



Standards for **Online Counselling**

ChEckIT!



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Abstract:

With the development and specialisation in the field of online counselling, the establishment of quality standards for those working in the area has become more and more important. These Standards for Online Counselling should contribute to the professionalism of the field.

These guidelines give ideas about the steps to be taken in the daily running of an email counselling service and also define general standards. As well as basic principles and general instructions for processing enquiries, this document also looks at everything from handling an email query to a methodological approach suited for online counselling such as Motivational Interviewing.



Standards for Online Counselling



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1. Introduction

1.1 Origins of the Guidelines for Online Counselling

Between Dec 2002 and May 2003, transnational meetings between ChEck iT!, Austria, Partypark, Drogenhilfe from Köln and kids-hotline, Berlin, Germany were held to discuss Standards for Online Counselling. Participants were experts from the field of drug prevention and rehab as well as from youth work with a focus on online counselling. Partypack and ChEck iT! both offer online information and consultation on psychoactive substances, especially on 'recreational drugs'. Kids-hotline, an institution of Jugendhilfe, targets children and youth and places emphasis on topics such as friendship, relationships, sexuality, puberty, school and violence.

The institutions' standards for online counselling were compared and jointly revised. Since concepts of all institutions were built upon similar basic principles, the idea to define uniform standards and quality criteria and bring them together in a concerted guideline was born. The resulting guidelines provide an action-guided concept for daily routines, as well as definitions of general standards. The systematic and critical examination of their techniques presented a major step towards professionalism for

the involved institutions and their employees. As a result, implicit assumptions on online counselling were questioned and heretofore unexpressed action-guided theories and principles together with successful methods were verified and explicitly put down in writing.

As soon as these guidelines were brought to the attention of FESAT- The European Foundation of Drug Helplines, plans grew to have them translated into English for distribution across Europe. Thanks to the support of the Drug Prevention and Information Programme of the European Commissions' Directorate-General Justice, Freedom and Security, FESAT managed to achieve this ambition.

A starting basis of this document is the "Guidelines for answering e-mail enquiries" edited by the Verein Wiener Sozialprojekte (VWS). This guideline was developed in the context of a work group, consisting of VWS associates Paul Neubauer (Head of Evaluation and Report Division), Tanja Stavik (Ganslwirt), Susanne Weissenböck (ChEck iT!), as well as Erik Zika of drug information centre Dialog.



2. Prospects and Limitations of Online Counselling

2.1 Significance of Internet and Online Counselling

The internet is the biggest information and communication network worldwide and it continually rises in importance. Today, access to the internet is widely taken for granted, just like the telephone was a couple of years ago. For many teenagers and adolescents, the internet has become an essential part of their life and an everyday mode of communication.

The prominence of the internet necessitated that those involved in addressing the psychosocial needs of young people embrace its potential. This new field of working also offers new possibilities for engaging people, delivering information and counselling and therefore acts as an extension of traditional counselling services. Online counselling can serve as an ideal opportunity for a first contact and can aid in overcoming initial inhibitions. It is both a bridge towards face to face counselling and a stand alone method of counselling support.

2.2 Types of Online Counselling

The internet is both the location of the counselling and a technical prerequisite for the different types of online counselling. The types of online counselling below all have in common that the information can communication is exchanged in written form. Independent of the modality, the same counselling standards apply.

Individual Counselling

The original form of individual counselling on the web is counselling via email (email counselling). The client poses a question to the advising institution via email and gets a reply. In section 7.8 to follow we advise against email counselling, because of potential problems with guaranteeing privacy and data security. An alternative approach that does account for data privacy is web-based individual counselling with server-side encryption. All information is stored directly on the institution's servers and access is only granted to clients and counsellors. Hence, information always remains on the institution's web server and cannot be read from third parties.

As there is a delay between sending questions and answers, email counselling is not synchronised.

Bulletin Boards

Counselling through bulletin boards gives the client the opportunity to discuss matters with other users and counsellors. This type of online counselling usually takes place in public, a fact that allows others to read the contents. Therefore, other clients have the opportunity to read up on similar issues and their solutions without needing to initiate direct counselling. In this way, boards are a very valuable way of obtaining topic-specific information. Counselling via bulletin boards is especially suited for direct and uncomplicated queries and for overcoming inhibitions. Like with individual counselling, communication is not synchronised.

Chat

Counselling via chat can be carried out for individuals as well as for groups. Clients and counsellors meet at the time appointed in a chat room only accessible to them. Since clients and counsellors communicate at the same time, this is a form of synchronised communication. The same holds true for the so-called group chat which allows a number of clients to simultaneously enter the chat room and participate in the counselling.

2.3 Advantages

Target Group

Online counselling offers information and consultation for a wide variety of target groups. The internet can reach and be used by people who for a number of reasons may not engage in traditional face to face counselling.

Independence from location

The internet allows the counsellor to be available independently from their physical location. Hence, it offers advantages for people living in remote or under-resourced regions as well as at those with disabilities.



Anonymous and Impartial

Communication through the web can be anonymous and to a large extent unbiased since the counsellor has no prior knowledge of social status, gender, ethnicity or occupation of the person they are communicating with. In this way, also people that want to keep a certain distance from the counsellor or that would otherwise never seek consultancy can avail of professional counselling.

Self-Determination

Many people appreciate the non-obligating online contact because its intensity and frequency can be self-determined and it can be terminated at any time. The uncomplicated low threshold-access also allows for quick retrieval of information or discussing a topic without requiring complete counselling.

Attractive to the Youth

Counselling services on the web are especially attractive to the youth because they are fast, inexpensive, effortlessly useable and available 24/7. Furthermore, the internet has a positively connotated image. Young people and people in critical situations have the need to 'offload' their problems when they are getting urgent. Even though there is no immediate response in most cases, the process of writing down and telling makes for an initial relief.

Written Communication

Writing out an enquiry or problem alone, can clarify a situation and disencumber the client. In addition, the threshold to address personal and possibly embarrassing issues is lowered. Since the process of counselling is slowed down or rather takes place with delays during the correspondence, the counsellor does not only have sufficient time for answering but also the possibility to consult additional sources of information and other experts. The complete process of counselling is well documented and it is possible to refer to and reflect upon the records at any time. Online counselling has neither spatial nor time constraints.

2.4 Limitations

To address the target group, access to the internet and knowledge of its use are mandatory.

When counselling online non-verbal communication through gestures, facial expressions and posture are missing. This often makes it more difficult to assess the enquirer's emotional state. Consequently, the (delayed) response may not fit the client's current emotional state and problems.



