



*by Berta Rodrigues*

## **Online Services - My Evolution**

In 1997, I was in the process of completing my second year field placement as a Master of Social Work student. At that time, I remember hearing about email therapy and one day I was talking to one of my peers about it. She was flabbergasted about it and didn't want it to gain popularity. I remember having several simultaneous thoughts: that it was impersonal and unethical, or that maybe I was being closed minded and hadn't considered the potential benefits of it and that it would become a lot more common if for no other reason than it being more convenient than driving to an office location.

Since that time, I have periodically thought about incorporating online services but still didn't feel completely at ease about it. I continued to have concerns about liability and ethics and also worried that client privacy could be easily compromised. Between 2003 and 2006, I began to do more research and when I made inquiries about it to my professional association it was clear that it was frowned upon and that

some of the policies and laws in regards to online therapy were non-existent or ambiguous. I was told that it was imperative to use encryption and to obtain regular professional consultation about how to incorporate online services ethically.

In 2008, I began to have severe health problems that compromised my immune system and along with many other symptoms I was experiencing debilitating fatigue. Once again, I began to contemplate the use of online services because I had a limited adrenaline reserve and thought that if I provided online services I could conserve some physical energy. I could not afford to be on disability and truly did not want to stop working. I learned about the Online Therapy and Coach Institute's (OTI/OCI) courses, and began to realize that incorporating online services would take some time unless I did it haphazardly. I was not only concerned with the legalities but it was even more important that I could tell my clients that their sessions would be private.

My health has improved gradually and in January 2013, I started the OCI coach certification course and have learned so much about the benefits and challenges of online services. Throughout this year, I have created a life coaching website that meets professional ethical guidelines and is linked to my encrypted virtual office. Although creating a website and setting up my virtual office was challenging, it was also empowering and it educated me further about many online technologies. I also learned how to incorporate social media such as a business Facebook page and Google+ account.

I am in the process of completing my OCI field placement and have been providing video coaching sessions to a client who is a first time

mom caring for her 4 month old daughter – not having to drive to a physical location affords her more time to spend with her daughter. Overall, it has been fun and fulfilling to offer online services. At times, it has also been challenging because of technical difficulties, such as echoing noise or slight communication lags. This does not deter me though because all systems are not without some error. For instance, there are interruptions that can occur even when seeing clients in person. In my private practice and in agency settings, I have experienced dealing with a variety of noisy distractions such as construction site noise, beeping of car horns or someone knocking at my door during client sessions. What I've found is that you can use some of the online technical difficulties to your advantage. For instance, I have become even more mindful of my communications to optimize my client's session time and not interject unnecessary comments that can interrupt my client's flow of thought and expression. I'll soon be incorporating audio conference, email and echat therapy and coaching sessions. There is so much flexibility with online services which offers many possibilities for the future practice of therapy and coaching. Both in person and online services are valuable and should be individualized based on the client's needs. ■

## About the Author

***Berta Rodrigues** is a psychotherapist licensed in the states of NJ and NY. She provides psychotherapy and life coaching in her West Milford, NJ office. She also teaches graduate and undergraduate courses with Rutgers University and has done trainings with Montclair State University's Child Welfare Training Partnership. For more about Berta see [www.heartmight.com](http://www.heartmight.com)*