

Cybercounseling: Characteristics and Barriers for Use  
in School Counseling Programs

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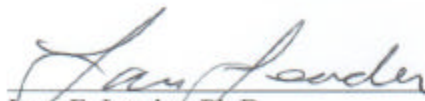
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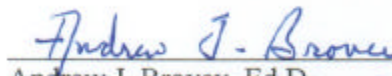
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Cybercounseling: Characteristics and Barriers for Use  
in School Counseling Programs

Michael Brian Law

### **Abstract**

With the impact of technology, the time has come to address alternative ways to providing counseling by integrating technology and using the Internet as an avenue of counseling. This electronic form of counseling is called cybercounseling. The purpose of this study was to explore counselor knowledge, opinions, ethical concerns, legal concerns, and recommendations for implementation of cybercounseling in the schools and to test a site to see if parents would use the site as a means of counseling and communication with the school counselor. The researcher polled attitudes of practicing school counselors to see what their attitudes were concerning the implementation of cybercounseling in the school setting. The researcher gained insight in how to implement this form of counseling in schools. A pilot website was implemented and advertised to parents soliciting usage from parents and students at a rural, elementary school in Southwest Georgia. The researcher found that little is known about this new innovation and that a number of concerns expressed by the respondents should be explored before the diffusion of this innovation is adopted. Suggestions to aid in narrowing the gap of how to implement this innovation and overcome some evident barriers were offered by certified professional school counselors. The interactive website proved that parents and students would use it if one is made available to them.

## **Cybercounseling: Characteristics and Barriers for Use in School Counseling Programs**

Cybercounseling is a relatively new concept of counseling technology made possible by the introduction of the Internet to this field of psychology. Cybercounseling is defined by John Bloom as “the practice of professional counseling and information delivery that occurs when client(s) and counselor are in separate or remote locations and utilize electronic means to communicate over the Internet” (Morrissey, 1997). Cybercounseling uses a form of electronic communication in the place of face-to-face or telephone mediated communication.

As schools are incorporating the use of the Internet and other related services, it is inevitable that this form of counseling will be provided. However, the literature suggests that there are ethical, legal, and procedural factors that may inhibit implementation of cybercounseling in schools. Part of this action research project studied the views of professional school counselors on these barriers of implementation. The focus or independent variable in this study was the possible implementation of cybercounseling techniques in school counseling. The study looked at information gained from practicing school counselors to determine their ideas and attitudes about the ethical, legal and implementation concerns surrounding cybercounseling.

Cybercounseling can take many different forms. One form is the use of electronic messages or email. In this form of counseling the client and counselor correspond using email services (Jagers, 1998). A second part of the action research will focus on a form of cybercounseling using the Internet to communicate with counseling clients. This study included implementation of a pilot school counseling website that was accessed

by parents and students. The website contains pertinent school counseling topics for parents and allows parents to send emails requesting counseling services.

## **Literature Review**

### Cybercounseling

At this point in time, there are no theories or techniques to guide cybercounseling. As Suler (2000) suggests, this lack of guidance poses many questions and limitations that could inhibit the growth and understanding of cybercounseling as a professional, legal and ethical enterprise. Does this new communication medium require a separate group of unique theories or will the current theories of counseling and development apply to this medium? Will there be a need for special training and certification for one to practice as a cyber counselor? These are a few unanswered questions that guide the limitations and ethical dilemmas that will be described in this paper. Cybercounseling is a part of electronic communications and must be regulated in a fair, ethical manner for all persons (Morrissey, 1997).

### Limitations

Computers do not offer the human interaction that is present in a face-to-face consultation in the counselor's office. The use of human interaction allows the counselor to use verbal cues in vocal expression and facial expressions to determine the feelings and status of the client. If these elements are missing, the counselor may be inhibited from making an accurate diagnosis (Lee, 1998). In traditional counseling, the result of genuine human face-to-face interaction aids in the development of rapport, a necessary

component in counseling. This practice would be limited with electronic counseling (Morrissey, 1997).

Without face-to-face identification the counselor cannot determine if the client is really who he says he is. Therefore, the person on the other end of the computer may not be the actual client but could be a hacker or person who has intercepted the message. There would be a breakdown in confidentiality because the client's personal information would be shared with another individual. Making sure there is a clear, secure network and using encryption and user verification software will aid in overcoming this problem (Suler, 2000). Another possible obstacle is that a user may find it hard to keep up with the demands of the latest technology in order to have the fastest connections and correct software for proper Internet communications (Morrissey, 1997).

One major barrier that will hinder the use of cybercounseling is the digital divide. The digital divide is the barrier that limits certain economic levels from having access to technology. In the United States there is a great gap in wealth between rich and poor. New technologies such as the Internet are not readily available in all households. A recent statistic from the United States Department of Commerce revealed that family incomes of \$75,000 and higher are 20 times more likely to have access to the Internet than those at the lowest income levels and more than 9 times more likely to have a computer in the home. Caucasians are more likely to have access to computers in the home than African Americans and Hispanics. Rural families are more limited in access than their urban counterparts (Bloom & Walz, 2000).

### Ethical/Legal Considerations

Regulation of online counseling is an issue. There are many questions that concern ethical practices. The following questions are similar to those found in the review of literature on cybercounseling: Who will provide the license and certification (if any) to counsel via the Internet? Is cybercounseling really considered counseling? Can people actually believe advertisements of counseling services in web sites? How will malpractice insurance cover electronic counseling? Who evaluates the competence of the counselor? If a counselor makes mistakes, who will reprimand him/her? Will different states regulate counseling via the Internet differently? And, as Hughes (2000) asks, who will determine what state guidelines apply if a counselor is counseling a client from a state that is different from his/her own residence? Few if any state licensing laws address online counseling. Therefore, an argument can be made that state laws currently do not prohibit the use of cybercounseling (Love, 2000).

As with certified practicing physicians, counselors would need certain standards for licensure. Web counseling standards from the National Board of Certified Counselors (NBCC) list certain ethical codes that online counselors must follow. The ethics include:

- A review of pertinent ethical and legal codes
- Informing clients of encryption methods
- Informing clients if and how long data will be kept
- Verifying parental/guardian approval for services to minors
- Discussing procedures of how to contact a counselor in ways other than online
- Obtaining a name of at least one counselor on call in the client's home area
- Explaining the possibility of technological failure

These standards are made necessary by the accessibility of counseling via the Internet (Morrissey, 1997).

### School Counseling Issues /Standards

School counseling standards were implemented to be a statement of what students should be able to do as a result of participating in school counseling programs. This accountability for counselors is the key to effective counseling programs. Measurable success can be evaluated by looking at the increased number of students who complete school with academic preparation, career awareness among students, and the personal/social growth in the students that allows them to make sound choices for their lives. Thus, the school counseling standards are based on academic development, career development, and personal/social development (American School Counselor Association, 1997).

### Ethics of School Counseling

The American School Counselor Association has issued ethical standards for school counselors. These ethics are to serve as a guide for ethical practices of all professional school counselors regardless of level, area, populations served and geographic area. They provide a benchmark for self-appraisal and peer evaluations of programs that fall under the responsibility of the school counselor. The ethics are stated to allow those who supervise practicing counselors to insure accountability of services provided (American School Counselor Association, 1998).

The ethical codes address confidentiality of students and families. Counseling plans are discussed and jointly named with the counselee in the planning phase. The counselor avoids dual relationships that may harm clients. The counselor must make

appropriate referrals to outside agencies when necessary. The counselor provides for group counseling sessions. The counselor informs others when the client is at harm to himself/herself. The counselor maintains secure records that are confidential. The counselor adheres to professional standards when administering evaluations and assessments. Counselors respect the inherent rights and responsibilities of parents. Counselors must be sensitive to cultural and social diversity among families and provide equal rights. Counselors must be sensitive to others' multicultural backgrounds. The counselor accepts the responsibilities of his or her own actions (American School Counselor Association, 1998).

Concerning technology and ethical considerations, the school counselor promotes the benefits of computer applications and "clarifies the limitations of computer technology" (American School Counselor Association, 1998). The counselor must insure that the counselees are capable of using the applied technology. Members of under represented groups are assured equal access to computer technologies with absence of discrimination. If a counselor does communicate with counselees via the Internet, he/she should consult the NBCC standards for web counseling (American School Counseling Association, 1998).

### **Setting**

In Georgia, there is a move for more use of technology in the schools. This initiative could bring up the issue of implanting a cybercounseling program within school counseling programs. In a rural school in South Georgia, the administrator has mandated the use of technology by all certified personnel to include myself, the counselor/researcher. This mandate has sparked my interest in using a form of

cybercounseling with parents and students through email counseling sessions from a website. Other counseling services and information are also made available to parents via this website. The school has a population of 525 students enrolled in Pre K to 5<sup>th</sup> grade. The racial makeup is 80% White, 15% Hispanic, 3% African American and 2% Multi-racial. Sixty-eight percent of the school's population is on free or reduced lunches. The school has three computers in each of the thirty classes and a computer lab of twenty computers. All computers are networked and have Internet access.