3. Basic Principles of Work

Counselling is voluntary and anonymous

The decision to contact a counsellor online is voluntary and it is not required to give any personal details in the communication.

Low threshold

Low threshold refers to it being uncomplicated and if possible, immediate. It offers accessibility of various aids and services without any interrelated obligations. Enlisting the organisations' assistance is free and does not require appointments in advance. To desire abstinence or even to be sober is not required in order to engage in consultation and seek assistance.

Discretion

The organisation guarantees to handle sensitive personal data and contents with the greatest care, to follow the existing privacy policy and not to give any data to third parties without prior consent.

Geared to Lifestyle

Online counselling reaches its target group directly in their preferred environment using their preferred medium, the internet. Therefore the type and method of offered services are directly geared to the clients lifestyle.

Partisanship

The organisation offering online counselling will represent the clients needs above others, as long as they are ethically, technically, and legally justifiable.

Accepting Attitude

Every person is accepted and respected in his or her entirety and considered as mature and self-determined individual, responsible for oneself. The counsellor aims at understanding and accepting the client's philosophy and lifestyle by accounting for the individual life story. Therefore a non-judgemental stance is taken where possibly destructive behaviours and ideas are neither endorsed nor condemned.

Empathy

This means the capability to put oneself in the clients position and to appreciate their perspective and attitudes.

The Principle of "Helping People to Help Themselves"

The counsellor facilitates the client to find his or her own solution to their query. The focus is put on autonomy, independence and personal responsibility of the client.

Gender Sensitivity and Gender Mainstreaming

All projects are designed such that they contribute to the promotion of gender equality.

Systemic Perspective

The individual is considered within the context of his social network and family system. The structures and workings of these systems and how they interact are taken into account.

Solution-focussed

The focus is put on the development of solutions, rather than analysing the problem and studying possible causes. All steps are aimed at looking at unhelpful behaviour patterns, identifying strengths and resources and facilitating them to decide their next step.

Pragmatic Attitude

Options, needs and referrals are considered in the context of what is realistic for the client at the time.



4. General Guidelines for Processing Enquiries

Reply to Every Mail

Mails presumed to be fake (written under fake identities or describing imaginary situations) should be treated the same as ordinary enquiries. Fake mails are often used to test out an institution ("who is going to answer me?") or explored its limits ("up to what degree will they take a mail seriously?") before attempting contact under a real identity. Also it can be difficult to distinguish fake mails from real mails.

Respond Timely

In general enquiries should be answered as soon as possible. If it is not possible to write a detailed answer within 48 hours, a short reply should be sent acknowledging receipt of the mail and assuring the client that they will receive a full reply within a week. Sometimes it can be necessary to sort enquiries by urgency and answer mails concerning the most acute crisis first.

Every Mail is Unique

Since every enquiry is different and unique it is rarely possible to use existing text modules or templates. Every enquiry deserves an individual answer and it is necessary to schedule enough time for that. For answering recurring questions, it is reasonable and more efficient to publish information on the web as FAQs (frequently asked questions) and refer to them in the response mail. This also allows for retrieval of information without the necessity to send an enquiry.

Choose your Words Carefully

As it is impossible to fully assess the callers' emotions from their online correspondence, it is important to be very careful with your choice of words, particularly as immediate feedback may not be available.

Adapt your Style of Language to the Enquirer

The style of language should be adapted to the enquirers' style and level of formality. Especially when communicating with adolescents, an informal style and form of address can be favourable. However you should maintain a serious tone in all replies sent. A reply that is too casual can lead to misunderstandings or make people feel insulted.

Clarify the Current Mental State

(Counselling Process with time delays)

When answering an online enquiry it has to be taken into account that the client's mood may have changed since writing the initial message. Especially if the answer goes into the enquirer's feelings, the time delay has to be taken into consideration and the current mental state should be clarified (e.g. "in your mail, you wrote that you were feeling bad.....how are you now?").

Use Emoticons to Support your Words

The term emoticon denotes a small symbol for a facial expression either composed from alphabetical and punctual symbols or depicted in an image. For example, ;-) represents an ironic wink. Emoticons can humorously support and intensify the expression of emotions, making texts less tense and more personal.

Consult your Peers

Discussing correspondence with a colleague is a good way to gain a new perspective. Mails can evoke different emotions and reactions from the counsellor which may only become acknowledged in a conversation with a professional third party.

Keep in Mind that an email has the same standing as a written document

It is not possible to influence what happens to an email once it has been sent. It should always be remembered that the clients might publish, share or divert the contents of your reply at will.

Use Internal and External Resources

The counsellor will gather information for the response to the query using the resources available within their own service and if necessary in consultation with another service. Country-specific regulations concerning privacy, data protection and discretion have to be observed.

Establish a Continuous Relationship

The relationship between counsellor and client is the basis all therapeutic conversations. To help with rapport it is important that the same person replies to a client each time.

Offer Further Counselling Services

One can assume that some clients have chosen to use online



counselling because it suits better than entering into a regular counselling relationship. In certain cases, however, it is necessary to point out the limitations of online counselling and to suggest face-to-face counselling.

5. Core Process

5.1 Definition

Online counselling is the series of actions starting with the receipt of an enquiry, the processing of this query and then the drafting and sending of the reply. Online counselling may consist of the repeated exchange of written documents, making it an interactive standardised process.

5.2 Aims

The aims are to apply the best practice principles and guidelines as referred to in Sections 3, 4 and 6 of this document.

5.3 Process Description

5.3.1 Reflecting on own Reaction

To allow for a fresh and unbiased approach to each enquiry it is important that the counsellor reflects on their own initial reactions to the contents at the beginning of their process of replying. The counsellor becomes aware of the images it may have evoked and the emotions stirred up by the online enquiry and examines first impulses for answers.

5.3.2 Assessing the Enquiry

Assessing the enquiry comprises the following four aspects (basic principles of assessment):

I. Concern

Is this an information request or a request for support? In principle, both aspects can be contained in a single enquiry.

II. Clarification of Expectations

What is the stated need of the client? What have they asked of the service?

To this end, it can be helpful to put oneself in the clients' position and to visualise him or her. It is important to make clear who is enquiring for example a parent, a partner or a professional

in the field and what this person needs or expects such as comfort, information or onward referral. At this point the counsellor threads a fine line between helpful assumptions and unhelpful presumptions about the client and his/her needs. If the service cannot help the client in the way that was expressed, it is advisable to make an appropriate referral to a service who may be able to help.

