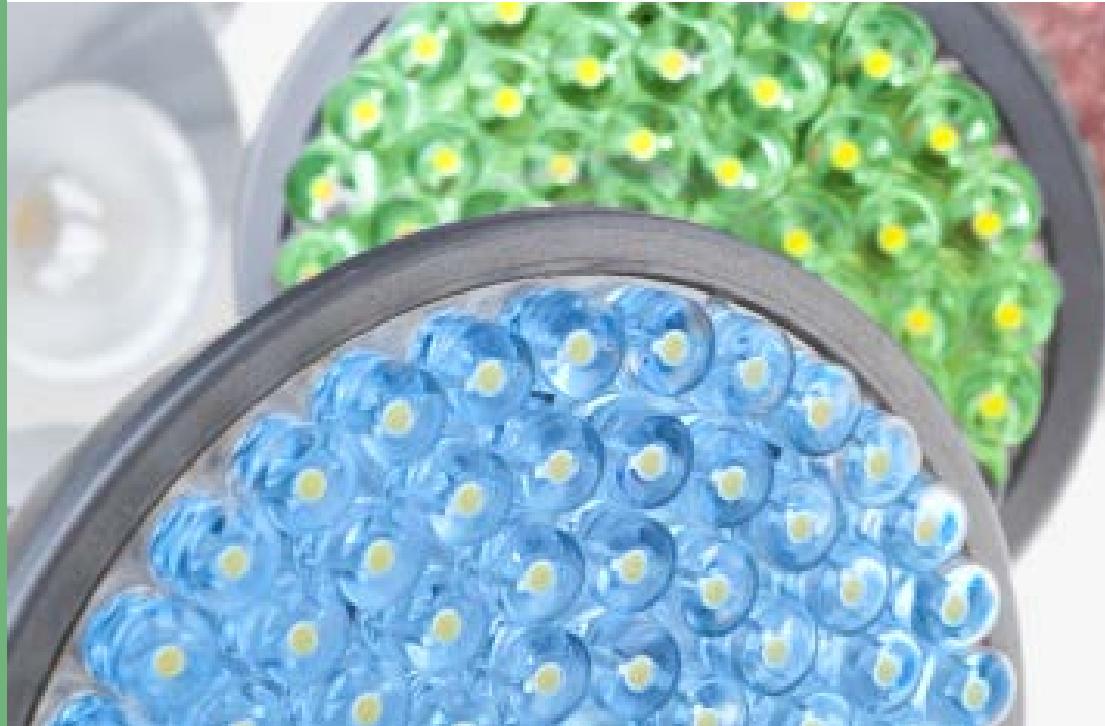


GAMBLING THERAPY SPOTLIGHT



by Jane Fahy

I'd been counselling compulsive gamblers for the Gordon Moody Association for two years when I was approached about delivering support and therapy to problem gamblers online. The decision to provide online support had been taken a few years earlier on the basis that GMA had 40 years experience in the field, which not many organisations can say! So they decided to give the global online community access to their expertise and the Gambling Therapy website was born.

Now I'm no stranger to a chat room and have been known to play a fantasy MMO or two in my time but I'll be honest, I wasn't convinced! How could I convey empathy, compassion and understanding via a computer screen? How could I work with body language without a body to observe?

Putting my reservations to one side I logged on to GT and found a therapeutic community so rich, so diverse and dedicated that no one could fail to feel the power of digital culture at work across continents as these people held hands in cyberspace.....corny right? Yup, but also true. ☺ I was touched by the peer support I had witnessed and as I started to deliver e-mail, group and chat support I was struck by the strength of feeling I had time and time again when engaging with these people. Stranger still, they could perceive this depth of feeling and they responded to it! So I had to admit it, I'd fallen in love with online therapy....

I would like to say here that the epiphany didn't mean I magically became an expert in online therapy, far from it! So I reached the decision to seek training and this led me to the Online Therapy Institute. I approached my training as I approach most things, with intent to be "perfect". Everything had to be written correctly and my interactions had to be professional and precise. But something was missing from those early interactions, and that something was ME. As with face to face therapy, the therapist is the therapy and attempts to hide behind academia just made me incongruent which as we all know is a pretty big no no.

The beauty of training online was that I relaxed into the course much more quickly than I had done in previous face to face settings. I had the benefit of being able to think through responses on forums which meant that I didn't hold back just in case I said the "wrong" thing. If I needed help between webinars I could access that either through a quick and easy e-mail to Kate or by asking my peers on the forum. I guess the continuation of support between "classes" is one of the main benefits of studying online along with the speedy feedback received on each assignment confirming whether or not I'm on the right track.

With my new relaxed approach I quickly injected my personality back into online interactions and forged a more genuine connection with my peers. This useful lesson is one I use in client work as people often apologise in early communications for spelling/grammatical errors. I can use my experience to educate individuals about the importance of being "real" and not sweating the small stuff

☺ In essence, I give clients permission to be themselves.

Through both training material and experiential learning with the OTI I have learnt that using the internet to deliver therapeutic interventions can enhance rather than detract from the process as I had initially feared. Individuals who are shy in reality can find themselves unburdened and liberated by the anonymity and freedom afforded to them in an online environment. They may fear rejection less than they would if attempting to speak to someone face to face because they always have the "log off" button if they need to remove themselves from an intense situation. Although the safety of knowing the button is there means that clients rarely use it.

There has been no other time in history when human beings have been so free to invite others into their reality, to connect at any time regardless of location with others thousands of miles away and share genuine shining moments of understanding with them. Online therapy allows client and therapist to work shoulder to shoulder each assisting the other in the evolution of online support and therapy.

I don't know about you, but I'm pretty excited to see where this goes ☺ See you in cyberspace! ■

About the Author

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