Online Counseling

Guidance on how to advise as a social worker via digital mailboxes
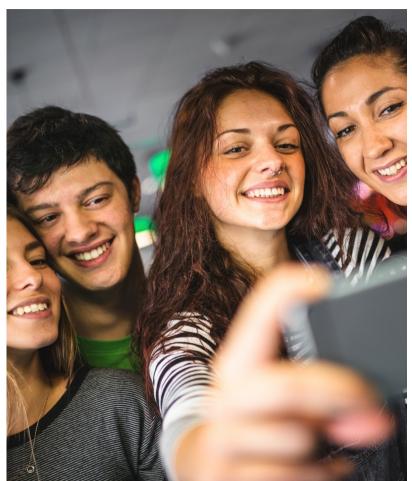
Purpose of online mail counseling

- **To be able to create support for vulnerable young people to make positive changes in their life depending on their problems**
    - Support to recognize and clarify problems
    - Support to reflect upon their life and available options for help in the real world
    - Help to understand these options and create and maintain motivation to make use of these.

- **At the same time, mail counselling is a unique opportunity to:**
    - Reach and advise vulnerable young people who can't use the online chat
    - Show who you are, as counsellor, rather than simply telling it.
    - Though the answers in the mail box is intended for only one person, they are seen, on average, more than 500 times by other young readers.

Duty of confidentiality

- **To secure the anonymity in your mail counselling, you must all be thorough in exercising your duty of confidentiality**

  - This is not just legal advise - the young person will feel confident, safe and more willing to share their problems knowing that they are anonymous in your online counselling

- **Bear in mind: There are two types of confidentiality:**

  - **Legal duty of confidentiality:**

    - It is not legal to share personal information without consent from the individual unless you are obligated to report the person in the case of life-threatening danger.

  - **Ethic and moral duty of confidentiality:**

    - Beyond the limits of the law, you have an obligation to respect the boundaries of the young person and respect their individuality and their rights.

Challenges of mail counselling

- **A lot of people are quite surprised over the difficulty of moving from physical to online counselling**

  - Your language and choice of words suddenly carries a lot more meaning than if you were doing counselling face-to-face.

  - Ex. How do you give online advise to an 11-year old boy who are bullied in school or comes from a violent home?

- **So how do you create a safe environment where your counselling can yield results?**

  - Create a safe and motivating space where the young person can reflect over their own life-situation and the possible causes, context and available options that you have proposed in your counselling.

  - Treat every mail as unique. What works in this meeting may not work in the next one. It is essential to put the young person at the centre and let the counselling revolve around them, and them only.

Inspiration for your counselling

- **1. Present opportunities**

  - The young person is the expert of their own life. Instead of being admonishing and directional, present your ideas and reflections as suggestions so that you help the young person stay in control and make the best decision based on their own life situation.

- **2. Be a "reflective witness"**

  - Avoid own interpretations of the young person's words. Instead, try to mirror those words and be a "reflective witness". Ex. "Based on what you're telling, I get a feeling that…" and so on.

- **3. Constantly clarify**

  - Also, you have to clarify what you do and don't understand. This way, you make it clear from where you are basing your counselling.

- **4. Externalise the presented problems**

  - You must help the young person understand the problems as amendable, not as part of the young one him-/herself. This way, you foster an idea of the young person being an agent of his/her life. For example, you can address an eating disorder as a voice or disease that makes the young person think or do specific things.

- **5. Referral**

  - If possible, it is important to refer the young person to further help in the real world and in the local area of the young person. Always be as direct as possible in this case; if needed, always strive to find a direct phone number or link to a website.

Online counseling: Before writing

- **Before you start writing your answer, it is important to consider the following things:**

Checklist:
- **Who is the young person? Visualise:**
    - **Age**
    - **Gender**
    - **Stage of maturity and life (psychologically, socially and physically)**
    - **What acknowledgement does the young person have of his/her problem?**
- **What's the primary question(s)?**
- **What resources does the young person possess in the counselling?**
- **Do the needs of the young person exceed online counselling? Ex.**
    - **Care**
    - **An adult presence**
    - **Focus on referrals**
- **Make a disposition/list of priority**
- **Consider: Do I need sparring from a colleague?**

Online counselling: During writing

- While writing your answer to the young person, consider the difficulty and complexity of the problem. Depending on the severity, the length and complexity of the answer may differ. Furthermore: Language, structure and depth will be more influential:

Bid them welcome, acknowledge and reflect
 Ex. "Nice of you to write (...)", "It can be difficult to (...)", "it's understandable you're frustrated (...)"
Answer the question. If this is not possible, EXPLAIN why you can't answer it.
Explain your thinking – Why do you respond like you do?
 Ex. "When you write it like that, I can understand. This is why my first thought is (...)"
Make a referral if possible – in the local vicinity, first and foremost.
End the answer with focus on the positive
 Ex. "There is light at the end of the tunnel", "you can create change"
 Read through your response, put it away for a while and then read it again
Language & attitude
 Use the young person as a reflection – use their own language – Explain technical terms
 Divide your answer into paragraphs – if necessary, make headlines.
 Be wary of distancing language (i.e. "Thus" and "Therefore" and so on)