counseling approaches in psychiatric or psychological consultations. Counseling may be done with individuals, couples, families and groups. Different conditions may require different treatments, including, for example, psychotherapy, behavior modification, prescription medicines, music, art or play therapy and much more. With the expansion of the Internet, the means of delivering therapy are taking on new forms as well – many accessible from your computer.

For people who have limited mobility, have limited access to transportation, are geographically isolated, or who have conditions that make it difficult to comfortably interact on a social or personal level, these forms of online therapy, or e-therapy, offer opportunities for care that were perhaps previously unattainable. New technology that uses Internet applications is also allowing therapists to treat conditions in ways unforeseen 2 decades ago. And people are using the Web to connect with others they would once have had difficulty meeting.

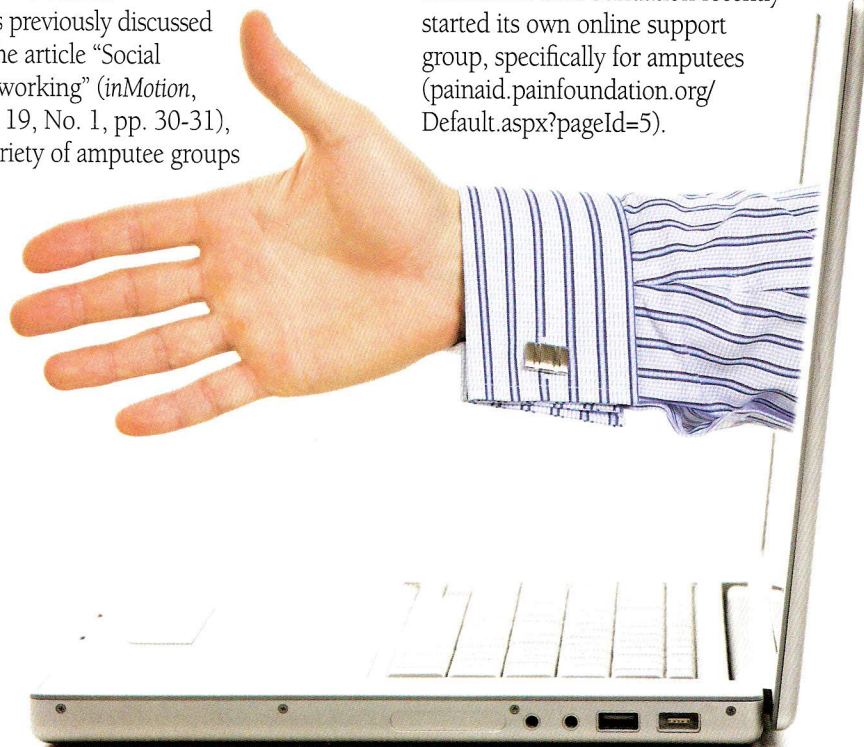
Also, a vast array of possibilities awaits those who seek to interact online through nontraditional means. Online social networking sites like Facebook provide people the means to connect to others without knowing them in person. Support groups, forums and blogs associated with a myriad of topics, causes and conditions abound online.

As previously discussed in the article "Social Networking" (*inMotion*, Vol. 19, No. 1, pp. 30-31), a variety of amputee groups

are online, including one sponsored by the Amputee Coalition. Since the publication of that story, the ACA's Amputee Communicator Forum has changed its format from moderated discussion to that of an online bulletin board; members can post messages 24/7 and "discuss" issues without concern for accessibility, transportation or availability.

"For the online forum, pros include the obvious – the ability to log in from anywhere, any time, day or night," says Charlene Whelan, ACA grants coordinator. "Also, forums allow a kind of anonymity that can appeal to folks that just want to test the waters, so to speak, or to keep their privacy." Registration for the Amputee Communicator Forum is for amputees only, and the ACA ensures that participants' privacy is maintained.

New online amputee support groups and forums are launching regularly. For instance, the social network site amputeenetwork.org just opened, and the American Pain Foundation recently started its own online support group, specifically for amputees (painaid.painfoundation.org/Default.aspx?pageId=5).