III. Assessment of Stage of Change

With reference to Prochaska and DiClemente's Stages of Change Model (see 6.3 below), the counsellor should try to assess the clients current position on the Wheel of Change.

IV. Necessary Information

The counsellor gathers further information necessary for counselling. This may include consultation with internal and external experts or indeed clarifying questions from the client directly.

5.3.3 Competence

If the enquiry is outside the counsellor's sphere of competence and thus has to be forwarded, they client must still receive a reply. It is important that all those who place a query should be welcomed and taken seriously regardless of the exact nature of their query.

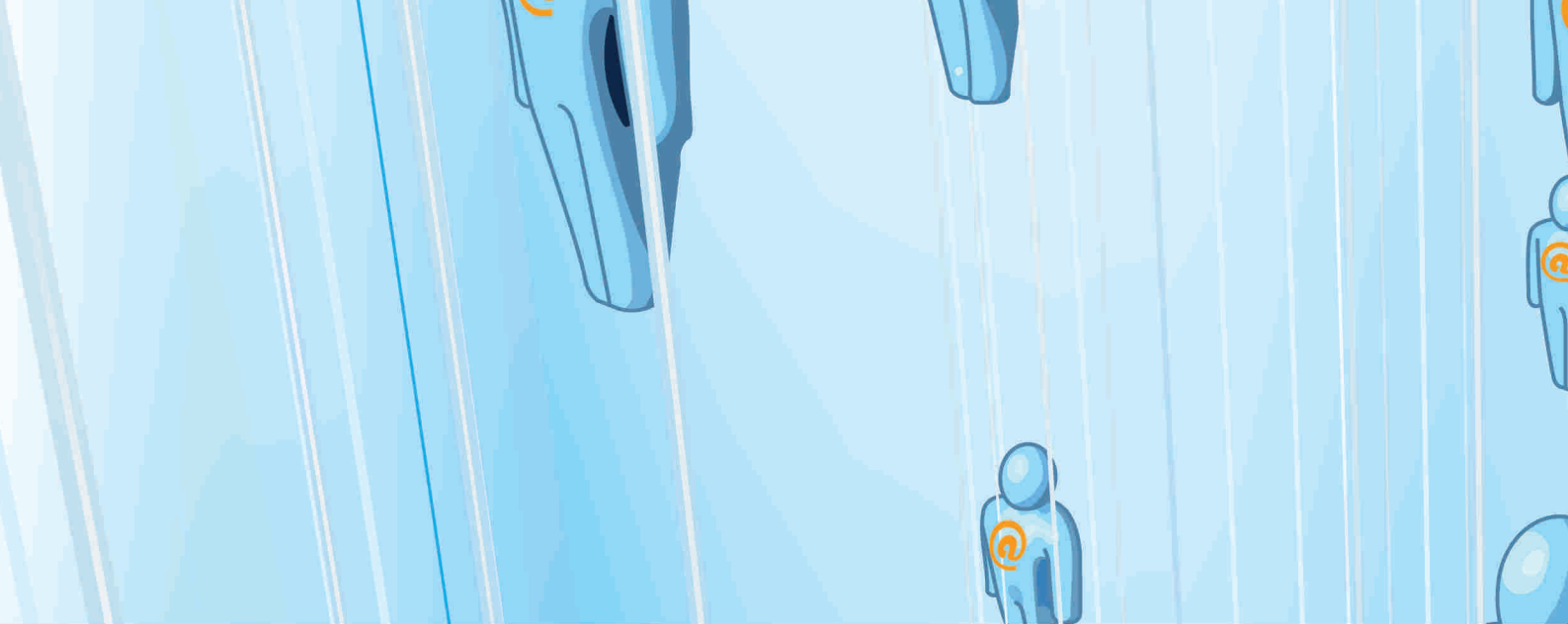
In particular cases it may seem reasonable or necessary to refer the client onward to a counsellor with more specialised knowledge. In such cases, prior to contacting the expert, the client's consent has to be obtained. A reassignment has to be discussed carefully and thoroughly with the client to minimise the risk of them terminating their contact.

When attempting to refer to face to face counselling, one has to pay attention to finding the right moment. Premature attempts could possibly overstrain the client and evoke the impression of being fobbed off. In many cases, a number of discussions will have to have occurred in order to develop trust and raise the client's awareness of his or her problem before introducing the suggestion that they see another counsellor.

5.3.4 Formulating an Objective

If all aspects listed in section 5.3.2 can be assessed and if the enquiry is within his or her scope, the counsellor determines

1. the type of enquiry (information and/or support request),



2. an appropriate goal of the reply, and
3. the appropriate method according to the current stage of change

5.3.5 Preparing the Reply

A reply is structured similarly to a letter. It contains a greeting, an introduction, body, and conclusions. In the following, the structure of a reply is outlined and methodical aspects are pointed out. More detailed descriptions of the methodical parts can be found in section 6.

I. Greeting

When writing the greeting, it is important to adapt to language and style of the enquiry. This also applies to the form of address (e.g. formal or informal, chosen nickname of the user). Depending on the conceptual orientation of the counselling institution, the counsellor introduces himself. Goal of the salutation is to give the client the impression of being welcome and being taken seriously.

II. Introduction

The introduction allows for a smooth entrance to the often stressful topic. To this end, giving positive feedback and encouraging words is recommended (e.g. "Thank you for your enquiry!"; "I think it's great that you're seeking assistance!"; "You already made the first step!"). To make the enquirer feel understood and accepted, it is a good idea to affirm feelings directly at the beginning and to show sympathies (e.g. "This is a difficult situation and it sounds like you are struggling with it...."). When processing an initial enquiry, design of the introduction is crucial for building up a trusting client/counsellor relationship.

III. Body

The organisation of the body of the text will vary depending on the client's concern and whether it is a request for information or support.

Where there is a clear request for information only, the appropriate information is provided. If clarification is needed on what information is sought, there may be further correspondence. If there is a reasonable suspicion that the client would benefit from support, it is gently offered by making points that open

up the possibility for deeper lying questions or issues to be discussed.

In case of a support request, the issues described are picked up and the problems are addressed with the aid of the respective methods, as referred to in section 6 to follow. For example, one might mirror or recap the described situation (e.g. "As I understand it, ...") enquire when in doubt ("Am I right with my assumption that ..." or "Is this correct?"). Questions are well suited to engage the self-reflection, raise the awareness of the problem and sensitise the enquirer to certain topics.