### **Research Questions**

First, ethical, legal and posing questions were addressed. Information was gathered from school counselors through a survey and interview to look at any other schools that may have already implemented cybercounseling and addressed such questions. School counselor attitudes on cybercounseling and ideas were solicited to help in identifying any inhibitions to a successful implementation of cybercounseling in schools. School counselors were defined as certified school personnel currently working in elementary, middle and high school settings.

Furthermore, I examined the implementation of cybercounseling, as defined by John Bloom, by providing parents and students access to a counselor web site with email communication as well as information and guidance services. Parent and student usage of the web site would show the level of interest in a form of cybercounseling in an actual school counseling setting.

Several questions were asked in this study:

1. What are school counselors' attitudes towards using cybercounseling techniques to counsel clients?

- Are they receptive to this innovation?
  - What do they know about cybercounseling?
  - What are their ethical concerns about implementing this innovation in the school setting?
  - What are their legal concerns about implementing this innovation in the school setting?
  - What are their recommendations for implementing this innovation in the school setting?
2. If a website were made available for parents and students concerning school counseling issues and communication links through email, would it be utilized? If so, how many times would it be accessed?

## **Methods**

### Participants

The participants in the survey of counselor's attitudes and ideas on the implementation of cybercounseling were school counselors from P-12 school systems. Each system has a unique size and ratio of students to counselors. Some schools are rural and some are inner city. All counselors are certified within their state of residence. These states include Georgia, Mississippi, Iowa, Florida, and Alabama. Twenty-five hold Master's degrees and 12 hold Specialist's degrees. Years of experience for the 37 participants are 5% with none, 30% with 1 to 4 years, 22% with 5 to 8 years, 16% with 9 to 12 years, 11% with 13 to 16 years, and 16% with 17 or more years. Survey instruments were solicited via computer on two

counselor listservs: Georgia School Counselor's Association and American School Counselor's Association.

Private interviews were held with counselors in Southwest Georgia Region of the Georgia School Counselor's Association. Participants in the interviews were selected at random from the list of members of the Georgia School Counselor's association. There were 7 interviews held. Each counselor's system has a unique size and ratio of students to counselors. Some schools are rural and some are inner city. Six hold Master's degrees and 1 has a Specialist degree. Years of experience for the 7 participants are 0% with none, 43% with 1 to 4 years, 29% with 5 to 8 years, 14% with 9 to 12 years, 0% with 13 to 16 years, and 14% with 17 or more years.

Participants in the school study consisted of parents and students who accessed the counseling website. Some of the hits to the website generated emails to the school counselor's private email.

### Instruments

Surveys and interviews of practicing school counselors served as the instruments of this study. The surveys were solicited from all active members of the aforementioned listservs. They included questions about the acceptance of cybercounseling in schools and the ethical and legal issues of concern. See Table 1 for the Likert-response questions. Other questions consisted of demographic questions to identify the area and expertise level of the counselor.

The interviews consisted of ten questions that asked for demographic information and open-ended questions concerning cybercounseling in the school

setting. The interview questions addressed the issue of using cybercounseling in the schools, ethical and legal issues of school cybercounseling, and barriers to the implementation of this form of counseling. Suggestions for a successful implementation were solicited in the interviews. See Appendix A for a list of the questions.

### Intervention

The school counseling website consisted of information about the current counseling activities at the school. The website included activities that were being done in groups and classrooms about childhood social problems and study skills. Character Education information was available. Parents were provided with links to sites that would give them information about childhood problems such as attention deficits, learning problems, and issue of dealing with divorce, death, and trauma. A direct link to the counselor's email address generated counseling requests from parents. Use of the website was solicited through the school newsletter and a letter to parents about its implementation. Parent information and instructions to access the counselor were provided. This intervention was designed to test the usage of such a form of cybercounseling by including a counter for the number of responses and a tally of the number of emails delivered to this website.

### Procedures

The answers to the surveys were emailed to the researcher by private email with a consent form attached. School counselors were asked to mark the answers and email the form with the attached consent form to the researcher. Each survey would have taken approximately 10 minutes to complete.

The interviews were conducted with members of the Southwest Georgia Region of the Georgia School Counselor's Association selected as every 10<sup>th</sup> person on the alphabetic list. Each participant signed a consent form in person or by fax. Interviews took 30 minutes each to complete. The practicing school counselor and student of the EdS program in Instructional Technology at Valdosta State University served as the administrator of the data collection.

Designed by the school counselor, the website was made available for a period of four weeks. Specific instructions for the use and URL were given in a letter to parents and the school newsletter. The counselor/researcher checked email on a daily basis to see if there were parent requests for counseling. The clock counter yielded the total hits for the site and were tallied at the end of the four-week period.

## **Results**

The first dependent variable in this study was school counselor attitudes about cybercounseling. This variable was measured through a survey of counselor opinions and interviews with practicing school counselors.

### Survey

Thirty-seven school counselors responded to the survey via the school counseling listservs. Of those surveyed 10 had never heard of cybercounseling, 25 were somewhat knowledgeable of it, and 2 were very knowledgeable of it. Only one school counselor used cybercounseling.

Table 1 shows that the strongest agreement by the school counselors was with the statement that they had enough skills to use this form of technology in counseling (M= 2.32). The counselors showed an undecided nature of response to

the issues of the concept of cybercounseling, licensing and certification issues, the use of malpractice insurance as in face-to-face counseling, and the evaluation of cybercounseling. The strongest disagreement ( $M=3.50$ ) was with the statement that cybercounseling issues are clear and ethical.

Table 1

*Strongly Agree (1), Agree (2), Undecided (3), Disagree (4), Strongly Disagree (5)*

<b>Question</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>
Counselor agrees with concept of counseling via the Internet	2.62	.94
Counselor has sufficient computer/Internet skills to use cybercounseling.	2.32	.99
Cybercounseling licensing and certification issues are clear and ethical.	3.36	1.00
Cybercounseling is really counseling.	3.00	.90
Malpractice insurance will cover Internet counseling.	3.27	.79
Cybercounseling evaluation issues are clear and ethical.	3.44	.76
Cybercounseling confidentiality issues are clear and ethical.	3.50	.80

### Interviews

There were three interviews held in person and four via the telephone. Those interviewed were asked open-ended questions to encourage more thinking about the topic of Cybercounseling and elaboration on the survey questions. When asked about thoughts on using cybercounseling in schools four of seven respondents felt

that it was more appropriate for the high school aged child, and seven of seven respondents thought it would increase parent communication and keep parents informed.

Concerning ethics, the counselors questioned the confidentiality of this type of counseling and counselor/counselee competence in using computer skills effectively. The competence level of the counselor in using this form of technology could violate ethical guidelines if the counselor could not demonstrate effective counseling practices while using cybercounseling. On legal issues, the counselors were concerned about privacy and whether a counselee could be evaluated based on anxiety level, depression, and suicidal tendencies identified on-line.

Barriers discussed in the interviews included a concern for those who are not literate in computer and reading skills as well as the digital divide of those who do not have computer access. Five of seven of the respondents thought face-to-face counseling was more personal and perhaps more effective. Some other barriers that were discussed were community rejection of such form of counseling, and lack of time caused by state mandated counseling activities such as classroom guidance and group counseling. One counselor responded that body language, a very important part of counseling, could not be used in an on-line environment. There were concerns that a human touch could not be given if the counselee needed that hug or body contact and the warmth of spoken words.

Suggestions for overcoming barriers were to provide a specific time that cybercounseling is available in lieu of other duties at school. One counselor suggested that parenting classes should be given to explain the nature of this form

of counseling and offer technology workshops for parents. A suggestion to help with problems of access was to open computer labs at school at night for parents and students to use. Video conferencing was a suggestion to help with the lack of body language.

Some counselors thought that a special certification for counselors should exist with an add-on in Instructional Technology. Overwhelmingly, the respondents thought this should be an optional certification and not mandatory to all school counselors. One thought that on-going technology staff development was imperative, but a special certification was not necessary.

The interviewees gave some viable suggestions for implementation of cybercounseling into school settings. One suggestion was to have a full time cyber counselor for the system to set up websites to encourage email communication and respond to problems and concerns. This same person could organize support groups through chat rooms on certain relevant student issues. Another suggestion was to take student and parent referrals through emails to the counselor and then meet in person. A suggestion was made to assign each student a password that would enable him or her to access an instant message service to the counselor.

#### Cybercounseling Web Site

The second dependent variable in the study was parent and student usage of cybercounseling. Through the school counselor's web site the researcher was able to answer the question that if a website were made available for parents and students concerning school counseling issues and communication links through emails would it be utilized and how many times would it be accessed? The site was

set up and contained information pertinent to parents of elementary school children. Links were made available to aid parenting skills. A link to the counselor's private email was added. During the month the site was active, 44 hits were made and 5 emails requesting counseling services were sent by parents.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of the study was to explore counselor knowledge, opinions, ethical concerns, legal concerns, and recommendations for implementation of cybercounseling in the schools and to test a site to see if parents would use the site as a means of counseling and communication with the counselor.

