Counselling Via Email:
Applying Therapeutic Letter-Writing Skills to New Technologies

Cathy Stone, Senior Counsellor
Head, Student Support Unit
Ourimbah Campus, University of Newcastle

Abstract

Whether to offer counselling via email to students is a subject of much current debate. Issues such as confidentiality, record-keeping and effectiveness of the intervention are important ones to consider. Narrative therapists have contributed much to the development of therapeutic writing skills and letter-writing is often used as an effective adjunct to therapy and, at times, as the sole means of therapy. This paper will discuss some of the principles of therapeutic writing and how this can be applied to email counselling. Examples will be provided from actual cases, of work with clients who have given their permission for this material to be used. The views of two such clients about their experiences of email counselling will also be presented and there will be discussion about the process and the practical and ethical dilemmas surrounding email counselling.

Introduction

Over the past few years there has been a rapid increase in email usage by students. It is more widely available to them, with most Universities routinely supplying students with email addresses and in many cases access to a University email server at low cost. It has become the preferred form of contact between students and lecturers, being far more convenient than trying to make an appointment with a lecturer or catching them by phone. Students use email routinely to communicate with fellow-students and friends.

It should be no surprise to counselling services that students are also increasingly seeking to make contact with a counsellor via email. Students can usually look up counsellors' email addresses on the University's web pages, or in a staff directory. It is an easy, immediate, anonymous and non-threatening way to make contact. What it does, though, is create a dilemma for many counsellors regarding how to respond. There are usually concerns about confidentiality, record-keeping, time, building a therapeutic relationship and, of course, the effectiveness of the intervention.

This paper will describe my recent experiences of engaging in email counselling with three different students. One of these students was already well-known to me, having seen me for counselling at various times over the previous two years. She had moved to another area, but asked if we could continue some counselling by email. The other two were students whom, to my knowledge, I had never met. All three of these students have contributed to the writing of this paper, through their answers to questions I have asked them for the purposes of this paper, and through giving me their permission to discuss their experiences.

Jenny

I first engaged in email counselling when a student I had been seeing for the previous two years, a young woman aged 22, whom I shall call Jenny, moved to another area. Jenny had struggled with anorexia and bulimia for a year or so prior to meeting me. With much of my work being influenced by narrative therapy, we had worked together to externalise "An and Bully" and Jenny had gained considerable strength against their influence, although it was an ongoing struggle. Jenny asked me if we could still discuss issues by email, as she was afraid of losing ground to An and Bully while she was looking for another counsellor. I was willing to agree, once I was assured that Jenny had considered the confidentiality risks with email but still wanted to go ahead.

One of the reasons that I was willing to use email as a counselling medium is that I had previous positive experiences of using letters as part of therapy. Narrative Therapy lends itself very easily to letter-writing. In their book "Literate Means to Therapeutic Ends", David Epston and Michael White talk about the importance of both spoken and written language in the process of assisting a person to discover "alternative stories" and effectively "reauthor" their lives.
"It can be argued that writing provides a mechanism through which persons can be more active in
determining the arrangement of information and experience, and in the production of different
accounts of events and experience.” (Epston and White, 1989, p.38).

Email is, after all, just another way of writing a letter. Therapeutic letters can be used to ask
questions, to encourage new and different ways of interpreting experiences. They can also be used
to highlight and confirm changes or differences, to strengthen and validate the alternative stories
that emerge. Because I knew Jenny well already, I was familiar with the issues that she emailed me
about and I could respond to her emails in a way that was already familiar to her. The work that we
had already done together was reinforced by this process.

For example, in one email Jenny told me that:

_B. is interfering with my studies. At the times when I should be doing readings and stuff, she likes to
take over. Maybe its because it is often late at night when she knows that I am at my most vulnerable.
It is rare that I can counteract her influence, and she has been getting me almost every night. That
makes me feel very ashamed and weak for letting her in, I keep thinking to myself that if I had more
willpower, then I could just ignore the calls of hunger and keep studying. I don't know. It is quite
depressing, I keep saying to myself "this is the last time", "tomorrow I will be stronger" and I guess in
a way that is why I contacted you again. I am really hoping that by letting her know that I mean
business by getting in touch with you again that she will be scared and run away! I need to take a
bigger stand against her, and it is not good enough for me to say that I will just wait until things slow
down a little, and then I can deal with her. I guess that this is her talking as well as me? If I wait, it
may be quite some time, and I want her out of my life right now._

