
INTRODUCTION

As most of you are aware, Distance Counseling is a rapidly emerging methodology for the delivery of effective counseling. This past year has seen the emergence of the distance counseling training as well as the granting of the first DCC Credentials. Many counselors have become more aware of this mode of delivery because of the discussion and publicity surrounding these occurrences.

In this volume, you will find an update from CCE (an affiliate of the NBCC) describing participation level and interest in this area to date (please see below). ReadyMinds, the training provider for the DCC, will also provide information about forthcoming training opportunities as well as projected participation for the upcoming year.

An article that recently appeared in *The Advocate* (a publication by the American Mental Health Counselors Association), written by Wendy Rawlings, LMHC, NCC, DCC, is included under the Featured Article section of this newsletter. Ms. Rawlings is a counselor in private practice in the state of Washington and has successfully utilized distance counseling for the past two years. In this featured article, Ms Rawlings offers her perspectives on this topic.

In the DC Forum section, you will read about the Pros and Cons of Distance Counseling as well as what to think about before becoming a Distance Counselor.

This will be the last newsletter issue of 2004. Our hope is that the year concludes well for all of you, the Holiday Season is a peaceful and satisfying one, and 2005 brings much success and fulfillment to you all.

Please feel free to send any comments, questions or other articles related to this field by emailing them to RMDCnewsletter@readminds.com We plan to address many of these inquires in future issues.

Harvey Schmelter-Davis, Editor
RMDC Newsletter

A message from the Center for Credentialing and Education (CCE)

Distance Counseling Credential off to a quick start!

The Center for Credentialing and Education, Inc. (CCE), an affiliate of NBCC®, established a new credential for counselors—the **Distance Credentialed Counselor (DCC)** in January 2004. NCC's and individuals licensed to practice counseling or a related field are qualified to apply for the credential after they successfully complete the required two-day 15-hour DCC training offered by *ReadyMinds*.

The first DCC Training Program took place in January, 2004. Since then, **over 125 applicants have already been certified!** The number continues to grow rapidly as more and more counselors move towards technology-assisted methods, including telecounseling, secure e-mail, chat, videoconferencing or computerized stand-alone software programs.

For more information about the DCC credential, visit www.cce-global.org/dcc.htm or contact CCE at (336) 482-2856.

**** NCCs will receive 15 continuing education hours for participation in this two-day workshop.**

FEATURED ARTICLE

The below article was featured in the November 2004 issue of The Advocate (Published by the American Mental Health Counselors Association – AMHCA)

**Distance Counseling:
Proceed with Cautious Enthusiasm**

By Wendy Rawlings LMHC, NCC

While telephone hotlines are well-known lifesavers for some of the most serious mental health problems—suicide intervention, domestic violence, and child abuse—routine counseling by telephone and Internet has quietly been gaining acceptance. And the explosion in the last decade in the use of computers and the Internet has accelerated the acceptance of distance counseling.

Last year, nearly 100 million people searched the web for mental health information, and many would-be clients now websurf their way to good mental health. In fall 1995 a PsychINFO search identified only 88 citations for “counseling Internet,” and only 12 therapists practicing on the Internet. By 2002, more than 300 private-practice websites were listed on the Internet, and “e-clinics” (groups of online therapists who share a website) accounted for an additional 500 therapists.

The rapid growth of the practice of e-therapy growing and the fact that online counselors had receiving no specialized training led to calls throughout the counseling community for counselor education and regulation. Seeing the need, in January the Center for Credentialing and Education, Inc. (CCE), an affiliate of the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC), established a new credential for counselors—the Distance Credentialed Counselor (DCC). Since then, 125 counselors have completed the training for this credential.

CCE has contracted with an education and career counseling organization called ReadyMinds (readyminds.com/training/dcc_cert.asp) to conduct training workshops to prepare master's-degreed counselors licensed in their state of residence to become distance counselors. The training is designed to address the delivery of counseling services to clients at a distance by building rapport and providing best counseling practices while being aware of ethical, legal, regulatory, and technological needs.