After clarification of the enquirer's concern, it is often necessary to create awareness for the situation, to develop new options for actions together and to confirm and/or further solutions.

The following describes general advices, that are particularly relevant for the main part of the reply:

In order to improve trust and rapport, feelings should be acknowledged in the body of the text. This may also open the client to the idea of responding emotionally to the problem. However, with online counselling in particular, one must be careful not to provoke feelings in the clients that might leave them vulnerable or isolated.

It maybe helpful at times to copy and paste sections of the initial enquiry into the text of the reply. This text will need to be distinguishable from the reply text so it could be in a different font style or colour.

If many topics are brought up at once, one should reduce complexity by picking out topics that seem to be central and important to the client. Try not to jump to conclusions prematurely and mark assumptions as such.

Since it can be assumed that in most cases there will be no follow-up, a reply should be as comprehensive as possible. However, it is important to make sure that dealing with the subject matter does not overload the enquirer and that the extent of the response letter remains manageable.



IV. Conclusions

With both information and support responses the correspondence should be closed with an open question or a direct prompt inviting the client to continue contact such as "I'm looking forward to hearing from you again!". The response is rounded off by some encouraging words appropriate to the situation and the signature of the counsellor.

5.3.6 Inspecting and Sending the Reply

Once the reply has been drafted it should be read through by another member of the team, with respect to the goals set in advance.

5.4 Evaluation

Anonymous data may then be recorded using whatever system the organisation uses, so that it can be analysed at a later date. It may be relevant to include socio-demographic data, the nature of the enquiry, whether it was a third party enquiry; the number of contacts etc. The design of the documentation system will vary according to the requirements and standards of the organisation.

6. Methodical Approach - Motivational Interviewing

Motivational Interviewing, developed by Miller and Rollnick (1992), is a concept for counselling substance abusers which is also applied during brief interventions in various other areas such as youth work, justice and medicine.

The concept uses principles and methods of client-centred interviewing, cognitive therapy, behaviour therapy, systems theory, social psychology and communication psychology. In addition to these methods Motivational Interviewing also incorporates the Stages of Change Model by Prochaska and DiClemente.

To follow are applications of the approach for online counselling (section 6.1), the five principles of Motivational Interviewing (section 6.2), the Stages of Change Model (section 6.3) as well as the techniques specific to each stage (section 6.4).

6.1 Application in Online Counselling

Typically online counselling consists of processing enquiries from young people who either contain a specific question or describe a short-lived situation, but do not exhibit a lot of opportunity to look into the current situation, independent of their awareness or readiness to change. Early interventions intercept problems prior to their development and manifestation. In contrast, traditional service concepts and institutions offer concrete support only if young people offer problem awareness or willingness to change.

Motivational Interviewing, in conjunction with the Stages of Change model, gives the client the express awareness or a desire for change.

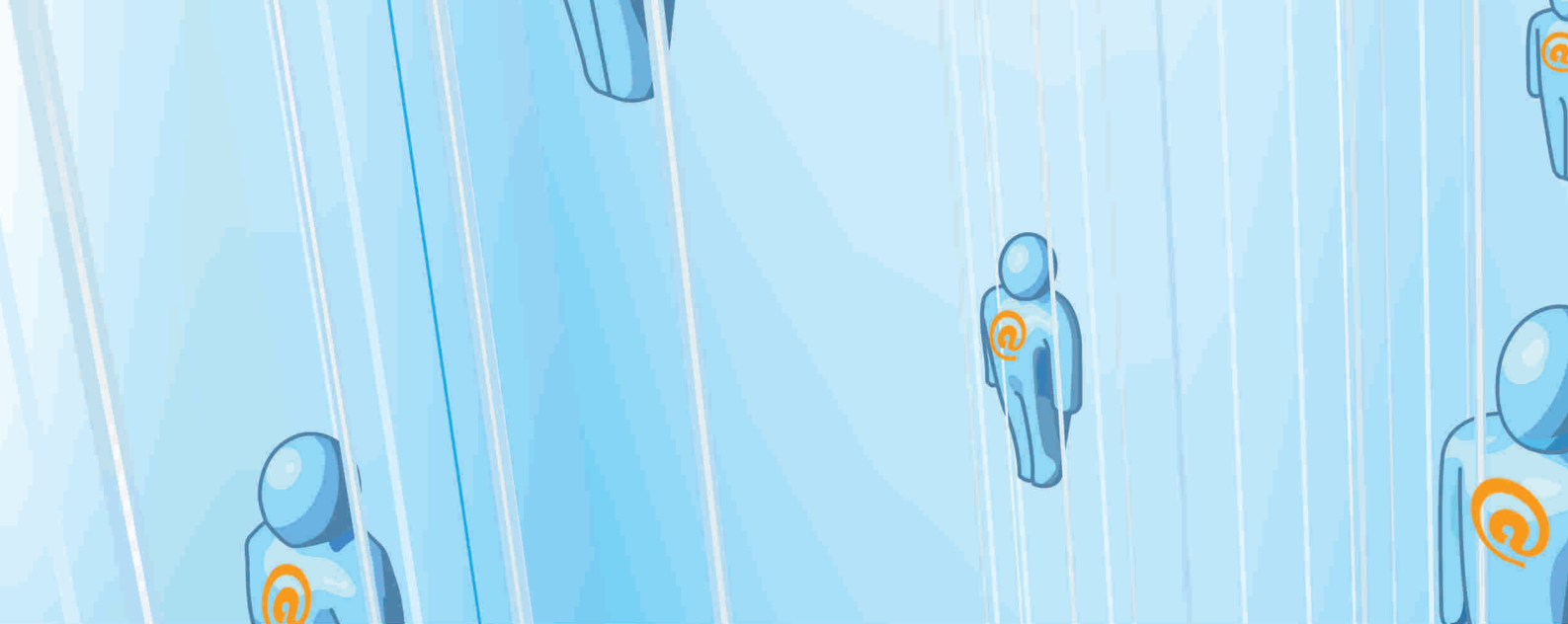
A central goal of motivational interviewing is to first identify the motivation for change and then to amplify it. To this end, the model offers a broad scope of useful tools and intervention techniques that can also be applied online.

Furthermore, experience shows that in counselling young people, many brief and thought-provoking interventions at different times are often more effective than intensive and long consulting sessions. Brief counselling is thus an adequate form of intervention that can be purposefully applied in the field of online counselling.