#### Counselor Attitudes

Counselors felt that cybercounseling is a viable form of counseling, but they had many questions about the diffusion of this innovation. They did not think that this form of counseling should be made mandatory by the state. There is an agreement that counseling is possible this way, but there were some inhibitions that could limit its effectiveness: Digital divide, legal and ethical concerns, and effectiveness.

Though only one of thirty-seven respondents in the survey actually already uses of cybercounseling, counselors felt that they possessed the technology skills to use this form of counseling. There was a concern for parent's and students' access and education about this innovation. Suggestions were made from interviews to have parenting and community workshops to teach cybercounseling to the public. Hence, the digital divide could be closed with the opening of school computer labs in

the evening hours. As the literature suggests, the problem of the digital divide is an apparent concern for reaching all counselees by the Internet (Bloom & Walz, 2000).

Legal and ethical issues are a major concern, especially confidentiality of counseling services. Respondents to the survey were undecided about the clarity of ethical and legal issues. Legal issues of privacy became a reoccurring theme in the ethic of confidentiality as all seven interviewees expressed this concern. There would always be a question as to whom the counselor is talking. Is it really the client or someone who has hacked into the client's server/password? Therefore, confidentiality would be a main concern in this kind of situation.

The issue of confidentiality is important to the ethics of counseling. As discussed in the literature, confidentiality is in the code of ethics for school counselors under the American School Counselor's Association list of ethics (American School Counselor Association, 1997). Furthermore, the issue of confidentiality was a concern in discussions on cybercounseling in other fields of counseling (Suler, 2000).

As the current education trend of accountability and evaluation continues to be on the forefront, school counselors have to make sure they evaluate programs and practice counseling ethics. Counselors have to evaluate each client and show where the client received appropriate services. This practice may not be as easy in an on-line environment when certain cues are missed due to lack of face-to-face contacts. The American School Counselors Association endorses supervisors to counselors to evaluate the services according to professional ethics (American School Counselor Association, 1998).

The counselor's inability to recognize and evaluate severe emotional states caused a concern for counselors in the interviews. With the lack of face-to-face interaction, the counselor does not have available many of the nonverbal or vocal expressions that would relay this status. This ethical question could become a legal concern of malpractice for the counselor if the client was in immediate danger due to his/her emotional status. Counselors in the survey were undecided on their views of the coverage of malpractice insurance to this form of counseling.

Cybercounseling can be made more effective in a number of ways. Suggested ideas from the interviews will aid in this process. Since there was a concern for lack of body contact and facial expressions, cybercounseling can incorporate technology to make it more like face-to-face counseling by using video conferencing on-line.

Establishing web site, email and chat communication as part of school counseling practice can increase effectiveness. Groups can be conducted using a chat method. Websites can be used to advertise for counseling services and provide pertinent information to parents and students about counseling issues. Email could be used as a referral process. The counselor should begin implementation by providing support for parents and students through familiarizing them with cybercounseling. This support is important and is endorsed under the ethics of counselors in using technology with clients as stated by the NBCC (American School Counseling Association, 1998). Each counselor should explore this avenue of communication and provide these optional services for clients.

Concerns for confidentiality can be addressed with password or other technology features and informing parents and students of methods used to maintain

confidentiality. This practice may aid in the problem with confidential issues that were brought up as a concern among counseling professionals.

### Pilot Website Use

Accessing the pilot counselor website generated 44 hits and 5 emails for counseling services. These requests were concerning the issue of a national tragedy and fear in the students as a result of media coverage of the tragedy. The researcher thinks that many of the hits were generated through an encouraged look at the website to find resource links for parents to discuss tragedy issues with children. The timing of the research project was a time of high interest in counseling and seeking information on how to talk to children about national tragedies. The response to this new web site showed a positive demand for counseling services.

According to the literature, the American School Counselor Association code of ethics for counseling and technology supports this endeavor of using technology for counseling (American School Counselor Association, 1997). The response of the parents showed an interest in the accessibility of the counseling website and links to other sources. The availability of this resource made it easy for these parents to access the counselor through email and receive valuable information to help their children.

### Implications

As discussed in the literature and the findings from counselor interviews, there are concerns about the limitations placed on cybercounseling by the digital divide. This issue will be improved as computers and Internet access become more readily available to all parts of the population. Public libraries are increasing access to the

World Wide Web by opening this public facility. Free email addresses are available from many Internet sites. More and more people will soon be able to access the Internet and will be skilled in using computers as technology continues to infiltrate all careers.

The study also identified concerns about the ethics and confidentiality of the use of cybercounseling. There were concerns that counselee rights would be violated by using this form of counseling. This issue needs to be addressed in a way that the counselor can be assured that the counselee is the correct person. Furthermore, counselors were concerned about how one would be licensed and certified to practice this form of counseling. This could be addressed through the professional standards commission in the school counselor's state of practice.

Other concerns were based on the lack of human, face-to-face interaction in a counseling situation. The use of the Internet and email for counseling does inhibit this personal touch to counseling. These needs should be addressed to make sure that counsees receive the attention that they need in the appropriate way.

#### Future Action Planning

This action research project will be published in the Georgia School Counselor's journal, a professional journal for school counseling practitioners. The results of the surveys, interviews, and pilot web site will be shared at a region counselors meeting in South Georgia. In the future, the counselor/researcher will continue to have an active website available to parents and students. He will also seek further information on group guidance using chat rooms. There is an interest in video conferencing using the Internet. These are two innovations that need to be further

examined. The researcher would also like to get feedback on parent and community attitudes toward using the Internet as a means of counseling in the schools. The results of the survey revealed the views of a varied representation of the school counselor community on cybercounseling. However, it is equally important to find out what parents and community ideas are on this form of counseling.

**Appendix A**

Interview questions from Survey.

1. What is your level of education?

Masters \_\_\_\_\_ Specialist \_\_\_\_\_ Doctorate \_\_\_\_\_ Post Doctorate \_\_\_\_\_

2. What are your years of experience as a school counselor?

0 \_\_\_\_\_ 1-4 \_\_\_\_\_ 5-8 \_\_\_\_\_ 9-12 \_\_\_\_\_ 13-16 \_\_\_\_\_ 17+ \_\_\_\_\_ (indicate)

3. What state do you have certification in?

4. What are your thoughts on using the Internet for counseling students and parents (cybercounseling)?

5. What are the ethical questions that you would have about using cybercounseling?

6. What are legal considerations that you would have about using cybercounseling?

7. What are some barriers that would inhibit you using cybercounseling in your school?

8. For question number 4, do you have any solutions to the barriers to implementing cybercounseling in your school?

9. What certification do you think is necessary for a school counselor to practice cybercounseling? Should there be a special certification?

10. How could cybercounseling be implemented in the school setting?

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Running head: IMPLEMENTING CYBERCOUNSELING INTO SCHOOL COUNSELING

**Implementing Cybercounseling  
Into School Counseling Programs**

**ITED 8999 Thesis – Action Research Proposal**

**Brian Law  
Valdosta State University**

### **Description of the Setting**

This study will be conducted through computer mediated communications on the Internet; therefore, it will not be confined to a specific geographic location. The instruments will be implemented via computer on a listserv. The listserv is composed of counselors from all over Georgia (Georgia School Counselor's Listserv) and across the United States (American School Counselor's Listserv). The listservs are made available to member of the organizations at no additional charge. Access from a computer that receives the email indicated as the pop server is the only computer requirement. The participants are counselors from P-12 school systems. Each system has a unique size and ratio of students to counselors. Some schools are rural and some will be inner city. All counselors will be certified with the state of residence certification.

The web counseling study will be implemented at J. M. Odom Elementary in Colquitt County. J.M. Odom Elementary is a rural school in South Georgia. The school has a population of 525 enrolled in grades P-5. The racial makeup is 80% Caucasian, 15% Hispanic, 3% African American and 2% Multi-racial. Sixty-eight percent of the school's population is on free or reduced lunches. The school has three computers in each of the thirty classes and a computer lab of twenty computers. All computers are networked and have Internet access. The school's name will not be released in the journal article to protect the confidentiality in counseling of the clients and to adhere to School Counseling ethics as designed by the American School Counselors Association.

### **Area of Focus Statement**

Counseling is a very important discipline. Counseling is used for guidance and changes in people's perspectives that involve emotional states that affect performance

and relationships with other people. Counselors provide an empathetic form of communication that allows clients to discuss inner feelings and discover solutions to problems with the counselor as a facilitator. Counselors need to deliver their services by whatever means are necessary. In the past, services have been provided in counseling offices with face-to-face communication. With the impact of technology on other fields, the time has come to address alternative ways to providing counseling by integrating technology.

The influence of the Internet has resulted in a new form of counseling. Cybercounseling is defined by John Bloom as “ the practice of professional counseling and information delivery that occurs when client (s) and counselor are in separate or remote locations and utilize electronic means to communicate over the Internet (Morrissey, 1997). Cybercounseling uses electronic communications in place of personal communication. The literature suggests that there are ethical, legal, and procedural factors that may inhibit implementation of cybercounseling in schools and other environments. This research project will focus on issues surrounding adoption of this innovation in the school setting.