_I went out with a girlfriend last night to see a band and I had a few wines, which An didn't like too
much, but that is one area of fun that I refuse to let her take away. I stayed at this friend's place, so
there was no opportunity for that other bitch [Bulimia] to creep in. I have been eating a few more
"forbiddens" like lollies, and even some chocolate, but do laps in the pool and aerobics to compensate.
This is also silly I know, but at least I am eating those foods and not throwing up!_

_You asked me "What are some of the ideas that you have gained from your studies and experiences at
Uni, that counteract the ideas that Bulimia and Anorexia have for you?" I guess the main thing has
been getting to know other women that don’t give a shit (pardon the language, but that is how they
would put it!) about what they look like, or what other people think of their bodies. And also people
who are just healthy and eat "good" stuff most of the time, but don't feel bad if they splurge once in
awhile._

_My reply referred to a number of things which we had discussed before, but that I was able to
emphasise in writing:_

_You told me that B is interfering with your studies, especially at the times when you are trying to do
readings and so on, she gets you when it is late at night when she knows that you are at your most
vulnerable. I was a bit puzzled by something you said about that. You said "I keep thinking to myself
that if I had more willpower, then I could just ignore the calls of hunger and keep studying." What is it
that makes you think you have to ignore the calls of hunger? Is that Anorexia telling you that?
Because I wondered if the two of them are sort of working in harness together - you know, Anorexia
gets you to believe that you shouldn’t listen to hunger, so she doesn't let you eat even enough healthy
food to keep hunger away, then it's like a trap, because of course you physically can't ignore hunger
for too long (no-one can!) so then B can more easily seduce you into bingeing, because by then you're
starving and could eat a horse! Then An and B punish you, telling you that you're weak and hopeless
for bingeing, and they insist that you vomit, and you are left feeling, as you said, "very ashamed and
weak for letting her in"._

_What seems to me particularly cruel and unfair is that they have you believing it is all your fault, when
they have set you up to "fail" by keeping you in a state of hunger, tempting you with "forbidden" foods,
whispering to you that you should eat, eat and eat some more, then blaming you for doing just that! I
can't help thinking about some of the methods used by officers in concentration camps, or when people
are forced to sign false confessions by being tortured. It sounds as if An and B torture you with
hunger, to the point where you can no longer resist, then when you give in you are punished even
more, just as if you signed that false confession. Did you know (I'm sure you must) that victims of_
torture or abuse usually end up believing that it is their fault? That if only they were somehow better or stronger or smarter it wouldn't happen? Do you remember how we once talked about whether being in a relationship with An and B is a bit like being in an abusive relationship? In abusive relationships women usually try harder and harder to be better, stronger, slimmer, more patient, more supportive, less argumentative and so on and so on, but however hard they try the abuse continues. It only stops when they decide that it is not their fault and that they will no longer listen to the abuser nor believe his lies, and eventually leave him for good.

A lot of the things you say indicate that you are working on an escape plan - perhaps beginning on a tunnel to the outside world? For instance, you won't give in to An over the wine issue, and you escaped from them both by staying with a friend. You are also aware that being alone makes you more vulnerable to attack, and you're thinking about ways of being with friends and other allies a little more often. You have contacted me again, despite my not being popular with An and B, and you spend time with other women who "don't give a shit about what they look like, or what other people think of their bodies". And also with "people who are just healthy and eat "good" stuff most of the time, but don't feel bad if they splurge once in awhile". An and B must HATE people like that! But you're not giving in to them on that either - you're choosing your own friends, not the ones that they would choose for you. You're also continuing to eat a few more "forbidden" like lollies, and even some chocolate, even though An insists that you do laps and aerobics to compensate. As you say, at least you are eating those foods and not throwing up! That is a real achievement and one worth reminding yourself about whenever An and B are trying to tell you that you are weak and silly.