Online enquiries are often written between other tasks and are usually rather short. In most cases, they represent snapshots or flashes of thought that are written and sent without inhibitions. Online counselling and especially counselling via bulletin boards is a constant back and forth, dealing with different snapshots and moods. Therefore, it is in most cases a context for brief counselling and brief intervention, though it can consist of more intensive counselling over a longer time period.

6.2 Five Principles of Motivational Interviewing

1. Express empathy
2. Develop discrepancy
3. Avoid argumentation
4. Roll with resistance
5. Support self-efficacy



These principles reflect the general attitude of the method and are also included in the basic principles described in section 3.

1. Express Empathy

The counsellor tries to comprehend the enquirers' emotions and positions without rating, criticising or trivialising them. Showing appreciation of the other person as well as following the basic principle of having an accepting attitude facilitates addressing the problematic situation. The principle of expressing empathy is applied in the method of "active listening" (see section 6.4.1 below).

2. Develop Discrepancy

Existing discrepancies are unveiled and addressed to initiate a change. Discrepancies are contradictions between the current behaviour and the plans, goals and wishes of the person concerned. When succeeding in detecting and uncovering these inconsistencies between reality and ideals the awareness for the current behaviour's disadvantages is raised and motivation for change may evolve.

3. Avoid Argumentation

Arguments as well as reproachful and confronting conversations can often provoke resistance and are thus inadequate to stimulate willingness for change. The goal is to walk with the client rather than dragging them along.

In online counselling, resistance is frequently expressed by terminating the contact. The emergence of resistance is an important indicator that the applied strategy or method is unsuited for the current situation and hence a signal for the counsellor to recheck his or her own actions. Frequently, resistance is a result of insufficiently respected ambivalence.

4. Roll with Resistance

Rolling with resistance means to involve the client in actively resolving his or her problems. Occurring resistances and ambivalences are accepted and understood instead of fighting against them. Counsellors are invited to consider new information and to change their point of view. They are treated as experts of their own situation that have the potential to come up with ideas to solve their problem. The client's personal responsibility

and freedom of decision are therefore determining the progress of the consultation process.

5. Support Self-Efficacy

According to the concept of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), people try to avoid other people and situations if they feel incapable of coping with them. Having confidence in one's own ability to deal with challenges and specific situations is an essential element of any change of behaviour and should thus be supported.

6.3 Stages of Change Model (Prochaska and DiClemente)

Change of behaviour is a process that can be broken down into five subsequent stages (i.e. precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action and maintenance). During the process, the individual stages are often passed several times until a persistent change is reached. Thereby, the sequence of stages is not necessarily linear. Hence, the counsellor has to adapt strategies to the respective stages.

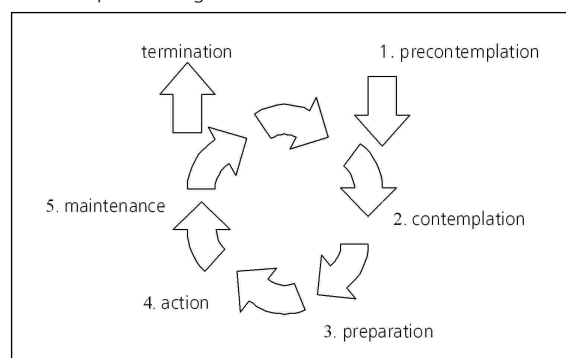


Fig. 1: Stages of Change, also known as the Wheel of Change (Prochaska and DiClemente)

Five Stages of Change:

1. During the stage of Precontemplation, the individuals are not aware of their problem and have no motivation for a change. Their own behaviour is not assessed negatively, but rather positively and results in the effects desired by the user.
2. During the stage of Contemplation, problem-awareness is already present. This stage is characterised by ambivalence. Individuals moves between the desire for change and the desire



to leave matters as they are. Advantages and disadvantages of both options are traded off. In one moment, they are concerned by their behaviour, in the next moment it is being justified. This state of antagonism can last for a long time. An enquiry from young people in this stage may sound like this: "Lately, I have been taking a lot of drugs on weekends and sometimes even during the week. Things can't go on like this! But it's so cool to PARTY and I can't imagine stopping partying but partying without drugs is just so boring. Please help me!"

3. In the stage of Preparation, a decision to change something has already been made and the first steps towards its implementation have been planned. If the person does not act, he or she may fall back into the Contemplation stage.

4. In the Action stage, concrete steps towards change are undertaken. Success and failure are very close in this stage. Good intentions and first successful steps of change are often followed by slips or serious relapses.

5. The Maintenance stage is about repeating, or rather normalising, achievements and avoiding relapses to consolidate the desired changes.

As the stages are not linear, persons may find themselves in different stages at different times in their recovery. Relapsing into old behaviour patterns is an integral part of the process. It is a normal and expected event that, if dealt with appropriately, can contribute to the process of recovery.

6.4 Possible Intervention Techniques

Motivational interviewing offers adequate intervention and interviewing techniques for the respective stages of change. The intervention techniques "active listening", "summarising" and "open questions" are described for the stage of precontemplation, since they are especially important at the beginning of counselling to develop an atmosphere of trust and acceptance and to get an initial assessment of the problem. Nevertheless, they play an important role throughout the complete counselling process.