Counselors who complete 15 hours of training over two days and complete the written Training Accountability Requirement receive the Distance Credentialed Counselor credential and 15 CEs.

ReadyMinds defines distance counseling as *a counseling 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 in order to maximize the use of technology-assisted counseling techniques*. Distance counseling, though not defined as such, has been around a long time. Sigmund Freud may have been the first modern-day distance counselor. He did his distance counseling through the use of letters. More recently, the medical community has successfully used telemedicine to bring services to outlying and underserved areas.

Therapy over the telephone has proven effective. The research literature shows telephone therapy to be a cost-effective, clinically useful ethical intervention modality. A study published in the Aug. 25 *Journal of the American Medical Association* reported that researchers found they could significantly increase recovery rates for patients taking antidepressants by providing several counseling sessions over the phone.

The use of technology such the Internet is just the newest twist to distance counseling. The Internet can be used in conjunction with face-to-face counseling or telephone hotlines in a number of ways. The Samaritans organization in the United Kingdom (Samaritans.org.uk) offers 24-hour email intervention for suicidal individuals. In the year 2000, The Samaritans responded to more than 37,000 emails. In Washington State, Group Health has initiated an email program called “Ask Your Doctor” that allows patients to email their doctor with health and medication questions.

Distance counseling sessions utilize traditional face-to-face modalities. Sessions can be individual, group, or family and may be conducted using email, real-time chat (instant messaging), secure web-based messaging, videoconferencing, and voice-over-IP (Internet phone). Most e-therapy takes place at a secure website that uses encryption methods for email and instant messaging to assure confidentiality. The intake process ensures that the client's presenting problem is one that can be appropriately treated using distance counseling. The informed consent portion of the intake includes procedures should the session end prematurely due to technology failure, emergency contacts should the therapist need to assure the client's safety, and the limitations of distance counseling.

Distance counseling follows the best practices of traditional counseling, including structuring the counseling sessions; rapport building; assessment, including use of online instruments; preparing the client for therapy; concrete treatment goals and planning; skill development and processing; communication procedures between sessions; and termination and follow-up contacts.

Distance counseling has been surprisingly successful. In May 1999, e-therapy watchdog Martha Ainsworth conducted a consumer satisfaction survey of Internet users who had tried this type of therapy. Of the 452 respondents who had tried e-therapy, 416 (92 percent) said that it had helped them, and 307 (68 percent) said that they had never been in therapy before contacting a therapist via the Internet (metanoia.org).

Though distance counseling is proving a viable alternative to face-to-face counseling, it has its limitations, not least of which is that research on best practices of Internet counseling is still in the pioneering phase. (See “Pros and Cons of Distance Counseling.”) Many of these limitations and challenges are being addressed by the International Society for Mental Health Online (ISMHO), which researches the best practices of distance counseling. It has an online consultation group for distance counselors that allows almost instant feedback and help for online counselors, and it has formulated suggested principles for providing online counseling (ismho.org).

In its ethics document, “The Practice of Internet Counseling,” NBCC provides a taxonomy of counseling and a definition of the Internet counseling relationship to assist distance counselors in providing best practices and overcoming the challenges of Internet counseling (nbcc.org/ethics/webethics.htm).

Distance counseling isn’t for everyone. Clients most likely to benefit from it include adults who are comfortable and adept at typing on computers, as well as those who are:

- Willing to accept the risks as well as the advantages of distance counseling;
- Willing to reveal information and feelings without seeing the therapist;
- Not suffering a serious crisis that would better be treated face-to-face; and
- Motivated to take responsibility for homework assignments given during the course of counseling.

Therapists who might most enjoy distance counseling include those who would be comfortable treating clients using email, chat, videoconferencing, and the telephone, and who can:

- Easily use the technology needed to perform distance counseling and communicate a positive attitude toward the technology;
- Complete the training and certification for the DCC;
- Stay current with new research, developments, and laws pertaining to distance counseling;
- Be comfortable with the isolation of working alone; and
- Direct clients to current online resources and websites that will benefit them.