Jenny replied the next day:

You asked "What is it that makes you think you have to ignore the calls of hunger? Is that Anorexia telling you that?" Yes, it is definitely An telling me that. Jenny knows that she is hungry and that eating something will not hurt, but An is there inside my head threatening me with thoughts of becoming fat and stuff like that. Sometimes it is not even the thought of becoming fat, it is just that I am so used to that feeling of hunger, and it is often difficult to tell if I am hungry or not (I hope that makes sense!). In that sense then, the pair are working in tandem. What I am going to try is when it is that late at night and I do feel hungry, maybe I could just have an orange, or hot drink or something. That is really hard though - you have no idea how strong Bs voice is to eat more, and eat "bad" stuff. She is so horrible! Still, this week I will give it a go, and try to beat B off with a very large stick! You are right when you say about abused people - "That if only they were somehow better or stronger or smarter it wouldn't happen?" That is exactly how I feel sometimes, especially just after B has attacked so to speak. I remember us talking about being in a relationship with An and B is a bit like being in an abusive relationship, and I still have that coaster [on the cycle of violence] that you gave me - I will have a look at it again, and see if I can apply some of the messages to An and B. Thanks for pointing out all the positives, like staying with friends and eating chocolate etc. It is sometimes hard to see that these are stands that I am taking against the pair, it is easy for them to let Jenny wallow in all the negative "victories" that they have between them.

We exchanged emails in this fashion for about two months until there were some other changes in Jenny's life and she found a counsellor locally, with whom she was happy. Over a year later, Jenny responded very warmly and willingly to my request for her participation in writing this paper, through giving me some feedback about her experience of email counselling, and I will talk about her answers to my questions later on.

"Bunny"

Sometime later, I received an email from a student, calling herself "Bunny". She told me that she wished to remain anonymous, but that she would like to email me about some personal problems. Initially I was hesitant. I saw a clear difference between engaging in email counselling with a student already known to me, as a method of follow-up, and engaging in email counselling as the only form of intervention, to a student who wished to remain faceless. I tried to persuade her to come to see me face-to-face, stressing that this would be confidential and probably far more helpful. I told her of my concerns about the security and privacy of email, but Bunny was adamant. She would not come to see me face-to-face, so I asked her to tell me some more about her and her concerns, to see if we might be able to use email as an effective medium for counselling.
This time, I was more aware of the constraints on my time and the need to schedule in regular appointments as it were. The pattern we established was that Bunny would email me, I would let her know that I had booked an appointment time over the following week, when I would then spend the hour reading her email carefully and replying to it, equally carefully. In this way, it was no more difficult to find the time for emails with Bunny than for a face-to-face appointment. We had six "appointments" in this way. My emails consisted of responses to Bunny's answers to questions I had asked in the previous email, and then some more questions, often externalising the issues in the process. In Bunny's emails to me, she would thoughtfully answer the questions I had asked, and would also tell me of any new developments, revelations, changes she or others had noticed and so on.

For example, early on Bunny talked about the way in which she cared for and looked after others, particularly her mother and her sister, and that "I think I take on their problems on my own a lot, so I don't really know what's my problem and what's not". Bunny told me that she was feeling depressed and worthless and found it very hard to trust anyone or get close to them.

I asked her some questions about this, such as:

- Do you often find yourself thinking about everyone else and not stopping to think about yourself?,
- It sounds as if you are a good listener. Have you always been good at listening to others?
- Is it possible that, because you were a good listener, and were good at thinking of others, that you ended up with the job of "emotional caretaker" and general helper of others?
- What effect is this habit of caring more for others than for yourself, having on your life at the moment?

Bunny replied openly to these questions and gave more information about herself in the process.

- Yes, I believe that I do think about everyone else and not stop to think of myself .... I've been brought up having to be strong and independent. I had to grow up faster than most kids.
- As far back as I can remember I know I could always understand and put myself in other people's shoes .... I've been thinking about what you said and yes, I think because I am/was good at doing, that I did end up with the job of "emotional caretaker" and general helper of others.
- I believe that the habit of caring more for others than for myself is ruining my life. I need to hear other people's problems as often as I can, so I feel like I'm doing something good with my life.

In her fourth email to me, Bunny told me about changes she was noticing.

