

Barb Veder, Stephanie Torino and Kelly Beaudoin

# FIRST CHAT

## Attracting New EAP Users Through Online Text-Based Chat Services



As consumers adapt to an ever-changing technological world, they expect their service providers to keep pace and offer new and innovative experiences.....▶

.....► Many of today's services have transitioned online to meet the increasing demand of customers who want instant gratification, to access them when and how they'd like. They expect to shop, bank, and book a vacation via the Internet, 24/7/365, using only a few keystrokes.

Social media innovations like live chat tools are being developed to provide clients with immediate and private counselling support in a secure setting. This type of environment provides individuals with a level of anonymity which can appeal to those who are looking for an alternative to in-person counselling.

Shepell•fgi, the leading provider of integrated health and productivity solutions supported by a full range of programs and services to address the mental, social and physical health issues that impact employee and organizational health, offers a product called First Chat in the synchronous text-based clinical counselling space.

## THE BENEFITS

In text-based counseling, the client and counsellor communicate in writing, so that the

information can be reviewed at a later point by the client and kept as a reminder of a course of action to follow. Essentially, the client receives real-time support at the moment that they need it most. It is an immediate, engaging, and positive experience that draws upon a person's strengths to explore options for moving forward. As the individual makes decisions or investigates options to resolve a situation, they have a counsellor at their fingertips to help guide them along the way.

Morneau Shepell's First Chat provides individuals with professional counselling through chat services. Individuals correspond via text with a qualified counsellor for immediate clinical support regarding their work, health, or life issue, 24 hours a day. Issues can include such things as work-life stress, parenting, or relationship-related concerns.

## THE RESEARCH

Research was conducted on First Chat via post-chat surveys to measure the overall level of client satisfaction with the service. Data was also randomly sampled from 407 chats taken from December 5, 2011 to January 31, 2012, and was compared against utilization data from the company's suite of Employee Assistance Program (EAP) support services for 2011.

## THE RESULTS

Results indicated the following:

- 94% of First Chat users reported feeling comfortable using chat as a clinical counselling service, indicating that text-based communication is an attractive and accessible method for clinical support.
- Young adults under the age of 39 accounted for 57% of the First Chat user community, and users in their 20s access First Chat two times more than other EAP access options. (First Chat users must be a minimum of 18 years of age.)
- 65% of the user population was female. This remains consistent with all other forms of counselling support.
- Feeling supported and provided with immediate relevant information to address their issues, 87% of users would recommend First Chat to other potential clients.

Another interesting finding was that 65% of First Chat users were new clients that had not previously reached out for EAP support services. No longer deterred by waiting for appointment times in a brick-and-mortar office, individuals now have more choice as to how and when they receive the support they require.

## IMPROVING ACCESS

Barriers that previously prevented some individuals from seeking clinical counselling for themselves or their family members have been greatly reduced or

altogether removed due to the freedom that technology offers. These include obstacles such as:

- perceived stigma,
- fear of loss of privacy,
- access issues such as lack of mobility or transportation,
- verbal communication challenges, and/or
- social phobias

A client can now travel and still have a constant link to clinical support. The concept of mobility coupled with privacy is fostering the emergent success of this new form of support.

Other elements of end-to-end intake services are also going online. Users can now book,



confirm, and/or change appointment times via the Internet. In fact, the telephone is being increasingly replaced by text and/or online tools and the convenience and immediacy that it provides.

## QUALITY

Delivery is very important in the online environment. Best-in-class online clinical practices ensure you have a user-friendly platform that is secure, protecting both the confidentiality and privacy of the individual. The platform should support the needs of the user while also being adaptable. Online users are notorious for moving on to another provider if an application is cumbersome, expensive to access, or somehow violates their privacy rights.

Another important factor is the standard of clinical quality. While a clinical support company needs to be constantly developing and innovating to keep sustained user interest in their services, the core principles of clinical counselling should remain the driving force. When the client accesses the provider's services online, they expect to receive the same type of issue identification, risk assessment, support, and solution suggestions as they would in-person.

A clinical counsellor who transitions to the online space requires targeted training and must develop a technology-enriched skill set to deliver counselling in this non-traditional

realm. They must have reliable computer hardware with a secure operating system and high-speed access to the Internet. They also need to remain current with technology (i.e., tablets, smartphones, etc.) and the applications that run on them. By having a solid understanding of technology, the online counsellor can troubleshoot issues that may arise during an online session to prevent these issues from dominating the therapy session.

In addition to developing trust and mutual respect between themselves and the client, the online counsellor needs to be able to use the written word and netiquette (a way of talking in shorthand and using symbols to indicate emotion) to communicate warmth, openness, and genuineness and to deliver a clinically-appropriate message. The ability to accurately interpret the client's mood from plain text and respond accordingly to foster a supportive environment in the technological space is an acquired skill.

## QUALITATIVE RESULTS – CLIENT FEEDBACK

*“With today's office environment moving towards cubicles without any privacy, the internet chat is great for being able to discuss things and get info without the whole floor knowing”*

*“It is very good way to communicate, especially for those whose English is second language, who is shy, or nervous, is more comfortable this way*

*to start conversation. Thank you”*

*“Thank you, I needed the service immediately and you were there, thanks”*

*“Much easier to communicate online rather than phone”*

## OUTCOME

Based on the growing presence of online technology and devices in our lives, online clinical counselling services are expected to continue to increase in popularity and daily usage. The potential for service providers to expand and diversify their client base and to assist these users with new and innovative methods is just a click away. Reaching out to a counsellor for immediate support should be as simple as reaching out to a friend through chat.



# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

### **Stephanie Torino, MA Counselling Psychology**

*First Chat Supervisor and Client Care Counsellor for Shepell•fgi*

Stephanie has over 20 years' experience in the counseling field, and has been with Shepell•fgi since 2010 when she signed on as Bilingual Client Care Counsellor in the Montreal Care Access Centre. Stephanie has been involved in the development and supervision of First Chat since August of 2011. Stephanie began her clinical career creating and leading parenting workshops for community centers, and transitioned into giving anti-bullying workshops to adolescents and young adults. In the past 10 years she has created and led workshops for the First Nation's population that specifically address family and youth issues in private practice setting and founded the MMFCA- Montreal Multicultural Family Counselling Association (January 2009). Stephanie specializes in working with clients with suicidal tendencies and alcohol and drug dependency, and received special training in Mental Health Disaster Response Counselling regarding Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and trauma related to natural and man-made disasters.

### **Barb Veder, MSW RSW**

*Director of Clinical Services for Shepell•fgi*

Barb Veder has spent 17 years working in the EAP field, including 15 years as Clinical Director with Shepell•fgi. Barb has extensive experience in addictions counselling and a strong interest in research and counsellor education. She is also committed to contributing to the development of resources and support for individuals struggling with depression, anxiety and other mental health issues. She is a past President of the Board of Directors for both the Mood Disorder Association of Ontario and the Employee Assistance Society of North America. She was also the 2011 recipient of EASNA's Contribution to the Field Award. Barb is also the clinical leader of Shepell•fgi's Digital Management team, which has launched North America's first EAP Smartphone application (My EAP).

### **Kelly Beaudoin**

*Clinical Communications for Shepell•fgi*

Kelly Beaudoin has been part of the Clinical Services Team for over 11 years as the key writer/editor and manager of the Clinical Communications team. As the editor of Shepell•fgi's WorkHealthLife blog, she is a prime example of why an Honours English degree (from Ottawa U) isn't as useless as some may think! Kelly thoroughly enjoys working with her counsellor and clinical management colleagues, and is in grave danger of exploring an MSW herself one day!