Since the concept of distance counseling creates such a rich opportunity on the one hand and is such a new and untested therapy modality on the other, counselors contemplating entering this field should do so with cautious enthusiasm. Counselors considering distance counseling should explore the issues raised in the literature and in this article before making the leap, and they should use distance counseling as an adjunct to face-to-face therapy, especially until more research can prove that the benefits outweigh the risks. (See “Before Becoming a Distance Counselor.”)

Formal training from ReadyMinds and certification from CCE is a must, as is joining ISMHO to obtain their ongoing support and training. Reviewing NBCC Standards for the Ethical Practice of Internet Counseling will assure that the counselor is following the best methods for distance counseling. For a list of recommended reading to help counselors clarify the pros and cons of establishing distance counseling as part of their practice, email me at shrink@bigzoo.net.

We must ensure that distance counselors are well prepared to render effective, ethical treatment. As members of AMHCA, the premiere mental health counselors' organization in the nation, we have a responsibility to educate ourselves in this new modality. If we choose to become practitioners, we must do so with the greatest level of preparation and the highest ethical standards.

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A counselor in private practice in Federal Way, Wash., Wendy Rawlings has been using distance counseling for the last two years as an adjunct to face-to-face therapy. Both therapist and clients have been pleased with the results. She is also an adjunct faculty member at a local university.

DISTANCE COUNSELING (DC) FORUM

In this section we have included information on the Pros and Cons of Distance Counseling, what to think about before becoming a Distance Counselor, comments from counselors who have attended a DCC Training Workshop, and updates as they relate to additional ReadyMinds Trainings.

Pros and Cons of Distance Counseling

Consider these advantages to distance counseling:

- Clients are more willing to disclose their issues due to its anonymous nature.
- It is less stigmatizing than going to an office for therapy.
- It can reach those who have difficulty going to a therapist's office, such as the homebound and those who are ill, agoraphobic, or live in remote areas.
- It seems to force counselors to create a structure to the counseling session rather than have it be open-ended.
- Sessions are usually more organized and thoughtful.
- It provides increased flexibility as to time of appointment and method of counseling used in the session.
- A well-designed website provides clients with online resources, articles, links with professional organizations, and support, which is not always present in traditional therapy.
- Clients can refer to written material generated as part of the counseling process (emails, instant messages, etc.) to review and reinforce therapy.
- Because it is not limited by geographical boundaries, clients can choose a therapist who lives far away but who specializes in their presenting problem.
- It usually costs less than face-to-face treatment.
- If the distance counselor is connected with an online consultation group, should outside intervention be needed, group members from the client's location can often provide services.

Obvious disadvantages to distance counseling include:

- Ethical concerns. These include possible confidentiality breaches should clients read emails from their distance counselor while at the workplace or at home around the family; crisis management when the therapist and the client are separated by distance; and lack of a concrete grievance process should the client wish to file a complaint.
- Regulatory concerns. Distance counseling is not regulated in most states. For example, it is not covered by Washington State's Administrative Code. HIPPA also presents new regulatory issues.
- Legal and malpractice concerns. Because distance counseling is in its infancy, there is no existing case law to determine which state, the therapist's or the client's, should license the therapist if therapist and client live in different states. Other legal issues that may arise include subpoena power, and length of time to store electronic records.
- Technology breakdowns. What procedures should the client and therapist follow if they lose contact during a session?
- The distance therapist is unable to observe the client's body language and (in the case of email or instant messaging) voice cues, creating a higher potential for misunderstanding
- Because the therapist and client are not meeting face-to-face, there is an increased potential for someone to impersonate the client.
- It may not be covered by insurance, although a review of major insurance companies showed that phone sessions, especially if the client is in crisis, are often reimbursed.
- Though some have argued that forming a therapeutic alliance is harder to do in distance counseling, many distance counselors report just the opposite.
- It is not appropriate for every presenting problem, for example eating disorders, violent relationship, sexual abuse, psychiatric disorders that involve distortions of reality, extreme depression, and suicidality. While some of these issues respond to telephone hotline interventions, face-to-face therapy following the emergency interventions is recommended.
- Cultural or ethnic insensitivity may result if not clearly defined at intake.

