

# ReadyMinds Distance Counseling (RMDC) Newsletter

**Volume 1, Edition 1**  
March 2004



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## **INTRODUCTION**

Welcome to the first issue of the quarterly ReadyMinds® Distance Counseling Newsletter. RM is a leader in Distance Career Counseling, working to advance the professional development of counselor practitioners in the use of Distance Counseling (DC) methodologies. RM is implementing DC Training that satisfies the training requirement leading to the granting of the Distance Counseling Credential by the Center for Credentialing and Education (CCE), an affiliate of the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC®). The newsletter format will include at least one current article about DC, discuss issues and interests of counselors relating to DC and provide DC professional development information. Please feel free to send your comments or questions by emailing to [RMDCnewsletter@readyminds.com](mailto:RMDCnewsletter@readyminds.com). We plan to address many of these inquiries in future issues.

*Harvey Schmelter-Davis, Editor*  
*RMDC Newsletter*

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## **FEATURED ARTICLE**

### **Distance Counseling Coming of Age**

So what is Distance Counseling (DC) and how has it come of age? DC can be defined as an approach that takes the best practices of traditional counseling as well as some of its own unique advantages and adapts them for delivery to clients via electronic means to maximize the use of technology-assisted counseling techniques. The technology-assisted methods may include telecounseling, secure e-mail, chat, videoconferencing or computerized stand-alone software programs.

Among professions, counseling is historically young having developed during the 20th century. Counselor training and practice has typically focused on face to face (f2f) and in-person group counseling techniques. The use of technology started to be considered by Carl Rogers by mid-century. He felt the use of tape recorded sessions might be useful as part of the therapeutic process. The introduction of computers and email opened new possibilities to conduct counseling. Career Assisted Guidance Systems (CAGS) and Career Information Delivery Systems (CIDS), developed in the late 1960's and early 70's, provided a new way in which clients could obtain information to help them make decisions. The current generation of CIDS can include assessment, values clarification and decision making resources. These computer assisted programs helped lay the foundation to support the evolution of distance counseling.

Meanwhile mental health professionals were experimenting with the use of technology to provide therapy. In 1972 the first simulated psychotherapy session occurred between computers at Stanford and UCLA. Telephone help lines were established to provide assistance in areas such as suicide and drug prevention. Informal support groups online were established in the late 1970s. A free mental health service called "Ask Uncle Ezra" <http://ezra.cornell.edu/> was established in 1986 at Cornell University and continues to help students. In 1994 a group in the United Kingdom called Samaritans <http://www.samaritans.org.uk/> trained volunteer counselors to provide free e-mail support to suicidal individuals. In 2001 more than 64,000 people were helped by these volunteers.

Two important organizations were established in 1997: The International Society for Mental Health Online (ISMHO) and ReadyMinds (RM). ISMHO, [www.ismho.org](http://www.ismho.org) was established "to promote the understanding, use and development of online communication, information and technology for the international mental health community." Hundreds of therapists actively use this site. RM, [www.readyminds.com](http://www.readyminds.com) was established to provide greater access to people who needed career counseling but could not find a convenient time, were not able to physically go for f2f counseling and/or found it more comfortable using this counseling methodology. Today RM is at the forefront in providing systematic and theoretically based distance career counseling services nationwide.

In the 21st century an increasing number of books have been published on DC including: *Technology in Counselling and Psychotherapy: A Practitioner's Guide*, *Cybercounseling and Cyberlearning: An Encore*, and *Using Technology to Improve Counseling Practice*. Recognition has been given to DC by professional and credentialing organizations. The American Counseling Association (ACA) [http://www.counseling.org/site/PageServer?pagename=resources\\_internet](http://www.counseling.org/site/PageServer?pagename=resources_internet) is in the process of updating its DC ethics and standards. The National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) has established a code of ethics for Internet Counseling [www.nbcc.org/ethics/webethics.htm](http://www.nbcc.org/ethics/webethics.htm). It is entirely fitting that in January, 2004 a credential was initiated by the NBCC affiliate, the Center for Credentialing and Education (CCE), [www.cce-global.org/dcc.htm](http://www.cce-global.org/dcc.htm). RM has been selected by CCE to provide the Distance Credentialed Counselor training, [www.readyminds.com/dcc](http://www.readyminds.com/dcc). This Credential establishes a scope of practice and ethical behavior for counselors using DC methodologies. The credential not only sets the standards to practice DC but offers to the counseling community and public at large a legitimate and ethical way in which distance counseling services should be provided. Yes, DC has come of age and will continue to be one of the most important counseling practice developments of the 21st Century!