"Amputees may find themselves, at least initially, with limited options to interact with others facing the same challenges," says Derek McGinnis, the American Pain Foundation's Amputee Outreach Program advocate and Military/Veterans Initiative advocate. "Our PainAid discussion boards and chat rooms provide an opportunity for amputees, military and civilian alike, to do so regardless of mobility and transportation issues. They give the participant a way to re-engage with society with people who truly understand what they are going through and 'feel their pain.' They can discuss the unique challenges they face due to the loss of a limb, the chronic and phantom limb pain that often results, and all of the related issues for the amputee and their family such as depression, financial hardships, family stresses and more."

PainAid membership is free and members can log in 24 hours a day to read the posts from fellow pain patients and respond if they wish to participate. There is also an opportunity to ask questions of its experts (nurses, doctors and other professionals) who can provide information to educate the amputee and their family about the issues surrounding pain.

Virtual reality (VR), in which participants use technology to interact with a three-dimensional virtual environment, is being explored for its therapeutic applications. The American Stroke Association recently released a study that shows virtual reality games hold the potential to help stroke patients improve motor function, and VR has been studied for its usefulness in treating amputees' phantom pain (amputee-coalition.org/inmotion/mar_apr_07/phantom_treatment.html). In addition, the U.S. Army recently launched a 4-year study to track the use of VR therapy to treat veterans of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan with post-traumatic stress disorder.

U.S. service members also participate in counseling online. In fall of 2009, the military health program TRICARE began a trial run of the online counseling program, TRICARE Assistance Program. Service members and family members 18 and



older can use Skype and a Webcam to go online to interact with marriage counselors and other similar professionals to help them deal with stress, family and relationship problems, anxiety and other issues.

According to DeeAnna Nagel of the Online Therapy Institute, online counseling has been growing since the mid-1990s, and it is now practiced in every state in the U.S. and in countries around the globe. She notes benefits such as the availability to those with mobility or transportation issues, and that neither patient nor therapist has to factor in overhead like transportation costs to and from an office.

"In addition, many people like the anonymity that online therapy can provide," she says. "While clients' and therapists' identities should be revealed to one another, there is still a sense of anonymity due to the lack of physicality. This can sometimes allow for more openness during therapeutic exchanges. People may be more comfortable with varying methods of delivery, from e-mail and chat to virtual worlds and videoconferencing. Today, there are many more options than a decade ago."

Nagel also notes that online therapy is limited by a person's access to technology and that anyone actively suicidal or in an acute stage of a chronic mental illness needs immediate intervention or assistance rather than online therapy.

Judy Gifford, who operated her own counseling business, FindingStone Counseling Center, and eventually founded the online therapy Web business eTherapistsOnline.com, also

points to online therapy's overhead cost savings and ease of access for those with limited mobility, lack of proximity to counseling services, or conditions that limit social interaction. She adds that online therapy's growth is fueled by the demand of consumers accustomed to online commerce.

"I think it's something that's really consumer-driven," she says. "More consumers purchase things online – especially the younger generation. They order everything online – movie tickets, pizza, clothes,

everything. So, to see a therapist online is second nature. It's consumer-driven now, and it will be more consumer-driven in the future."

Those interested in pursuing this type of counseling can search the Internet for terms like "online therapy" or "online counseling" and find many options. Nagel says that all 50 states require that a person be licensed in the state to practice counseling and psychotherapy, and some states restrict therapists from working across state lines.

Therapists should have their license number posted on their Web site, and they should be able to inform potential clients how to check the license with the state licensing board. The client should be assured that communications will be encrypted. Privacy and informed consent policies should be available on the Web site. Nagel notes that counseling should not be received through unencrypted Web boards, forums, e-mail or chat rooms.

Although some proponents of the traditional, one-on-one, real-space therapy have expressed concerns about how well a therapeutic relationship between therapist and client can be maintained in cyberspace, online therapy seems likely to grow in popularity as access to the Web expands and simplifies. Those considering online therapy should assess how comfortable they are with the concept before pursuing it. If potential clients decide to go forward, they should be confident that the service they choose works with licensed, insured therapists. ■