- My mother was telling me the other night that since I've started the course I'm doing and started talking to you she has noticed that my self-esteem has got better. I do feel better about myself. Knowing now that things aren't always my fault, I have tried to stop myself from being sorry for things that have nothing to do with me, but most of the time the habit is stronger than I am.
- Yes I think that the fact that I am prepared to look at my problems now, even though this is a really bad time, is an indication of my strength and independence. It feels to me the right time to address all this stuff. I hate feeling the way I do, and I thought I was strong enough to do this all on my own.
- I guess I try to look at a lot of things in a positive way. I did mean that what's happened in the past has contributed to the strength and independence that I have now. I do feel I have gained something from some of my experiences, even though they have been so difficult at times - but I keep making the same mistakes.
- I do feel angry towards the habit, but because its something/someone I can't see or change. In a few minutes the anger dies and I try to question it but I can't make sense of it. My sister's demands/expectations? I always do what she wants, if I don't I feel really bad, but I mostly do it just to keep the peace (yet again). I am trying to refuse the demands/expectations of the habit.

I was able to comment and reflect on these changes she had noticed. Bunny's fifth email emphasised these changes even more.

- I think that now that I know more about the habit and now I recognise that it is there, I can stand up to it and not feel so bad (like I would have before). Yes I do think it's a significant change how I handled...
things. [In relation to a specific incident she had mentioned]. I think this says that I can do stuff for myself and not feel bad about it afterwards, but it still has to be something that someone else wants also. I can't just think of myself just yet! I don't know why people care about me so much for. They keep telling me that I'm a great friend who can make them laugh and smile and that I'm always there for them, and that I'm nice. I know I'm all these but that doesn't make me special or anything. I guess I try to keep the faith that everyone in the world is nice and thoughtful. I've been sick the past few weeks, so I haven't been doing much at all. I've gotten into fights with my mother and sister, because I've been sick and haven't done much around the house or anything for them. I felt guilty about not helping mum, so I tried to do something and ended up back in bed within 5 minutes. Now I don't care, I do things that I want to do, and if I don't want to do them then it won't get done.

The final emails between us reinforced the changes and terminated the regular "appointments".

Talking to you really helped me out a lot, I think I found out why I wanted to help people and put them before myself. My sister is the opposite of me, she is always thinking of herself and she expects everybody around her to do everything for her, but she won't go out of her way to do anything for anybody else (mainly for her family that is) and I guess seeing how she is, it finally hit me that I was like this because I don't want to turn out like my sister. I want to be someone people can trust, someone people can feel comfortable around. Don't get me wrong, I know I still have a lot to learn and a lot to get right, especially regarding looking after my own feelings and emotions before everybody else, and I truly believe that I am doing this (slowly). My boyfriend keeps telling me I have to look after myself, so I can't forget to do that when he is around. If I really feel like I have to talk to someone I will contact you.

PS. My real name is Nicola.

In almost every email, I mentioned the possibility of Bunny (or Nicola) coming to see me at some stage if and when she ever felt ready. I wanted to keep this open, should she ever change her mind. Although I think that the process was probably slower than face-to-face counselling, in that questions and answers had to happen in stages, Nicola indicated clearly that she had found email counselling helpful. I contacted her 12 months later to ask her if she would help me with this paper. Her feedback, which I will go into in more detail later, was very positive.

Annie

The third student I will talk about is Annie. Like Nicola, Annie contacted me by email and requested counselling by email. Again, I expressed my preference for face-to-face counselling.

I am willing to do email counselling but I must admit that it is easier and I think more helpful for the student if the student comes to see a counsellor face-to-face, so that would be my preference. The confidentiality aspects of email are a bit problematic also.

Again, Annie declined this.

I understand your preference for face to face counselling and would like to do it but at this stage I think it would make me feel very uncomfortable. It would be much easier for me to talk via email and I find I am a lot clearer when communicating in this way. So, if it's OK by you then that's the way I would like to go, at least for the time being. I look forward to hearing back from you about this.

I established with Annie that I would book regular appointments and warned her of the lack of security of emails.

I have booked an appointment time on .... for me to email you in response to whatever you would like to talk to me about. If you would like to go ahead with some counselling via email, you will need to email me back before then, telling me as much as you would like about yourself and the issues that you would like some help with. I'll make regular appointments with you like this, so that I have sufficient time to read your emails thoroughly and respond in some depth, rather than on the run, so to speak! I just need to warn you that emails are not always completely confidential as I'm sure you are aware, so just keep this in mind. Looking forward to hearing back from you.

Annie told me:

My main problem is my anxiety. It seems to be affecting my life in a very unpleasant way. It happens whenever I am in a social situation such as at work or at a social function. For some reason I get this
overwhelming feeling of tension and nervousness. It makes me want to stay at home all the time where I feel more at ease.

