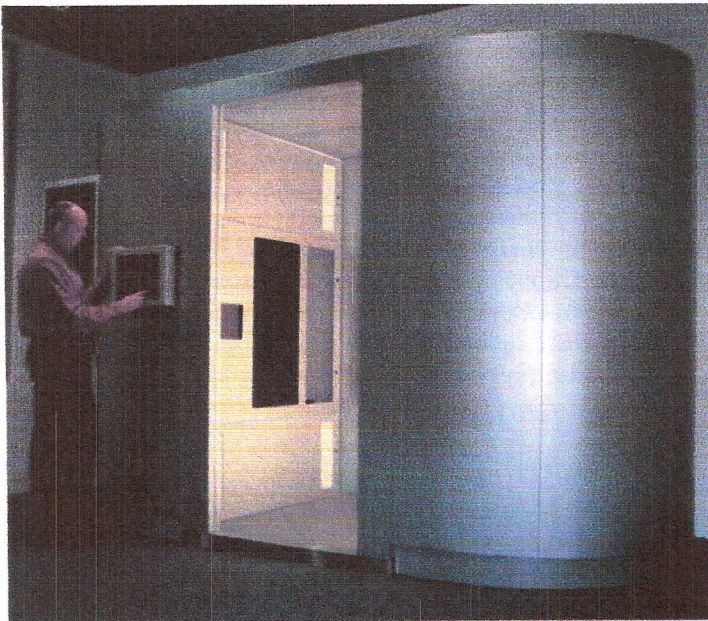


Virtual counsellors - whatever next?

It is already possible to have a computer-generated image of yourself placed in a computer-generated room. A similar image of your client could then talk to your computer image with each of you controlling (and hearing) not only what is said, in real time, but also emotional expressions and gestures. If virtual reality headsets were to be added, it would even be possible to give the appearance of actually being in the room, seeing things from the perspective of your computer generated self and being seen by others in the same way. **Stephen Goss** and **Kate Anthony** visited BT's Radical Multimedia Lab where the most sophisticated versions of this technology are currently being developed



training is available. While not yet endorsing such practices per se, BACP has led the way by publishing not only discussion documents but perhaps the most detailed set of guidelines for the ethical practice of online counselling yet produced anywhere in the world.

There are other possibilities too, however, which are barely yet thought of as ways to deliver therapy, that might have some advantages over traditional methods. For example, it is already possible to have a computer-generated image of yourself placed in a

computer-generated room. A similar image of your client could then talk to your computer image with each of you controlling (and hearing) not only what is said, in real time, but also emotional expressions and gestures. If virtual reality headsets were to be added, it would even be possible to give the appearance of actually being in the room, seeing things from the

perspective of your computer generated self and being seen by others in the same way.

BT Exact Technologies' 'Radical Multimedia Lab', based near Ipswich, is currently developing some of the most sophisticated versions of this technology. One's whole self is scanned into the computer from all directions by stepping inside what appears to be a cross between a passport photo booth and the kind of scanner you might see connected to ordinary PCs in homes and offices everywhere. A photographic image of your entire body is then produced with the aid of the computer and given three-dimensional depth, and then animated to behave just as you like.

At present the computer representations (known as 'avatars') are not so lifelike in either their appearance or movement to be able to simulate the experience of a face-to-face meeting. However, exploration of the experience of therapy provided in this way in the future is being pioneered by BTEXact and onlinecounsellors.co.uk. looking at its acceptability with clients, its effectiveness and questions like what pros and cons it might have in comparison with traditional methods or, say, video-conferencing as a way of

INCREASINGLY the world of counselling and psychotherapy is open to the possibilities of new applications for information and communications technology. The DoH are already carrying out an in-depth review of computerised CBT and it is increasingly easy to find counsellors who 'see' their clients via email, Internet chat or through video-links and specialist

providing services at a distance. But while there may be some way to go before the technology is sufficiently sophisticated, the history of technical development in this field has long been that ideas that at first seem impossible become, once properly developed, so commonplace that they are no longer even remarkable. 'Radical multimedia' already deserves our serious attention.

'Avatar' therapy

There are, at least, two possible uses for this 'avatar therapy', a term coined by Kate Anthony of onlinecounsellors.co.uk. One is its possible use in conjunction with the current attempts to provide CBT by a computer without the aid of a therapist. The computer programme could itself have an avatar represented on screen. Existing software can then make it feasible to 'talk' directly with the computer programme using everyday speech and phraseology. The programme is then responsible for responding in such a way as to offer an experience that is genuinely therapeutic.

The second possibility, which is perhaps less dependent on creating avatars that are quite so natural-looking, might be for group therapy. Imagine being able to join a therapy group from anywhere in the world, perhaps led by a world leading specialist based in a country far away, and being able to do so with complete anonymity, even from other group members – and yet still have the advantages of being able to see them. It would be possible for a therapy group to meet only in a virtual space. Using avatars that did not resemble yourself (there is no reason to restrict the appearance of an avatar – you could equally well use one that looked like anything you wish) would mean that you could not only access the group from wherever you and your computer happen to be but would also preserve complete anonymity, even from other group members, while retaining something like the normal group experience of seeing as well as hearing and reacting to what the other group members say and do. This might be a distinct improvement on the nearest equivalents currently available, such as using private internet chat rooms that rely only on text.

Other innovations

Any such developments would of course have to be thoroughly researched before

they could be used for therapy provision itself. Any evidence-based profession must equip itself with evidence of both positive effect and of safety of use before launching into the use of innovative methods – indeed, BACP's position with regard to the more familiar email and chat for therapy provision remains cautious until sound research has demonstrated what can and cannot be achieved.

Whether 'avatar therapy' is to become one element of the future of counselling and psychotherapy is yet to be seen. But given the pace of developments in the field it is impossible to rule it out and those practitioners with a technological bent

might do well to keep an eye open for whatever uses it may, ultimately, be shown to have. What other innovations the technologists might have up their virtual sleeves we will have to wait and see. ■

Stephen Goss is BACP's Research Development Manager. Kate Anthony MSc, runs OnlineCounsellors.co.uk which provides consultancy, ongoing research programmes and training for counsellors wishing to work online. Tailored training is offered both online and face to face. She is also a counsellor with Oxleas Health Trust in South East London. Contact: Kate@onlinecounsellors.co.uk

