

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

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**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.

## Introduction

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 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 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.

Question	Mean	Standard Deviation
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

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

### 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 counselees 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.

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## 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?