### **Concise Literature Review**

Cybercounseling can take many different forms. One form would include the use of electronic messages or email. The client and counselor would correspond using email services. This asynchronous display would not be labeled as real time or immediate response systems (Jagers, 1998). There are questions about how to address the limitations and ethical considerations that involve the practice of cybercounseling. Cybercounseling

is a part of electronic communications and must be regulated in a fair, ethical manner for all persons (Morrissey, 1997).

At this point in time, there are no theories or techniques to guide cybercounseling. This lack of guidance poses many questions and limitations that could inhibit the growth and understanding of cybercounseling as a professional, legal and ethical enterprise. Does this new communication medium require a separate group of unique theories or will the current theories of counseling and development apply to this medium? Will there be a need for special training and certification for one to practice as a cyber counselor? These are a few unanswered questions that guide the limitations and ethical dilemmas that will be discovered in the context of this paper (Suler, 2000).

### Limitations

Computers do not offer the human interaction that is present in a face-to-face consultation in the counselor's office. The use of human interaction allows the counselor to use verbal cues in vocal expression and facial expressions to determine the feelings and status of the client. If these elements were missing, the counselor may be inhibited from making an accurate diagnosis (Lee, 1998). In traditional counseling, the result of genuine human face-to-face interaction aids in the development of rapport, a necessary component in counseling. This practice would be limited with electronic counseling (Morrissey, 1997).

Without face-to-face identification the counselor could not determine if the client is really who he says he is. Therefore, the person on the other end of the computer may not be the actual client but could be a hacker or person who has intercepted the message. There would be a breakdown in confidentiality because the client's personal information

would be shared with another individual. Making sure there is a clear, secure network and using encryption and user verification software will aid in this problem (Suler, 2000).

Technically a user may find it hard to keep up with the demands of the latest technology in order to have the fastest connections and correct software for proper Internet communications (Morrissey, 1997).

### Ethical/Legal Considerations

Regulation of online counseling is an issue. There are many questions that concern ethical practices. The following questions are similar to those in research: Who will provide the license and certification (if any) to counsel via the Internet? Is cybercounseling really considered counseling? Can people actually believe advertisements of counseling services in web pages? How will malpractice insurance cover electronic counseling? Who evaluates the competence of the counselor? If a counselor makes mistakes, who will reprimand him? Will different states regulate counseling via the Internet differently? And who will determine what state guidelines apply if a counselor is counseling a client from a state that is different from his own residence (Hughes, 2000)? Few if any state licensing laws address online counseling. Therefore, an argument can be made that state laws currently do not prohibit the use of cybercounseling (Love, 2000).

As with certified practicing physicians, counselors would need certain standards for licensure. Web counseling standards from the National Board of Certified Counselors (NBCC) list certain ethical codes that online counselors must follow. The ethics include:

- A review of pertinent ethical and legal codes
- Informing clients of encryption methods

- Informing clients if and how long data will be kept
- Verifying parental/guardian approval for services of minors
- Discussing procedures of how to contact a counselor when he is not online
- Obtaining a name of at least one counselor on call in the client's home area
- Explaining the possibility of technological failure

These codes are results of the accessibility of counseling via the Internet (Morrissey, 1997).

### School Counseling Issues /Standards

School counseling standards were implemented to be a statement of what students should be able to do as a result of participating in school counseling programs. This accountability for counselors is the key to effective counseling programs. Measurable success can be evaluated by looking at the increased number of students who completed school with academic preparation, career awareness among students, and the personal/social growth in the students that allows them to make sound choices for their lives. The school counseling standards are based on academic development, career development, and personal/social development (American School Counselor Association, 1997).

### Ethics of School Counseling

The American School Counseling Association has issued ethical standards for school counselors. These ethics are to serve as a guide for ethical practices of all professional school counselors regardless of level, area, populations served and geographic area. They provide a benchmark for self-appraisal and peer evaluations of programs that fall under the responsibility of the school counselor. The ethics are stated

to allow those who supervise practicing counselors to insure accountability of services provided (American School Counselor Association, 1998).

The ethical codes address confidentiality of students and families. Counseling plans are discussed and jointly named with the counselee in the planning phase. The counselor avoids dual relationships that may harm clients. The counselor must make appropriate referrals to outside agencies when necessary. The counselor provides for group counseling sessions. The counselor informs others when the client is at harm to himself/herself. The counselor maintains secure records that are confidential. The counselor adheres to professional standards when administering evaluations and assessments. Counselors respect the inherent rights and responsibilities of parents. Counselors must be sensitive to cultural and social diversity among families and provide equal rights. Counselors must be sensitive to others' multicultural backgrounds. The counselor accepts the responsibilities of his or her own actions (American School Counselor Association, 1998).

Concerning technology and ethical considerations, the school counselor will promote the benefits of computer applications and “clarifies the limitations of computer technology” (American School Counselor Association, 1998). The counselor must insure that the counsees are capable of using the applied technology. Members of under represented groups are assured equal access to computer technologies with absence of discrimination. If a counselor does communicate with counsees via the Internet, he/she would consult the NBCC standards for web counseling (American School Counseling Association, 1998).

For a more complete Literature Review related to this topic see: *Cybercounseling: Characteristics and Barriers for Use in School Counseling Programs* by Brian Law.

### **Definition of the Variables**

The independent variable for this research study is the possible implementation of cybercounseling techniques in school counseling. Cybercounseling is defined by John Bloom as “ the practice of professional counseling and information delivery that occurs when client (s) and counselor are in separate or remote locations and utilize electronic means to communicate over the Internet (Morrissey, 1997).

There are two dependent variables in this study. The first is school counselor attitudes about cybercounseling. School counselors are defined as school guidance certified school personnel currently working in elementary, middle and high school settings. Attitudes are defined as the opinions of school counselors about using cybercounseling. The second is parent and student usage of cybercounseling. Parent and student usage may be defined as parents of students and the students enrolled in a designated elementary school that will access a counselor web page with information and guidance services for students and parents.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are school counselor’s attitudes towards using cybercounseling techniques to counsel clients?
  - Are they receptive to this innovation?
  - What do they know about cybercounseling?
  - What are their ethical concerns about implementing this innovation in the school setting?

- What are their legal concerns about implementing this innovation in the school setting?
  - What are their recommendations for implementing this innovation in the school setting?
2. If a website were made available for parents and students concerning school counseling issues and communication links through email, will it be utilized. If so, how many times would it be accessed?

### **Proposed Intervention**

The intervention that is being researched is electronic counseling or cybercounseling. The researcher anticipates that most counselors will accept this intervention as a way to help clients who may not feel comfortable with face-to-face meetings. Through the use of the surveys and interviews of school counselors, the researcher would explore counselor knowledge, opinions, ethical concerns, legal concerns, and recommendations for implementation of cybercounseling in the schools. The researcher expects to gain insight on how cybercounseling can be implemented in the school setting. This insight would be explored in interviews of practicing school counselors.

The researcher is interested in parental and student use of such a form of counseling. An experimental website that offers contact with the counselor and counseling information will be implemented to see if students and parents are receptive to using the Internet for counseling. This website would be an application and an experiment to see how much this form of cybercounseling will be utilized in a school setting.

### **Membership of the Action Research Group**

The members of this research project will be members of the Georgia School Counselor's Association and the American School Counselor's Association. The researcher will distribute the instruments to them for evaluation purposes and compile the report to be shared in the Georgia School Counselor's journal. The findings will be made available for insight and implementation procedures for this innovation.

Parents and students at a local elementary school in South Georgia will be important members of the research team as their accesses of the school counseling website and emails will be important data to determine if this type of cybercounseling will be utilized. The actual site will be kept confidential to insure the family's confidentiality and not violate this ethic of confidentiality in counseling. The thesis committee chairperson will be an important member of the group. He/she will provide direction and guidance to complete the research.

### **Negotiations to be Undertaken**

The researcher has full access to a listserv within both the Georgia School Counselor's Organization and the American School Counselor's Association. The researcher will ask for surveys to be done by certified school counselors. There are no negotiations to be made for this listserv as it is there to serve the needs of counselors and research in counseling. Consent forms will be attached to the survey to be returned with it.

Interviews will be done with certified school counselors. The permission forms will be standard and include a description of the study for the school counselor to read

and agree to. There will be a statement that this is a thesis project done through Valdosta State University and all responses from interviewees will remain confidential.

The researcher has access to a file server within a school system's website that will provide a place to post web counseling information and count the contacts made on this site. The system encourages the use of personal web pages for home/school contacts. Messages sent by parents and students to the website will not be included in the research data. Therefore, parent or student permission is not necessary. Only the total number of student/parent accesses to the website will be collected.

### **Time Line**

Fall- 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> Week- Obtain committee names and refine work from summer

3<sup>rd</sup> Week –Obtain approval of committee for Literature Review and Action

Research Plan.