I was not at all happy with trying to use email alone to help her with anxiety, so I tried once more

Having read your email I would like to urge you again to come and see me or our other counsellor in person. The anxiety that you describe can be diminished quite considerably by teaching you some quite simple relaxation and breathing techniques, which will make a difference to how you feel straight away. It tends to be more effective to talk with someone about these kinds of things. Anxiety can be terribly debilitating and will indeed affect your life in all sorts of ways - but there are ways of getting in control of it. Anxiety is probably making it harder for you to come and see a counsellor, so it is even more important not to let it stop you from seeking help and support for yourself.

Annie's reply convinced me to go ahead - particularly the last sentence.

You are right about my anxiety, it is stopping me from getting counselling face to face. But I do want and need support. The only person I can talk to about it is my boyfriend but he doesn't really understand it. Nobody else knows about my anxieties. It is something I deal with alone. I think to myself how good it would be if I could stay at home in my safe haven all the time and never have to deal with anyone socially. Of course I do not come across this way in person. I can be as friendly and as outgoing as the next person. I really want to come and see you about this but I just know I can't at the moment. I understand that via email you are limited in what you can do for me. That's ok. You have already helped me a great deal by acknowledging that my problems are real and my stresses are real.

I asked questions to find out more about Annie and her beliefs, her story about herself, and then asked questions about these, to provide opportunities for alternative beliefs and stories to emerge. Some examples of these are: "What else is anxiety stopping you from doing?", "How much is it affecting your life? If you had to put a figure on it, what percentage of your life would you say has been taken over by anxiety? Would it be 10%, 100%, somewhere in between?", "Who do you have in your life who is 'on your side' - an ally or support to you?". By splitting up the questions and comments in my emails, and replying to each in turn, with her answers typed straight after my text, Annie turned the emails into something more like a conversation. I followed her lead in this. Here is an example of this conversational style. All of my questions here were from the previous email to Annie. She has woven her answers around them to create a meaningful conversation.

Annie

Hi Cathy. I would say my anxiety has taken over maybe 30% of my life. It prevents me from going out with work friends, it prevents me going to see my doctor, it causes me to not want to go to work. Just last week a group of people where I work organised a night out and they asked if I was going. I said no because I'd rather stay home, which is the truth.

Cathy

Annie, would a part of you have liked to have been able to go to this night out? Was there a bit of a struggle between the part of you that wanted to go and anxiety? Do you think that there was a moment when you thought about saying yes, before anxiety came in and said no?

Annie

No, not really. I would not have enjoyed myself if I went anyway so I didn't want to go.

Cathy

I'd really like to know a bit more about the other 70% of your life that is not taken over by anxiety. What does this involve? How have you managed to keep anxiety away from this part of your life? Does it ever happen that anxiety tries to take over a bit more and you manage to keep it away?

Annie

I spend a lot of time alone. That is where much of this 70% of time is taken up. My boyfriend works a lot so often it is just me at home by myself. I am completely comfortable in this situation. It is when I feel the pressure to socialise and be extraverted that I get anxious. Actually someone in my tutorial said to me that I am too withdrawn and I should get therapy for it. My mother is the one who cares
and worries about everyone. I do worry a lot about her. It really hurts me when she puts herself down all the time. My father doesn't help much because he often tells her that she has no idea about reality and what goes on outside in the real world.

Cathy
So, Annie, is it your mother who is the one in the family to care and worry about everyone else? What effect does this have on you? Do you find yourself wrestling with guilt and worry over your mother? What sorts of things are guilt and worry saying to you about your mother and about yourself?

Annie
I do feel bad about my mother's situation. I mostly feel bad about the fact that I am aware of her problems but I haven't done anything yet to help her overcome her self-esteem issues.

I am enjoying my course at Uni very much. I still feel anxious but I put up with it due to my enthusiasm for learning. The anxiety is not as bad for me at Uni.

Cathy
Annie, is Uni part of that 70% that's not taken over by anxiety? Can you explain to me what this is about? Are you a bit more free to be yourself at Uni, without worry and guilt about your family accompanying you? What are some of the things that you like about Uni and find helpful or rewarding for you?

Annie
I like Uni because its focus is on learning. I don't feel like I have to be something I'm not. I talk up in class and express my opinions sometimes. I like to share knowledge so I can develop and help others to develop as well. I have made a friend with a girl who is similar to me in the way she thinks and because of this I do not feel like too much of a loner.