6.4.1 Precontemplation

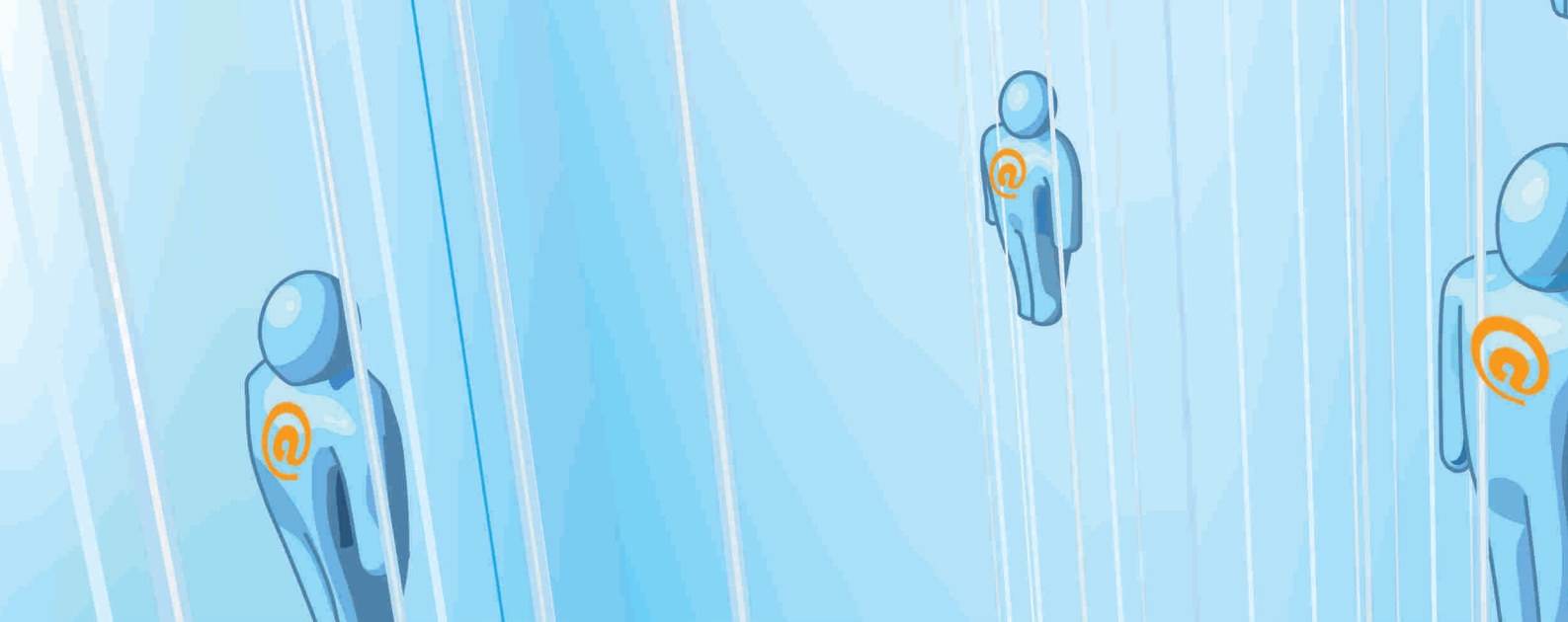
Since problem-awareness has yet not developed in this stage, the focus is put on giving feedback and information about the current situation, as well as about its consequences and risks and on raising awareness of the client's own behaviour. A clear appraisal of the current situation and pointing out contradictions between thought and action facilitates development of motivation for change. Through the use of active listening techniques the counsellor tries to understand the enquirer's feelings and imagination without judging them. While doing this the client can be affirmed and shown empathy for their situation, all of which help the rapport.

During the process, the client's statements are continuously summarised and reflected on to check whether the message was understood correctly. The counsellor asks open questions to leave room for an extensive answer and points of contact for further online communication. The counsellor should not provide standard solutions or monologues, which do not serve to engage the client. Rather, it is necessary to stimulate reflection and raise problem awareness. With complex enquiries, not all issues are tackled at once. Together with the counsellor, issues are prioritised and dealt with in stages.

6.4.2 Contemplation

The main point in this stage is to reveal existing ambivalences and connected mood swings and to make them acceptable for the user. Resistances are accepted and explicitly addressed by the counsellor. Dealing with resistance could be seen metaphorically as performing Far Eastern martial arts such as Aikido, where an attack is not responded with immediate defence, but rather one attempts to make use of the opponent's attack momentum and to channel it in another direction. Likewise, when communicating with enquirers, their statements are redirected and reformulated to show experiences in a different light.

The ambivalent conflict can be depicted with the image of a scale, see Figure 2 below. Pros and cons of current behaviour and also of a change of behaviour, are compared and assessed. Often, this is the first time clients get an overview of the extent and results of positive and negative factors. In the process, the counsellor should help elaborating the positive aspects of change.



At this, not the rational aspects of the ambivalence are in the focus, but rather the emotions and ideals of the person. This approach acts on the assumption that motivation for change develops mainly if the subjectively experienced costs of a behaviour outweigh the subjectively experienced benefits.

goal is defined, acceptable and realistic, sustainable steps towards a change are planned in collaboration with the client and binding agreements are made. Since the choice over an appropriate method raises the client's motivation, the full range of strategies to accomplish the goal should be considered. By "closing a deal"

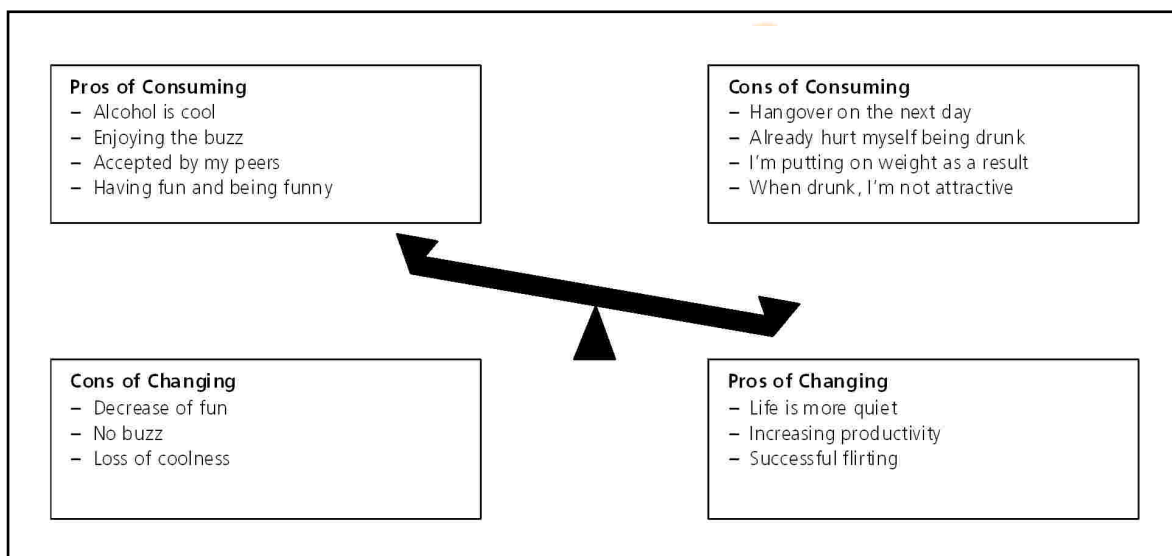


Fig. 2: The Scale

It is not always advisable to use all aspects of the scale during the counselling process as it could ask too much of the client to address the problem in such a complex manner. This should be kept in mind especially for online exchanges where the model cannot be developed face-to-face and step-by-step. Depending on the topic of the counselling, each of the model's four aspects can also be applied individually. The scale can be incorporated into the body of the message by asking questions or as an attached document that has to be filled in.