3<sup>rd</sup> Week- Design and post website for web counseling

4<sup>th</sup> Week- Implement evaluation instruments

5<sup>th</sup> Week/6<sup>th</sup> Week- Collect and update any new research for Literature Review

7<sup>th</sup> Week/8<sup>th</sup> Week- Compile results of instruments

8<sup>th</sup> Week- Tally results from counseling web site.

8<sup>th</sup> Week/9<sup>th</sup> Week- Write reports

10<sup>th</sup> Week/11<sup>th</sup> Week- Present findings to the Colquitt County School Counselor's

Association and celebrate research

12<sup>th</sup> Week- Submit journal article for Georgia School Counselor's Association and

journal article for Action Research Exchange.

End of Semester- Graduate

### **Resources**

- Fall term tuition for researcher's Ed.S. program paid for with Scholarship from Professional Association Of Georgia Educators Colquitt County Chapter
- Use of CD burner at School to save and present data to committee – free
- Use of hardware for presentation to local counselor chapter – free
- Use of web space within school system's web site - free

### **Data Collection**

During the course of this action research project, the researcher will use three data sources:

1. Surveys of attitudes on ethical considerations, legal issues, and usage questions that relate to the adoption of this innovation in the school setting. This survey will be disseminated on the listserv. Counselors will respond to surveys and return via email. (Research Question 1) See Appendix B.
2. Interviews with professional school counselors with open-ended questions on ideas of adoption of cybercounseling. Interviews will be person-to-person and phone interviews. The interviewees will be selected by random sample from the directory of members of the Georgia School Counseling Association. (Research Question 1) See Appendix C.
3. A web-based counseling site that will communicate counseling matters to students and parents via the Internet. The number of accesses on the site and the number of emails generated from this website will be tallied to measure response to this type of counseling. (Research Question 2)

- Information about school counselor's attitudes will be gained from the use of surveys of professional school counselors via list serves.
- Private interviews with school counselors in a local school system will provide further information on school counselor's attitudes.
- Ethical and legal concerns will be addressed using interviews and surveys of professional school counselors. The surveys will be conducted on two list serves (GSCA and ASCA). Interviews will be held in a local school system.
- Through private interviews with local school counselors, the researcher will gain insight on procedural ideas to implement cybercounseling into the school setting.
- Through a pilot test using a counselor website, the researcher will see if parents and students would utilize the Internet for counseling services. The results of usage of this site will enable the researcher to see if this form of counseling would be feasible for this elementary school.

### **Data Analysis and Interpretation**

Survey data will be compiled and then analyzed and interpreted using a spreadsheet to calculate either the frequency or the mean and standard deviation for items. Interviews will give insight to the questions about ethics in cybercounseling and adoption of the innovation. A summary of the interview findings will be included in the report. Web-counseling usage will be determined by the number of hits on the site and the amount of personal email sent to the school counselor concerning the web site. This will provide information on how many participants will utilize a form of cybercounseling at this elementary school. The results will be analyzed using descriptive statistics.

### **Communication of Findings**

The researcher will present the findings to the Colquitt County School Counselor's Association at a counseling meeting. This celebration will include refreshments as well as a PowerPoint with handouts on the findings. Committee members will be invited to attend. Digital photos will be taken of this presentation and handed in with the thesis to the committee. This celebration will be held by the 11<sup>th</sup> week of the Semester. Findings will also be available in the journal article that will be submitted to the Georgia School Counselor's Journal.

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Appendix A

**Action Research Chart**

<b>Research Questions</b>	<b>Recommended Action Targeted to Research Questions</b>	<b>Who is responsible for action? C=Counselors S=Students P=Parents</b>	<b>Who needs to be consulted or informed? C=Counselors P=Principal/Admin. TCP= Thesis Committee Chair</b>	<b>Who will monitor/collect data</b>	<b>Time Line</b>	<b>Resources</b>
<p>1. What are school counselor's attitudes towards using cybercounseling techniques to counsel clients?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are they receptive to this innovation?</li> <li>• What do they know about cybercounseling?</li> <li>• What are their ethical concerns about implementing this innovation in the school setting?</li> <li>• What are their legal concerns about implementing this innovation in the school setting?</li> <li>• What are their recommendations for implementing this innovation in the school setting?</li> </ul>	<p>Disseminate Survey on List Serves and Interview random selection of counselors</p>	<p>C</p>	<p>C TCP</p>	<p>Counselor/Researcher through Survey Interview</p>	<p>4<sup>th</sup> week of Semester to 7<sup>th</sup> week of Semester</p>	<p>*Tuition reimbursement through local PAGE Scholarship. *Use of CD Burner at work. *Use of hardware for presentation at work *Survey forms on the free listserv. *Interview forms printed at printing company.</p>
<p>2. If a website were made available for parents and students concerning school counseling issues and communication links through email, will it be utilized.</p>	<p>Design website for counseling. Post site on web page. Send letter to parents about website. Talk to students about website. Collect results.</p>	<p>C S P</p>	<p>P TCP</p>	<p>Counselor/Researcher through information gathered from hits and emails from site</p>	<p>4<sup>th</sup> week of Semester to 7<sup>th</sup> week of Semester</p>	<p>*Tuition reimbursement through local PAGE Scholarship. *Use of CD Burner at work. *Use of hardware for presentation at work. *Information from hits and emails from site</p>

## Appendix B

Survey for Counselors**Place a mark by each question.**

1. What is your level of education?

Masters \_\_\_\_ Specialist \_\_\_\_ Doctorate \_\_\_\_ Post Doctorate \_\_\_\_

2. What are your years of experience as a school counselor?

0 \_\_\_\_ 1-4 \_\_\_\_ 5-8 \_\_\_\_ 9-12 \_\_\_\_ 13-16 \_\_\_\_ 17+ \_\_\_\_ (indicate)

**Fill in the blank.**

3. What state do you have certification in?

\_\_\_\_\_

**Place a mark by each question.**

4. Are you familiar with Cybercounseling?

Very knowledgeable \_\_ Somewhat Knowledgeable \_\_ Never heard of it \_\_

5. Cybercounseling is described as helping clients by counseling using the Internet.

Do you already use this form of counseling?

Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_ If yes, how?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_**Identify your opinion on each of the following statements.****Choose one of the five options.****(SA) Strongly Agree, (A) Agree, (U) Undecided, (D) Disagree or (SD) Strongly Disagree.**

6. I agree with the concept of counseling clients via the Internet.

SA      A              U              D              SD

7. I have sufficient computer/internet skills to use this form of counseling.

SA      A              U              D              SD

8. The following are ethical issues that should be considered before adoption of cybercounseling. Identify your opinion on each of the following statements.

a. Cybercounseling licensing and certification issues are clear and ethical.

SA      A              U              D              SD

b. Cybercounseling is really counseling.

SA      A              U              D              SD

c. Malpractice insurance will cover Internet counseling.

SA      A              U              D              SD

d. Cybercounseling evaluation issues are clear and ethical.

SA      A              U              D              SD

e. Cybercounseling confidentiality issues are clear and ethical.

SA      A              U              D              SD

## Appendix C

**Interview Questions**

1. What is your level of education?  
Masters \_\_\_\_ Specialist \_\_\_\_ Doctorate \_\_\_\_ Post Doctorate \_\_\_\_
2. What are your years of experience as a school counselor?  
0 \_\_\_\_ 1-4 \_\_\_\_ 5-8 \_\_\_\_ 9-12 \_\_\_\_ 13-16 \_\_\_\_ 17+ \_\_\_\_ (indicate)
3. What state do you have certification in?
4. What are your thoughts on using the Internet for counseling students and parents (cybercounseling)?
5. What are the ethical questions that you would have about using cybercounseling?
6. What are legal considerations that you would have about using cybercounseling?
7. What are some barriers that would inhibit you using cybercounseling in your school?
8. For question number 4, do you have any solutions to the barriers to implementing cybercounseling in your school?
9. What certification do you think is necessary for a school counselor to practice cybercounseling? Should there be a special certification?
10. How could cybercounseling be implemented in the school setting?

Appendix D

**School Permission forms and requirements**

The use of Cybercounseling by School Counselors  
Interview/Survey

You are being asked to participate in a project as a thesis research project under the direction of Dr. Lars Leader and conducted through Valdosta State University. The University in accordance with its policy regarding the Protection of Human Research Subjects asks that you give your signed agreement to participate in this project.

Please ask the student researcher Brian Law any questions you have to help you understand this research project. A basic explanation of the research is given below.

The purpose of this evaluation is to determine the barriers to implementing cybercounseling (counseling using the Internet) in the school counseling programs. The research will look at school counselor views and opinions on this innovation and parent/student contact with the counselor via the Internet

Your name will remain confidential at all times. You will not be identified in the research report.

Valdosta State University is an equal opportunity educational institution. It is not the intent of our institution to discriminate against any person based on sex, race, religion, color, national origin or handicap of the individual.