The only person who knows about my anxiety is my boyfriend whom I live with. I get the impression he thinks I am just being silly- like it's not that serious. I often feel depressed but it is not a bad depression - just a feeling of sadness that comes over me sometimes.

Cathy
Annie, are you able to talk to your boyfriend about your sadness? Sadness is something I think that we can all understand. Have you considered sharing this sadness with anyone else - girlfriends, other students you know through Uni?

Annie
No I don't share my sadness because I don't like to feel vulnerable. I protect my inner self. I am opening up to you because I want to understand myself. I guess I want to be told that my desire to be a recluse is perfectly acceptable, but I know it's not. It's not healthy.

I have been doing a lot of thinking and introspecting lately and I have become more self-aware. I have realised that when I am "myself" around people that a lot of people don't understand me. I find it hard to "connect" with anyone and I think this adds to my feelings of anxiety. I think it might be my personality that no one understands.

Cathy
What is it about "Annie" - which parts of her personality - that you think maybe people don't understand? I'd like to know a bit more about Annie and what makes her such a mystery to others. What do you think?

Annie
I don't know. Maybe because I am not interested in the things most people are? Maybe it's the mixture of my introversion and intuitive way of seeing things that prevents me from being understood in this largely visual, competitive, hierarchical and extraverted world. I just don't want to deal with the world anymore.

After four sessions, Annie had made some significant changes, to the point where we decided that no more regular sessions were needed.
Cathy
You said "I am putting pressure on myself to be someone I am not". Do you think that you are beginning to take a little of that pressure off yourself? To allow yourself to be you, instead of someone else?

Annie
Yes, I'm getting there. I just have to ignore what other people think and I'm beginning to do that now.

Cathy
You sounded very clear and definite when you said "I think people should follow their own advice". Does this mean that you are beginning to follow your own advice a bit more often and accept yourself for the person you are, and feel okay with this?

Annie
Yes, I'm feeling much better about this now. I guess I just needed someone to validate my problems and tell me that my desires are healthy. You have done that for me. I guess you're one of the more open minded people in this world who can accept all people for who they are unlike the majority of people I come across who have a bad case of BLM (be like me) syndrome. I have appreciated your responses so very much. I can honestly say I feel much better about myself since I have started "talking" to you. Thanks.

Cathy
From what you say here, it does sound to me as if you are valuing yourself and your individuality more than perhaps you were doing before. I am thinking that now you may be able to continue the process of validating yourself, by appreciating yourself and your qualities.

Annie
I agree. So, I think I will be OK from now on. What are your thoughts? Do you think I need more counselling?

Cathy
No, I don't think you need more counselling regularly any more, but you might find it helpful to "check in" from time to time, to keep me updated on how things are going and to get a little feedback sometimes. Changes are a bit up and down in nature and can be hard to maintain without some support and someone to check in with. How about you see how things go and if you'd like to contact me again, just to give me an update or to check something out or let me know something, then get back in touch?

Annie
Thanks, Cathy. I will do this if I fall back into the same thinking again or have any other problems.

Follow-up
In preparation for this paper, I contacted Jenny, Nicola and Annie in June of this year. I had had no contact with any of them since last year, so was not sure that their email addresses had remained the same. I was in luck, and received very warm and positive responses from all three to my request for their assistance, plus answers to each of the questions that I asked and permission to use their answers in the paper. What I wrote was:

I am emailing you to ask if you might be able to help me with something. I am interested in finding out a bit more about whether email counselling is something that is particularly helpful to some people, and whether it offers something that can't be done with face-to-face counselling. I was hoping you might answer a couple of questions for me and maybe give me permission to use your answers in a research paper that I would like to put together for a student services conference at the end of the year. Your details and responses would be completely anonymous and nothing that could possibly identify you would be used.

The following section lists the questions I asked and each of their responses:
Question 1
Did you feel that email counselling was helpful for you? In what ways? What did you like about it? Was there anything you didn't like about it?

Jenny
Yes, definitely. Particularly if it was difficult to call or get to see you, it gave me an avenue for expressing what I was feeling etc, and you always provided ideas on how I could cope, strategies to use. It is obviously not as effective as a face-to-face session, but then in some ways it could be used if I really didn't feel like talking to anyone, but DID feel like getting it all out - email/letter is a good way to do that.