6.4.3 Preparation

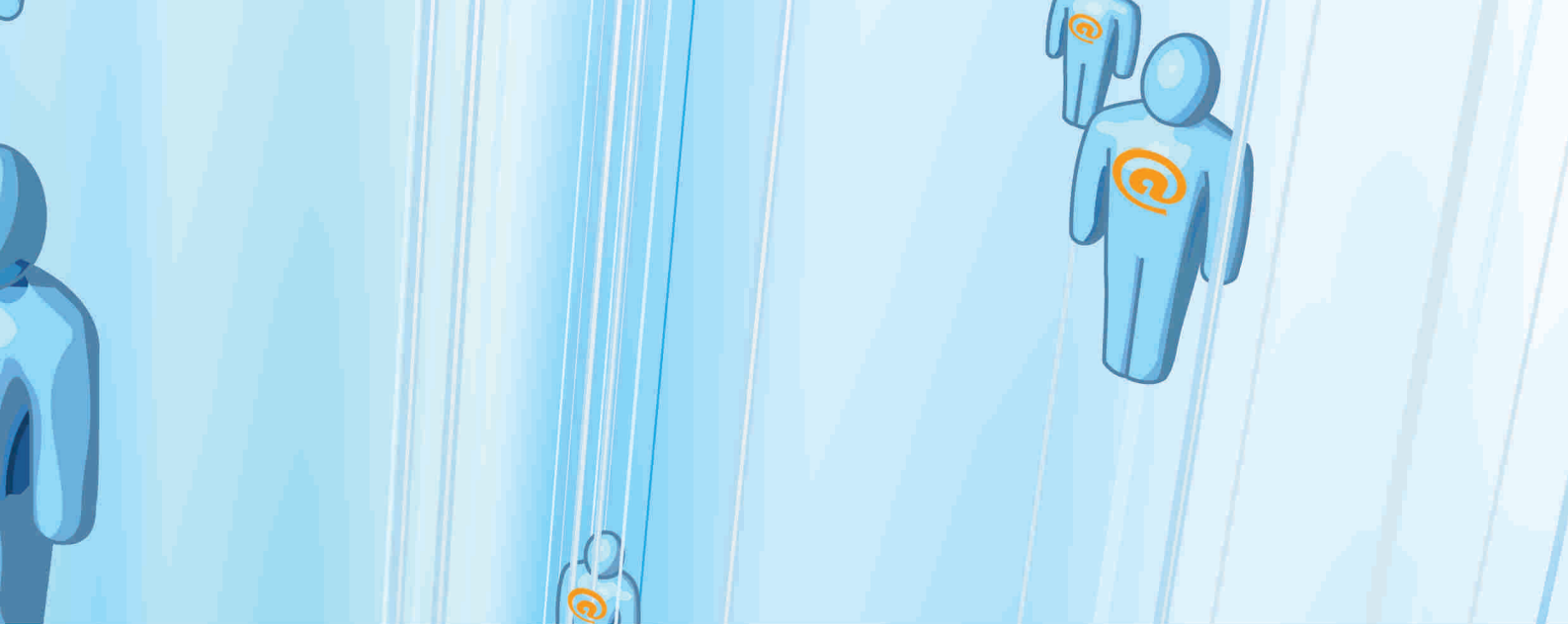
If the enquirer shows willingness for a change, it is indicated for the counsellor to shift strategies for intervention towards strengthening the enquirer's commitment and self-obligation. This transition from the stage of contemplation to the stage of preparation is crucial. The counsellor's main task consists of consolidating the decision that has been made. As soon as a

and "making it public" to important others, the client can strengthen his or her commitment and enforce his or her self-obligation. Another purpose of "making it public" is to make other people support the client and his or her intentions.

6.4.4 Action

The boundaries between the stages of contemplation, preparation and action are blurred. Frequently, individuals are already taking small steps towards behavioural change at the end of the stage of contemplation. Hence, also in this stage it is necessary to enforce self-confidence and an expectation of self-efficacy, to keep contact on a regular basis, and to discuss achievements and relapse risks. In the expectable case of a relapse, discouragement and demoralisation should be avoided. Instead, the counsellor helps

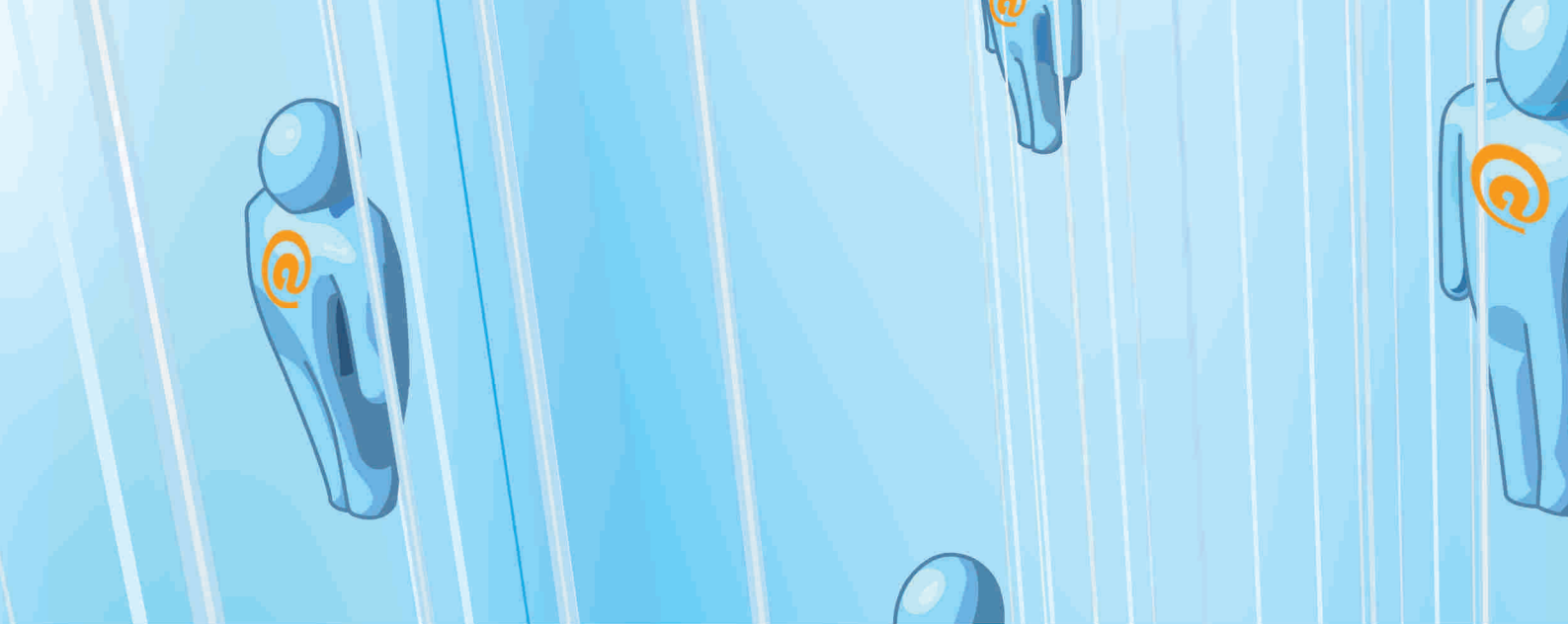
the client to re-examine defined goals and plans.



