Providing an online counselling service to people affected by cancer and other life threatening conditions.

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Introduction

We Hear You is a charity that provides free professional counselling to anyone who has been affected by cancer or other life-threatening conditions. We support children, young people and adults across Bath and North East Somerset, Somerset and Wiltshire. Providing over 90 one-to-one counselling sessions each week in over 10 locations. The majority of our counselling is delivered, face to face. This pilot project to offer online counselling was developed as an innovative method to help support more clients across our area and to make our service more accessible.

Methods

There is a limited amount of published research on the effectiveness of online counselling (1). Research has tended to focus on online services for young people provided by educational establishments and voluntary organisations. We followed British Association of Counselling Professionals (BACP) guidelines when undertaking this evaluation (2) (3).

This evaluation is a practice-based research project measuring the effectiveness of the online counselling service provided to the 15 clients aged over 16 who had completed a course of up to ten sessions in the period 2015-2016.

This type of evaluation falls into the category of ‘effectiveness research’ which investigates therapy in routine settings using pre and post measures but without a control group. However, for this evaluation it has been possible to compare the CORE results (4). CORE records outcomes in counselling measuring levels of functioning, seriousness of problems, and levels of wellbeing and risk, between the seven clients who had completed online counselling with the 106 who had completed face to face for the period July 2015 to June 2016.

Given the small sample size, the evaluation places more emphasis on qualitative rather than quantitative aspects of the service, although some statistical evidence is used.

Five types of evidence have been used in the evaluation:

- The CORE evaluation sheets completed by clients before and after counselling measuring the effectiveness of the intervention
- Evaluation completed by clients after they have finished counselling.
- A questionnaire completed by clients who had completed a course of online counselling, including a follow up interview if taken up.
- A questionnaire completed by the five counsellors providing online counselling, including a follow up interview if taken up.
- Feedback from the clinical supervisor, in the form of a commentary on the findings and recommendations of the evaluation.

Results

The online pilot evaluation demonstrated that

- There were much lower rates of non-attendance compared to face to face counselling
- Online counselling recorded higher levels of effectiveness and improvement using the Clinical Outcomes in Routine Evaluation (CORE) method.
- The Core Outcome Measures compare show the average improvement for clients who received face to face counselling was 44% (n=106). For clients who received online counselling the improvement was 62% (n=7).
- The evaluation showed the primary reason for taking up the offer of online counselling was the convenience of not having to travel, incur transport costs or take time off work.
- The primary disadvantage was not being able to see the counsellor in person and to read body language. Technical problems did not feature to any significant extent.
- The overall experience of online counselling was very positive for all clients, and they would recommend it to others.

Conclusions

The evaluation demonstrated that for those clients who took up the offer of online counselling:

- it was as effective as other types of counselling
- Online counselling improves accessibility for clients with a range of different needs (geographic, transport, disabilities and illness, caring responsibilities and issues of self-esteem)
- the outcomes were very positive as measured by CORE
- they experienced significant improvements in before and after outcome scores
- they were generally very satisfied with the counselling they have received and would recommend online counselling to others
- their primary reason for taking up the offer was the convenience of not having to travel, incur transport costs or take time off work.
- Their stated primary disadvantage was not being able to see the counsellor in person and to read body language. Technical problems did not feature to any significant extent.
- they all felt they were adequately supported online
- they were not constrained about saying things on line that they would have said face to face.

Whilst the initial take up of online counselling during the pilot was slow, we have taken the service forward and built it into our core offer to clients and this has helped in making the online service more viable and part of the work that the charity undertakes.

The demand for the service has risen and is now consistent with other areas of our work.

We will be building in flexibility to this service enabling clients to switch between online and face to face counselling and training all our therapists to deliver our online platform.

References

(2 & 3) Professor Tim Bond, Working Online, Good Practice in Action 047 and Dr Nicod Davies, Social Media (audio and visual) and the counselling professions, Good Practice in Action 040
(4) http://www.coreims.co.uk/index.html

"I had a small baby at the time of my diagnosis, so trying to get a [face to face] appointment would have been very difficult" - online client

"Far easier than visiting a centre." - online client

"I felt the need for counselling and living in a remote location, online was perfect!" - online client

"I have been surprised at how emotionally attuned I can be to a client online, and even allow and work with silences, in a similar way to face to face." - online counsellor