Nicola
I felt email counselling was really helpful for me. I am not the type of person who would just go up to somebody and tell them if I had a problem. I'm the type of person who always puts other people's feelings etc before my own, plus I would really have to trust someone to be able to talk to them face-to-face about a problem I was having. So email counselling wasn't confronting for me and was helpful, and the fact that if I didn't want to answer something I didn't have to, but on the other hand it was helpful because it gave me time to think about things before answering you or typing back to you about how I felt about things.

Annie
Yes, it was helpful for me. I liked the fact that after I received your email I didn't have to reply to it straight away so I had time to think about my responses. Also, I liked being anonymous and felt I could be completely honest with you. The email counselling helped me look at my problems from a different perspective which really helped me accept myself more.

Question 2
Would you have come to see me face-to-face if I had not agreed to provide email counselling? Why or why not?

Jenny
Possibly, it is difficult to judge that one because a lot the time I just couldn't see you because I was too far away. I think that I certainly would have tried to juggle things around more to try to see you in person though if the email support had not have been there.

Nicola
I liked how it wasn't face-to-face so I didn't feel as if I was going to be judged like I would have if I had to do it face-to-face. I liked how I could take my time to reflect about what was being said and done. There was nothing I didn't really like about email counselling, maybe just how sometimes you (the counsellor) might think that a problem wasn't too bad and didn't responded right away (not that I thought you did this). I mean with face-to-face counselling, you can tell by the person if it is a big problem and they need something done straight away, but with email counselling you can't.

Annie
No, I would not have came to see you face-to-face. I am quite shy and introverted, so it is very hard to walk into an office for counselling. I thought about it but knew I could never do it. Another thing is that I communicate better in writing than verbally. When face-to-face I find I can't concentrate as I'm too busy thinking about how I'm coming across to others.

Question 3
What would you have done if I had not agreed to email counselling? e.g. tried elsewhere, contacted another counsellor, given up on the idea of counselling etc.

Jenny
Been upset!! Probably tried more to find a counsellor closer to me geographically, which is always an onerous task and could be detrimental to counselling in general - i.e. I might have just given up altogether.
Nicola

No I wouldn't have come to see you face-to-face because I would have found that harder to do than to do email counselling, and then I would have probably not have talked to anyone about how I was feeling at that time, and who knows what or where I would be today?

Annie

I probably would have given up on the idea of counselling if you had not agreed to it. The only reason I tried it was because a friend of mine mentioned she had been "talking" to you via email. I thought it was a great idea and because I'd been wanting to see someone for so long about my problems, but never had the courage, I decided to give it a go.

Question 4

Is there anything else you would like to say about your experience of email counselling?

Jenny

It was highly worthwhile, and I definitely benefited from it. There is a chance that I would have just forgotten about counselling altogether if we had not kept up the emailing. In no way would I recommend it as a replacement for face-to-face counselling as I feel that sessions are invaluable to recovery and to sharing information and feelings. There is no real substitute for being able to talk in person, although the email is a great support mechanism.

Nicola

No I think I covered it in the answers above.

Annie

Hmmm well only that it really helped me because, up until that point, I thought there was something wrong with me because I felt I didn't fit in with the rest of society. After my counselling I no longer felt that way. Just to have someone to talk to who could offer a more objective and informed perspective was great.

I also asked Jenny, Nicola and Annie to comment on any concerns that they had about confidentiality issues with counselling via email and whether they could remember my giving any warning about confidentiality risks. Each one admitted to some concerns and therefore being wary of others using their computer and so on, but that this was not enough to deter them. What was interesting was that none of them could remember whether I gave them any specific warning. Perhaps this indicates that the security risks should be mentioned more than once, and not just at the beginning of counselling, when people have a lot of other, more pressing issues on their minds.

Conclusion

While my preferred style of counselling remains face-to-face, there is indeed a place for counselling via email, for students who need to access counselling from a distance or wish to seek counselling anonymously. Email is another form of letter-writing, which has long been recognised as an effective therapeutic tool. I have found it to be particularly suited to many of the ideas of Narrative Therapy, which can use both written and spoken text to challenge dominant stories, beliefs and ideas, in order to create the space for alternative stories to emerge and develop.

References