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## **DISTANCE COUNSELING (DC) FORUM**

This column provides a place where professionals can pose questions and obtain responses related to DC. Feel free to email any questions or comments to [RMDCnewsletter@readyminds.com](mailto:RMDCnewsletter@readyminds.com) and we will try to address them in future newsletters.

The following is a summary of issues and interests that counselors posed in recent DC training sessions. Several themes emerged and were addressed during the DC training:

- Technology - Using technology effectively when counseling clients.
- Ethics and Scope of Practice - Following appropriate counseling practice related to DC.
- Counseling Practice - Incorporating DC techniques in one's current practice.

In this particular issue, we will focus on one aspect of technology, the use of email. Email has become a standard for communication for many people in our day to day lives. It can be a powerful tool in the counseling process.

The following are some of the topics to consider when using email in the counseling process that are covered in the DC training.

### **1. The use of encryption to protect the privacy of the client.**

The use of encryption is critical when using email since it protects the client's privacy. If one works for an organization that has an information technology department, there is a good chance that encryption is available. However, if you don't have IT support, then search the web for encryption software and services. Here are some of the sites to obtain encryption resources: [www.probix.com/products.htm](http://www.probix.com/products.htm), [www.mailboxsecurity.com](http://www.mailboxsecurity.com) and [www.letstalkcounseling.com](http://www.letstalkcounseling.com).

### **2. How email can be used as part of the counseling process.**

It is not like sending a regular email. The counselor and client have to understand the advantages and challenges of using email as part of the counseling process. One of the most important advantages is the "power of the written word." Individuals have an opportunity to compose a written response and review it prior to sending it off into cyberspace. Another advantage is that the client and counselor have a written record to review, thus providing more opportunities to reflect on what has transpired. Some of the challenges of the use of email are that one doesn't obtain immediate feedback or see the client's body language or hear their tone of "voice". The counselor needs to develop skills to adjust for this challenge when using email or other written forms of distance deliveries.

### **3. Client and counselor preparation in the use of email.**

It's important for the counselor to make sure the client understands how email will be used as part of the counseling process. For example, describing what will take place, ensuring that only encrypted email will be used as well as explaining what is meant by encryption, indicating how quickly a client will receive a response, and making sure that the client agrees that this would be an acceptable format for counseling. These are just some topics that need to be addressed with the client upfront.

#### **4. Maintaining records.**

Maintaining a record of email transactions is an important part of the counseling process. The counselor must decide if a paper record will be maintained, how email will be saved and/or backed up securely, and if all email transactions are to be saved.

These are some of the issues a counselor must address if email is used in the counseling process. The following are three references that will be helpful to practitioners who want to use email in their counseling practice:

*Technology in Counselling and Psychotherapy: A Practitioner's Guide*, edited by Stephen Goss and Kate Anthony. Chapter 2, "Individual Therapy Online Via Email and Internet Relay Chat", pages 39-58.

*Cybercounseling & Cyberlearning: An Encore*, edited by John W. Bloom and Garry R. Walz. Chapter 10, "E-mail Rules! Organizations and Individuals Creating Ethical Excellence in Telemental-Health:" pages 203-217.

John Suler, Ph.D., Rider University, "Email Communications and Relationships" Web site, <http://www.rider.edu/suler/psyber/emailrel.html>