Questions regarding the conduct of this research may be directed to Brian Law, at (229) 324-3315 or my thesis committee chair, Dr. Lars Leader.

Refusal to participate in this study will have no effect on any future services you may be entitled to from the University. Should you agree to participation in this study and decide later that you wish to withdraw, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. **If you agree that you will participate at this time, please sign and date this statement.** You may keep a copy of this consent form for your records. Thank you very much for your willingness to help in this research project.

My Name (printed): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Cybercounseling: Characteristics and Barriers for Use  
in School Counseling Programs  
Brian Law  
Valdosta State University**

## **Introduction**

Counseling is a discipline that is used to help people who are struggling with emotional states. The counselor serves as the facilitator for the client to guide him/her to understand and deal with these emotions. A counselor who offers empathy and guidance to the client can facilitate this self-understanding for the emotionally stricken. Initially a rapport is built and the client will discuss feelings and thoughts in the mind as well as actions of the body. By using empathy, the counselor will help the client to formulate a plan of action that will address emotional conditions, basic needs and deficiencies in the client's life.

The practice has been provided in offices that are confidential and quiet. Person-to-person interaction has been thought to be necessary to build rapport and understand body language, expressions, tone of voice and other aspects of personal interaction. As innovations in technology are developed, counseling is increasingly being affected by this change. With the addition of the Internet, counseling has taken on a new direction to include cyber practice, which is the act of practicing counseling in the online environment.

It is important for cybercounseling to meet the standards of counseling legally, ethically, effectively and with equal accessibility. Legal and ethical cybercounseling would require counseling to remain confidential. Both certification and licensing would need to be established to ensure a professional practice. Cybercounseling would need to insure that communication, rapport building, training and accountability issues are addressed and maintained throughout the online practice. For a fair practice to all

persons, cybercounselors must attend to language skills, equity, computer skills and equal access. Counselors must address these barriers to help diffuse this innovation of electronic counseling.

It is inevitable that this new innovation of cybercounseling will make its way into the school setting. Many barriers must be addressed to insure a legal/ethical practice that is effective in addressing the needs of students in schools. This paper will review the literature concerning characteristics and possible benefits of electronic counseling and will describe the barriers likely to delay the use of cybercounseling as common practice in the schools.

### **School Counseling Issues**

#### Definition and Standards

School counselors work to assist students in making decisions and changing behaviors. School counselors work with all students, school staff, families, and the community as a part of the educational program. The focus in school counseling is on academic achievement, prevention, intervention activities, social/emotional and career developing activities. School counselors are faced with a challenge to prepare students to meet the expectations of higher academic standards and to become productive members of society. The school counseling program imparts skills and learning opportunities proactively and preventively to ensure that all students strive for success in academics, career planning, and personal/social experiences (American School Counselor Association, 1997)

School counseling standards were implemented to be a statement of what students should be able to do as a result of participating in school counseling programs. This

accountability for counselors is the key to effective counseling programs. Measurable success can be evaluated by looking at the increased number of students who completed school with academic preparation, career awareness, and the personal/social growth that allows them to make sound choices for their lives. The school counseling standards are based on academic development, career development, and personal/social development (American School Counselor Association, 1997).

The standards enable all students to achieve success in school and develop as contributing members of society. Academically students are expected to acquire positive attitudes, knowledge and skills that contribute to effective learning in school and life. Strategies of success are taught. Transition of skills from school to the world of work, home and community is emphasized. Career development standards guide the program to provide a foundation for learning skills, attitudes and knowledge in selecting and maintaining a successful career. A correlation is made between personal qualities, education and training, and the work force. Personally and socially the standards provide a framework for students to acquire skills to learn to respect self and others and to apply these skills in the transition from school to home, community and the workforce (American School Counselor Association, 1997).

#### Parent Views of School Counseling

Paulson and Edwards (1997) conducted a study using concept-mapping to investigate parents' perception of the role for elementary school counselors. Results indicated that the counselor plays a very important role in the education of children in the schools. Parents noted that they preferred the counselors to be involved by offering lessons that would raise emotional and academic attitudes of the students. The parents

saw the counselor as a support personnel member who is available to assist teachers in providing sound educational practices. Parents indicated in the mapping study that they wanted the school counselor to work closely with them and act as a liaison for communication with the school (Paulson & Edwards, 1997).

### Student Views of School Counseling

High school students were surveyed to analyze student perceptions about school counseling and to determine why they did not seek counseling. Two hundred and thirty-five seniors were given a questionnaire. The findings revealed that they did not feel comfortable talking to anyone about personal information. Twenty-nine percent felt that talking to the counselor about these personal matters made them uncomfortable. Others noted that they were afraid of the counselor breaking confidentiality and telling other people what was discussed. Some noted time as a factor that inhibited them from seeking a counselor (West, 1991).

### Ethics of School Counseling

The American School Counseling Association issued ethical standards for school counselors. These standards are to serve as a guide for ethical practices of all professional school counselors regardless of level, area, populations served and geographic area. They provide a benchmark for self-appraisal and peer evaluations of programs that fall under the responsibility of the school counselor. The standards are stated to allow those who supervise practicing counselors to insure accountability for services provided (American School Counselor Association, 1998).

The ethical code addresses confidentiality of students and families. Counseling plans are discussed and jointly decided upon with the counselee in the planning phase.

The counselor avoids dual relationships that may harm clients. For example, a counselor may not work with a client who is also seeing another counselor for the same issue. The counselor must make appropriate referrals to outside agencies when necessary. The counselor provides for group counseling sessions. The counselor informs others when the client is at harm to himself/herself. The counselor maintains secure records that are confidential. The counselor adheres to professional standards when administering evaluations and assessments. Counselors respect the inherent rights and responsibilities of parents. Counselors must be sensitive to cultural and social diversity among families and provide equal rights. Counselors must be sensitive to other's multicultural backgrounds. The counselor accepts the responsibilities for his or her own actions (American School Counselor Association, 1998).

In relationship to technology and ethical considerations, the school counselor promotes the benefits of computer applications and “clarifies the limitations of computer technology” (American School Counselor Association, 1998). The counselor must insure that the counselees are capable of using the applied technology. Members of under represented groups are assured equal access to computer technologies with absence of discrimination. If a counselor does communicate with counselees via the Internet, he/she would consult the NBCC standards for web counseling (American School Counseling Association, 1998). These standards are listed in the prior section on ethical considerations.

School counselors must maintain an element of confidentiality for their clients. This ethical principle is covered under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (PL 93-380). A study was done to determine counselor views of confidentiality by age of

the student. The study reported that 30% of secondary counselors felt a higher need to maintain confidential information from parents than their elementary counterparts. Seventy percent of the counselors surveyed agreed that children should have the same degree of counseling confidentiality as do adults. The study summarized the ethical findings that when children and youth are clients they have control over who gets information on counseling sessions. The exception would be made in the case of suicide attempts, abuse or intent to commit crimes. Counselors suggest in the survey that parents need to get more involved in their childrens' lives and be aware of changes in emotional states (Wagner, 1981).

In a study to determine if school counselors are aware of ethics and legal aspects of counseling it was found that of 165 counselors surveyed about 65% reported that they were familiar with the codes of ethics as stated by the American School Counselor Association. In this study, a sample of 300 were selected from a population of 1700 subjects who were certified in the state of Wisconsin as professional school counselors. The counselors ranged in age from 27 to 68 years with 45% male and 55% female in this study. The study reported that counselors were unclear on such ethics as dual services where the school counselor and another practicing counselor in the private sector may see the student. Counselors also need to understand better the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (PL 93-380), which determines what information can be shared with parents of clients in the school. With two-thirds of the respondents reporting a familiarity with the legal and ethical aspects of counseling, these statistics would warrant providing more information to school counselors on ethics and legal issues in school counseling (Davis & Mickelson, 1994).

There are increasing methods available in the practice of school counseling. One such method is cybercounseling. This new form of counseling is a topic that is being discussed and debated among this profession. John Bloom, a member of the National Board of Certified Counselors, coined the definition of cybercounseling as, the practice of professional counseling and information delivery that occurs when client(s) and counselor are in separate or remote locations and utilize electronic means to communicate over the Internet (Morrissey, 1997).

### **How Cybercounseling Works**

Cybercounseling can take many different forms. One form would include the use of electronic messages or email. The client and counselor would correspond using email services. This asynchronous display would not be labeled as real time or immediate response systems (Jagers, 1998). A more advanced form of communication via the Internet would include the use of live chats, video conferencing, and online white boarding (students see the notes and messages written on the screen). This type of transfer would be immediate, and feedback could be given in real time discussions (Verhoeve, 2000).

There is no question that this type of counseling is currently practiced. Web counseling is inevitable because when there is access to the Internet, people will use it. However, there are questions about how to address the limitations and ethical considerations involved in the practice of cybercounseling. Cybercounseling is a part of electronic communications and must be regulated in a fair, ethical manner for all persons. There is no way to stop people from putting up web pages on the Internet that advertise themselves as counselors, but this practice could be regulated with application of

standard ethical guidelines. People must be careful not to damage the reputation of traditional face-to-face counseling as they use the Internet as a means of counseling (Morrissey, 1997). Some of these same issues that are now arising with electronic counseling are the ones that were present when video, telephone or other media interactions were present in the past (Lee, 1998).