Before Becoming a Distance Counselor

Consider the following things when setting up a distance-counseling practice:

1. **Full disclosure.** Create an easy to understand, comprehensive statement that fully discloses the possible benefits and risks of distance counseling. Make it clear that this type of counseling uses new technology and has an unproven track record. While preliminary research looks good, we don't know the final outcome and cannot guarantee the results.
2. **Comprehensive assessment.** Take extra care to provide distance clients with complete and detailed assessment tools that include their sex, ethnicity, and cultural background. Include a statement about the importance of completing their intake as completely and honestly as possible. Use a code word if necessary to guarantee you are always interacting with the client and someone posing as the client
3. **Confidentiality.** Inform clients of their rights and about the unavoidable risks of confidentiality. Take all possible precautions to prevent misdirected or hacked emails, and eavesdropping on telephone conversations. Never have a session over a cell phone or portable phone. Let clients know what safeguards you have taken to protect confidentiality.
4. **Emergency procedures.** Give your client your emergency contact information together with resources available in the client's location should the need arise. Formulate an emergency plan with the client together with an emergency contact person. Acquaint yourself with local police numbers and hospitals in the client's area. It is best to find a therapist in the client's area you can use as a back-up should the client need emergency face-to-face intervention.

5. **Communication.** Provide client with communications procedures, especially what to do in an emergency or in a technology failure.
6. **NBCC resources.** Consult the National Board for Certified Counselor's "The Practice of Internet Counseling" to ensure compliance.
7. **State resources.** Consult licensing provisions in your state to ensure compliance.
8. **Insurance coverage.** Consult your malpractice insurance agent to ensure you are covered for distance counseling.

—Wendy Rawlings

The above were published in the November Issue of The Advocate.

Some Comments from Counselors who have attended a DCC Training Workshop

Robert F., LPC, NCC

"The DCC training was a great experience for me! I have been doing Distance Counseling since the middle 70's, so I didn't expect the wealth of new information & resources. The training provided me with such great insight, depth and rejuvenation. The training will be an invaluable tool for me in doing Distance Counseling. I am so enthused about sharing all of this great material with my colleagues in the counseling department as well as my colleagues involved with Distance Learning.

Thanks for all of your encouragement and assistance that you gave me in getting to the training. It truly was one of the best educational experiences in my career as a counselor and teacher."

Linda G., College Counselor/Professor

When I came to the training, I had a lot of doubts about distance counseling, and wasn't sure if I would ever be comfortable enough to do it. However, I left with the understanding that, if distance counseling is done correctly, it can be a great service for those who are more comfortable with alternative methods of counseling, and for people who don't have geographical access to a counselor. I am now making plans to write a proposal to offer distance career counseling to our students. I would recommend this training to anyone who is thinking about doing distance counseling."

ReadyMinds Training Updates

ReadyMinds will be announcing in Spring of 2005 a new online training and credential program called DCF (Distance Credentialed Facilitator). Individuals who obtain the Distance Credentialed Facilitator (DCF) title will provide assistance to clients in the area of life career development and planning. They may also facilitate the fostering and maintenance of interpersonal relationships but essentially in the context of helping clients to plan for, and maintain successful functioning within, the world of work. Distance Credentialed Facilitators will offer their services via appropriate technology-assisted methods. They will seek supervision/consultation, as required by the ethical standards that apply to Distance Credentialed Facilitation and those standards that govern their professional scope of practice.

A combination of the following education and experience* is required. In order to qualify for the Credential, experience must be acquired after obtaining at least an associate's degree.

Graduate Degree	2,800 hours (estimated 2 years)
Bachelor's Degree	2,800 hours (estimated 2 years)
Associate's Degree	2,800 hours (estimated 2 years)

*The work experience requirement can include a combination of Workforce Development, Coaching, Human Resources, Career and Job Development and/or Educational experience where you are assisting clients. This is required for each educational level.

To keep up-to-date on DCC and DCF training information, please continue to check our website at www.readyminds.com/dcc.
