

A Day in the Life of an Online Therapist

I love my job. It's strange to say that out loud, but my job is exciting, new and part of the digital revolution that is our world. I am a tech-savvy clinician, and this is right up my alley!!!



STEPHANIE TORINO

I begin my day at 7:45am, sitting at my desk with a large tea and bagel in hand. I check email, get my First Chat profile up and running, open up all the documentation I will need, and make myself ready to accept the first clinical consult of the day. It is now 8 AM, and I am ready to tackle the day head-on!

Chat, you say? Chat, I say! I am a First Chat clinical counsellor for Shepell•fgi. By “chatting” I mean online instant messaging using secure encrypted chatting software that allows clients from all over the country to access services 24 hours a day. First Chat offers clients a solution-focused clinical consultation through which they can confidentially address their issues, be they financial concerns, relationship issues, or anything in between, under the guidance of a trained clinical counsellor. First Chat is also a wonderful gateway through which clients can be connected to more specialized Shepell•fgi resources or other referrals as appropriate.

I need to be open-minded, flexible and well-versed in netiquette and internet jargon. I am challenged on a daily basis to deliver the best counselling possible because we all know that one wrong word can result in the client taking offence where none was meant. I have always been a stronger writer than speaker, and it pleases me to know I am providing writing support to those who also feel more comfortable in the virtual world. Clients tend to get to the point more quickly, speak their minds without fear of judgement, and will share things they would not normally share because chatting gives the impression of intimacy without having to look someone in the eye while bearing your soul to a complete stranger.

Seeing as I do not get any visual or audio cues from my client, I have to pay extra attention not only to what is typed, but to the tone of the conversation, the delivery and structure of the phrases, how long it takes for the client to finish their train of thoughts, what they are not saying, the grammar, spelling and punctuation they use. I have to depend on my skills and experience to tell me when something is appropriate, when I am touching on a sensitive subject, how to engage the client, how to focus them, and how to let them guide their own experience as well. It’s like driving a car: you have to multi-task and concentrate on the present, but also anticipate the possible route the other driver may take.

As for the client experience, First Chat has exceeded expectations. From what the clients have said, it is a tool that provides “instant gratification”. Client comments include “thank you so much!”, “I feel fortunate to have this service available to me”, “given that I work in a cubicle, with so many ears around me, this discrete service is incredibly valuable to me”, “service was fast and no wait time for a counsellor, keep up the great service!” and “great and accessible service”. As the modality allows clients more time to reflect and articulate their thoughts before making their final comments, more so than they may at the end of a final face to face or telephonic session, I practically receive this kind of feedback on daily basis.

Although traditional-minded professionals might suggest that “chatting” is not a clinically viable way of dealing with mental health issues, as we saw when we first launched e-counselling over a decade ago, I am here to say not only is chat an extremely effective and sound clinical practice, it is a natural evolution of writing therapy and e-counselling. It takes the power of the written

The screenshot shows the Shepell•fji website. At the top left is the logo. The navigation menu includes: Home, About Us, Programs & Services, For Employers, Blog, Contact Us, For Employees & Families, and Contact Your EFAP. The main banner features a family photo and the text: "EMPLOYEE AND FAMILY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM" and "Expert support for any concern". Below the banner is a "What's New" section with two items: "Understanding Mental Illness microsite" and "First Chat". To the left of the "What's New" section is an "Articles & Resources" section with two articles: "Visit, learn and share our new online issue-focused resource, Understanding Mental Illness, today." and "Visit the Shepell•fji Blog to find out more about cultivating healthy, engaged and productive employees".

word and offers clients the opportunity to seek counselling outside of conventional means, such as face-to-face or telephone counselling. In today's day and age, people are communicating more through the written word than any other modality. This is the natural result of our technological advancements and is an extension of the new social media trend. If you know how to BBM, IM, tweet, or text then chatting is the modality for you. It appeals to those who wouldn't

normally seek professional help for many reasons, such as social stigma, privacy & confidentiality concerns, access issues due to lack of mobility or transportation, verbal communication challenges and social phobias. I am offering a valid and valued service that is paving the way for unique and effective counselling. I am proud to say I am part of this new virtual era where we have combined old world communication with the new technology of today.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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For Stephanie's full biography, please see our feature "First Chat: Attracting New EAP Users through Online Text-Based Chat Services"