At this point in time, there are no theories or techniques to guide cybercounseling. This lack of guidance poses many questions and limitations that could inhibit the growth and understanding of cybercounseling as a professional, legal and ethical enterprise. Does this new communication medium require a separate group of unique theories or will the current theories of counseling and development apply to this media? Will there be a need for special training and certification for one to practice as a cyber counselor? These are a few unanswered questions that guide discussion of the limitations and ethical dilemmas posed by cybercounseling (Suler, 2000).

### **Forms of Electronic Counseling**

#### Listservs

Listservs are being developed to promote information, research, and social connections among groups of people. Participating in these listservs provides an easy way for one to become familiar with technology. This valuable resource is used to gain insight into issues that arise in counseling sessions warranting more information before completing guidance sessions (Harman, 1999). A listserv would provide a client with the help needed to communicate using the Internet. It would also offer information for the client that is research based and would supplement counseling messages from the

counselor. The listserv would give the clients a chance to discuss topics and respond to the group enrolled on the listserv. This practice could be considered a form of group therapy and support.

### Group Support Sites

There are an increasing number of sites developed to serve as counseling group support sites. Many people turn to others on the Internet to guide them and form support groups for weight loss, divorces, loss, self-esteem, addictions, and other needs. These valuable resources help people cope and share as they support others and themselves. An interesting discussion of how people help each other through group support was made in a newspaper article about a support group for persons who were trying to lose weight. The participants would formulate and respond to emails to groups of persons who were trying to lose weight. These support group was formed from a website that allowed the participant to respond to discussion threads created from the others who accessed the site and posed questions or support statements to those interested in losing weight (Forman, 2000). By doing a search of the Internet on many of these self-help topics, a client can find other people who are working through similar situations. Support groups conducted by counselors would bring these people together and provide a means of cohesion and help for one another.

### Testing

The Internet has been used as a tool for testing in counseling. Counselors use testing to evaluate a client's emotional status, educational level, and behavioral tendencies. These test results are used in determining the proper treatment or referral to other agencies. The Internet adds the possibility of remote delivery for test selection,

orientation, administration, scoring, profiling, report writing, and multimedia presentation. Links to test reviews provide the counselor with judgments of quality of test materials. The test data may be cross-referenced by literature sources that describe reliability and validity of tests. Links to publishing companies of testing materials often provide samples for practice. Testing individuals using the Internet should, however, be scrutinized. There are questions about confidentiality, inadequate or incompetent counselor uses, and limits to the Internet based on financial resources as well as reduced private administrations of tests (Sampson, 2000).

### Video Counseling

A case study was done to show that counseling does not have to always be face-to-face and person-to-person. The use of video for interviewing and counseling students may in fact enhance the communication between the client and the counselor. The study showed that students might often feel more comfortable using video conferencing. It was noted that video interviewing encouraged the students to talk. The students indicated that they felt less threatened. Communication was much clearer and evident than in face-to-face meetings. The study did indicate that different personalities related differently to alternative communication methods (Kent & Welch, 1994).

### Online Resources

Online resources for counselors and clients to access for guidance and counseling issues are increasing on the World Wide Web daily. There are many self-help and mental health magazines for self-improvement available for the consumer. There is an array of mental health websites that offer guidance on issues. Many of these sites offer chat forums, mailing lists and direct communication for answers to questions that are posed.

There are psychological and support mailing lists available for different topics in counseling (Hackerman & Greer, 2000).

The use of World Wide Web resources as an aid to counseling of students, teachers and parents has become very popular. Due to the wide range of sites, there is no one design and style for these aids to counseling. An action research project looked at 100 multicultural counseling sites to determine the type of content. A popular search engine was used and these sites were categorized by origin. Recommendations were made for future developers of multicultural sites for counseling. The ease in the use of these sites is noted in the data. Many counseling clients search for information and guidance, but if the information is not presented in an easy-to-use format or searches do not link to useful sites, the client may choose not to use this type of counseling resource. The study noted clients like clear and complete identifications of the name and address of the site sponsor. Clients prefer prominent displays of headlines with a short display of purpose of the site, short to-the-point discussions, links to the homepage of sponsors of the organization, correct grammar, punctuation and spelling, nice images that load easily, and links that work (Torres-Rivera, Maddux, & Phan, 1999)

### **Limitations of Cybercounseling**

One major barrier that will hinder the use of cybercounseling is the digital divide. The digital divide is the barrier that limits certain economic levels from having access to technology. In the United States there is a great gap in wealth between rich and poor. New technologies such as the Internet are not readily available in all households. A recent statistic from the United States Department of Commerce revealed that family incomes of \$75,000 and higher are 20 times more likely to have access to the Internet

than those at the lowest income levels and more than 9 times more likely to have a computer in the home. Caucasians are more likely to have access to computers in the home than African Americans and Hispanics. Rural families are more limited in access than their urban counterparts (Bloom & Walz, 2000).

The importance of equitable delivery of cybercounseling is relevant in looking at the different ways of offering electronic counseling. It is important to make sure that the clients can receive the service regardless of their economic status. Counselors should conduct an audit of the community to determine who has computer access. Lack of computer access would limit the number of clients that could be served. Counselors should form partnerships with people in the community who can offer support and access to computers for electronic counselors. Counselors should help clients develop the computer skills necessary to use cybercounseling (Walz, 2000). Being an advocate of cybercounseling would involve lobbying all levels of government to raise awareness and helping with legislation to make sure that technology hardware, software and skills are available for all persons (Lee, 2000).

Language can be a barrier to counselees and counselors. If a client cannot communicate fluently in writing, the client will lack prerequisite skills needed for electronic communication. Written communication is the most advanced level of communication next to spoken language. Those who are lacking computer skills will also have difficulty with cyber communications. Different languages and translations of languages pose a barrier of communication from one culture to another as with any written or spoken messages that cross cultural barriers (Hackerman & Greer, 2000).

Computers do not offer the human interaction that is present in a face-to-face consultation in the counselor's office. The use of human interaction allows the counselor to use verbal cues in vocal expression to determine the feelings and status of the client (Suler, 2000). Counselors also base their understanding of current status and feelings on the facial expressions of the person. This interaction gives body language cues to guide the counselor to understand current and changing mental and emotional status. If these elements are missing, the counselor may be inhibited from making an accurate diagnosis (Lee, 1998).

Without face-to-face identification the counselor could not determine if the client is really who he says he is. Therefore, the person on the other end of the computer may not be the actual client but could be a hacker or person who has intercepted the message. There would be a breakdown in confidentiality because the client's personal information would be shared with another individual. Confidentiality is a key element in psychotherapy. In this example, the identity of the client could not be validated. The prevention of the problem of outsiders listening in on the messages and intercepting the transmission of data via the cyber line requires technical solutions. Making sure there is a clear, secure network and using encryption and user verification software will aid in solving this problem. Video conferencing will also aid in identification purposes (Suler, 2000). Technically a user may find it hard to keep up with the demands of the latest technology in order to have the fastest connections and correct software for proper Internet communications (Morrissey, 1997).

One difficulty that could occur is in the counselor's ability to develop rapport with a client that the counselor has not actually met in person. In traditional counseling,

the result of genuine human face-to-face interaction aids in the development of this necessary component in counseling. Cybercounseling may make it difficult to determine certain personality traits that help the counselor know how to respond to build this rapport. Human relationships are changed when they are mediated by a computer (Morrissey, 1997).

When a client is discovered to have a severe mental problem that is too serious to handle over the Internet, the client must be referred to a professional who deals with these issues. Such mental problems that would qualify as needing extensive therapy would include schizophrenia, severe depression, and suicidal tendencies. The question arises as to how Internet counseling will refer out to other professionals. If a crisis occurs, there may not be ample means to respond in time. This inhibits counseling in situations involving severe problems or suicidal thoughts (Hughes, 2000a).

### **Advantages to Cybercounseling**

There are several advantages to using electronic counseling. Many clients may be willing to respond to the counselor in writing with information that they might not necessarily say in person. Those with shy personalities who are not comfortable in a face-to-face meeting may benefit from this type of transfer (Morrissey, 1997).

The added feature of convenience is a positive aspect of Internet counseling. The ability to receive therapy in the privacy of one's home adds a feature similar to home visits from the doctor. Many people who are hindered by geographic isolation would benefit from cybercounseling. Furthermore, less stress comes from comfort and feelings of being at home and in an environment that is familiar when receiving counseling (Morrissey, 1997).

Bloom and Walz (2000) suggest that clients will find a way to utilize computer resources even if they do not have access in their own homes. They think people will seek public and private access to the Internet for the access to a counselor online. It is important to note that the easy access to people who do have computers will enable them to save time and money if they are located in a rural area that does not offer counseling services. These families may gain access to a counselor without having to drive to an urban location. Cybercounseling may be the major vehicle that can introduce clients to new academic, career, or personal-social decision-making models. This crucial information provided by cybercounselors will enable these clients to make important life decisions in the privacy of their homes. It is important for counselors to not lose sight of or discriminate against clients who do not have access to online services. This commitment to assuring equal use of cybercounseling should be a high priority (Bloom & Walz, 2000).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Regulation of online counseling is an important issue. There are many questions that concern ethical practices. Who will provide the license and certification (if any) to counsel via the Internet? Is cybercounseling really considered counseling? Are there truth-in-advertising counseling services in web pages? How will malpractice insurance cover electronic counseling? Who evaluates the competence of the counselor? If a counselor makes mistakes, who will reprimand him? Will different states regulate counseling via the Internet differently? And who will determine what state guidelines apply if a counselor is counseling a client from a state that is different from his own

residence (Hughes, 2000a)? Which professional organization would have jurisdiction over a counselor who is counseling abroad (Suler, 2000)?

Few if any state licensing laws address online counseling. Therefore, an argument can be made that state laws currently do not prohibit the use of cybercounseling.

Precedents have been set that support the practice of cybercounseling without danger of violation of states' laws. Some precedents include: An agreement can be made between the counselor and client that the services are not subject to licensing laws of the state; the client's state has no right to arrest and extradite a counselor who was actually in another state while providing the services; and counselors may raise a free speech defense against charges of practicing without a license (Love, 2000). Cybercounselors who are unlicensed are almost completely free of harm, especially if they post a statement that what they are doing is not therapy. Most websites have a disclaimer that tells the client that the information in the site is only advice, e-therapy, information and education, or supplements to therapy (Hughes, 2000b).

Cybercounseling is not currently a part of many states' definition of counseling. However, not saying anything about it may allow it. The Telemedicine Act of 1997 spells out in detail guidelines for doctors receive reimbursement, confidential matters online, informed consent, and licensure. Each of these specifically applies to electronic communications. Some states require doctors to be licensed in a particular state in order to practice telemedicine (Orbuch, 1997).

As with certified practicing physicians, counselors would need certain standards for licensure. WebCounseling standards from the National Board of Certified Counselors

(NBCC) list certain ethical guidelines that online counselors must follow. The code includes guidelines for:

- Reviewing pertinent ethical and legal codes
- Informing clients of encryption methods
- Informing clients if and how long data will be kept
- Verifying parental/guardian approval for services of minors
- Discussing procedures of how to contact a counselor when he is not online
- Obtaining a name of at least one counselor on call in the client's home area
- Explaining the possibility of technological failure

These codes are results of the accessibility of counseling via the Internet (Morrissey, 1997).

### **Conclusion**

Cybercounseling is an alternative to traditional face-to-face counseling. Cybercounseling has developed a number of legal and ethical concerns among the profession. There are ethical questions that must be answered before this form of counseling can be licensed and certified as a regulated form of therapy. Many questions are posed that could inhibit the expansion of electronic means of counseling. As researchers continue to study the innovation of cybercounseling these questions must be answered.

With the innovation of cybercounseling, it is inevitable that this form of counseling will be used in the schools. There are benefits to this form of counseling and barriers that will inhibit the speed of diffusion. Many areas must be addressed to insure that legal and ethical principles are met when using cybercounseling. Counselors must assure that

cybercounseling in the schools will be effective in addressing the emotional needs of students enrolled. Equal access must be addressed so as not to discriminate against any one culture of families. This literature review forms a baseline to form a hypothesis for the use of cybercounseling in the schools and to conduct action research to discover how cybercounseling will be addressed in school counseling settings.

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## **Learning Community Report**

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The Learning Community Report is prepared following a celebration at the completion of the Action Research Project. The report discusses activities and results of the action research and how they were communicated to the appropriate audience. The purpose of this report is to document communication and dissemination of the action research in the student's educational organization. The Action Research celebration is used to relay results to the stakeholders in the project and to celebrate the completion of the action research through the sharing of the findings.

The action research consisted of surveys and interviews of counselors' attitudes and ideas on the implementation of cybercounseling into the school setting. Furthermore, there was an interactive counseling website set up for parents and students to utilize to see how much interest there would be in this form of cybercounseling in a rural elementary school in South Georgia.

The action research celebration was held on Tuesday, November 13, 2001, from 2:30 to 3:30 in the media center of the school where the pilot counseling website was implemented. Invitations were sent to thesis committee members, class members, all school employees, and Georgia school counselors. Refreshments were served and the results of the study were discussed.

During the celebration, the student researcher began by thanking all the school employees for their support and advertisement of the counseling web site. Then a special

thank you was initiated to the area counselors who attended the celebration. Several of these were among the respondents to the survey and interviews conducted in the study. Immediately following the acknowledgements, the attendees were invited to partake of the refreshments and return to their seats for the discussion of findings.



*Simple refreshments were served for the attendees*



*Student researcher drawing attention to the screen to left of the pilot website.*

The discussion was accompanied by a spreadsheet showing the data matrix and descriptive statistics for the survey of school counselors. See Appendix A. The attendees were given a copy of the survey to correlate with the study's findings. The student researcher summarized the findings of each interview question. Then, a discussion of the results of the interviews was held.

The discussion was led by answers to the specific questions of the surveys and interviews. The results indicated that counselors thought this was a useful tool. They felt that it would better serve high school aged children and would increase parent communication. The counselors in the interview all agreed that this was an innovation

that we need to explore more. The attendees to the celebration were in agreement with using cybercounseling in the schools.

In the celebration there were open discussions about the concern for ethical and legal matters discussed in the findings of the action research project. There were concerns of certification, licensure and counselor competence in using this form of technology. The attendees were concerned about the digital divide and equal parent and student access to the technology. Confidentiality was a main area of concern for the participants in the survey, thesis and celebration discussion.

Furthermore, the celebration included open discussions of ideas that may aid in the implementation and success of this innovation. Ideas similar to those gathered from the interviews were shared, such as:

- ✓ Increasing confidentiality through passwords for each client
- ✓ Integrating other forms of technology to use video and audio conferencing to increase the cues of emotional status during the use of cybercounseling
- ✓ Giving the counselor time off from duty to use this innovation
- ✓ Educating parents, the community and board members about cybercounseling
- ✓ Requiring that each counselor have a website for parents' and students' access of services
- ✓ Using chat in counseling
- ✓ Opening the schools during the evening hours so parents and students may use technology for counseling services

The Celebration was concluded with the presentation of findings of the Pilot Web Site and a discussion of the results. The pilot website was shown on the overhead projector. It was noted that during the month of implementation there were 44 hits and 5 emails generated from the site.

The discussion included the fact that parents did seem interested in this form of counseling. It was noted that using email as a referral method for counseling services aided the counselor in preparation for services and was much easy to follow up through email. Also, it was noted that during the time of the implementation of the pilot website, there was a national tragedy occurring that caused a need for parent information and counseling of children. This event may have had some effect on the interest in this website as there were direct links to help for children during tragic situations. The counselor/researcher concluded with the fact that this site will continue to be a part of counseling services provided by the school.

## Appendix A

Case (ID)	Q6	Q7	Q8a	Q8b	Q8c	Q8d	Q8e	
1	1	1	1	4	2	3	4	4
2	1	1	3	4	2	4	4	4
3	3	3	4	1	3	1	1	1
4	3	3	2	5	2	4	4	4
5	1	1	1	3	2	3	3	3
6	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4
7	5	5	1	5	4	4	4	4
8	3	3	2	3	2	3	3	3
9	1	1	1	3	3	3	3	3
10	2	2	2	4	4	4	4	4
11	2	2	2	4	2	4	4	4
12	3	3	2	3	3	3	3	3
13	3	3	2	3	4	3	3	4
14	3	3	4	3	2	3	3	3
15	2	2	2	4	2	3	4	3
16	3	3	4	3	4	4	4	4
17	4	4	4	3	3	3	3	3
18	2	2	1	3	3	3	3	4
19	4	4	2	3	4	3	3	3
20	2	2	3	2	2	3	4	5
21	3	3	4		1	3		
22	3	3	2	3	4	3	3	3
23	3	3	4	3	3	3	3	3
24	2	2	2	1	2	1	2	2
25	2	2	2	2	2	3	3	3
26	3	3	2	2	3	3	3	3
27	2	2	2	3	3	4	3	3
28	2	2	2	3	2	3	3	3
29	2	2	2	3	4	4	3	3
30	2	2	2	3	3	3	3	3
31	3	3	4	5	4	5	5	5
32	2	2	2	4	4	5	4	4
33	4	4	2	4	3	3	4	4
34	4	4	2	4	4	4	4	4
35	4	4	2	5	4	3	4	4
36	2	2	1	4	4	3	4	4
37	3	3	2	5	4	3	5	5

<i>M</i>	2.62	2.32	3.36	3.00	3.27	3.44	3.50
<i>s</i>	0.94	0.99	1.00	0.90	0.79	0.76	0.80