stages of change	methods for interventions
precontemplation (never): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • no problem awareness • not interested in change • avoidance of facing the problem • rebellion • resignation • rationalisation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • giving information • giving feedback • searching for emotional references • pointing out contradictions between thought and action • offering alternative views • building up self-efficacy • raising awareness for aspects of change • active listening
contemplation (one day...): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • consciously facing the problem, but no specific plans • strong ambivalence (pros & cons are balanced out) • interested, but not determined 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • keeping a diary • elaborating pros & cons by means of the scale (or similar) • allowing mood swings and ambivalences • initiating change
preparation (soon...): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • highly motivated • taking a decision • open to behavioural change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • pointing out alternatives • finding realistic and acceptable steps towards change • making agreements • developing individual "control mechanisms"
action (now...): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • high degree of determination and commitment • concrete and observable steps of change are undertaken • high risk of relapses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • strengthening of self-confidence and self-efficacy • preventing relapses • establishing contacts on a regular basis • addressing the situation, discussing achievements and risky situations

Tab. 1: Stages of change and possible methods for intervention

Source: K. Marzinzik, Uni Bielefeld
 The techniques described here are only a selection of the numerous intervention techniques of motivational interviewing that have been chosen due to their applicability for online counselling. Further areas of application and advanced theories can be found in the book "Motivational Interviewing" by Miller and Rollnick (1992).



7. General Conditions

The number of counselling services on the web, as well as the demand for such services, is rising. One of the reasons for this is that counselling via the Internet is can reach people that could not be reached using traditional counselling services. Since its beginnings, online counselling has taken on a significant role that demands to develop mandatory quality criteria. As a consequence, also the questions of surrounding conditions, necessary resources and available capacities arise.

7.1 Time Resources

In contrast to the popular image of e-mail exchange as fast media for communication, online counselling needs time. Carefully examining and considering every individual enquiry and formulating its response is time consuming.

7.2 Financial Resources

Online counselling is a service offered for free. However, the counselling institution has to pay all arising expenses that result. Apart for staff costs the following may also require attention:

- The theme or appearance of the organisation on the web
- type of web presence
- technical infrastructure
- the quantity of counselling, the number of visitors to the website and the involved user traffic
- the used software
- the data privacy measures taken
- the organisational structure of the institution

7.3 Human Resources

Depending on the factors mentioned above and the institution's scope of services, a multi-disciplinary team of experts is required to cope with the many different types of enquiries.

Even if the institution is specialised in one area, one has to assume that incoming enquiries are not limited to that area. Hence, institutions offering online counselling need cooperative partners who can deal with other aspects of the enquiry.

Online counselling is a responsible and complex task that requires adequately qualify personnel to operate. Furthermore, it is

beneficial to have counsellors with practical experience in counselling the respective target group. This expertise is very useful to respond to the enquirers and their lifestyle.

7.4 Technical Resources

Institutions offering online counselling have to make a decision on the tools they want to adopt. Currently, three main types of counselling are available via the Internet

- bulletin boards,
- (web-based) individual counselling or email
- chat

When deciding on what type to use as well as when determining the type of web presence, one has to consider advantages and disadvantages of the following options:

- Applying a standard solution
- Cost-intensive development of individual solution
- Applying existing solutions tailored to the process of counselling that specifically support both clients and counsellors (e.g. the solution used by kids-hotline).

In principle, the technical implementation has to ensure that the ease of access to the service, which is one of the key features of online counselling, is maintained.

7.5 Prompt Processing

To make allowance for the usual speed, flexibility and availability of the internet, response times are kept as short as possible. In general, enquiries are answered as fast as possible. On working days, a response should be sent within 48 hours. If this cannot be met, at least a brief response is sent to acknowledge the receipt of the message and to inform about when to expect a thorough reply. Binding response times are specified in the general terms of use (see section 7.7).



7.6 Discretion

- Counsellors are bound the professional ethics of their country.
- Personal data is only handed on to third parties without the client's prior consent in case of an obligation by law (e.g. in case of acute danger to themselves or others).
- Decision processes that result in overriding professional discretion are documented in detail for the client's security.
- The general terms of use (cf. section 7.7) describe how to implement the relevant legal regulations and how to deal with personal data.

7.7 Transparency (General Terms of Use)

Online counselling services should be transparent with regard to their organisation, their working methods and their regulations. Well visible "General Terms of Use" give the users (at minimum) the following information:

- Extent of stored personal data and handling of this information
- Professional discretion of counselling persons
- Legal limitations to confidentiality
- Data security measures
- Counselling persons
- The process of counselling

7.8 Privacy Protection and Data Security

Country-specific regulations for data protection and telecommunication should be respected and implemented.

For reasons of data privacy and security, it is in the interest of both clients and counsellors to make use of web-based counselling software with encrypted data transfer.

It is advised against exchanging emails for counselling as messages are sent in plain text (i.e. unencrypted) over the Internet and

the sender has no influence on the transmission route. Hence, it cannot be ruled out that third parties intercept and read these messages. Furthermore, as writing and managing email correspondence frequently requires particular software on the clients computer such as Microsoft Outlook, third parties that have access to the PC could also easily access the details of the counselling.

By using web-based encrypted solutions, these factors can be eliminated. Transmission of data cannot be viewed by others and the contents are not stored on the PC used for connecting to the Internet.



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ChEck iT!

ChEck iT! works with adolescents and young adults that consume psychoactive substances such as Ecstasy, Speed, and cannabis in their leisure time. Their objective is to prevent problems and drug related harm to the health of drug users, through information, consultation and crisis intervention.

Their work includes

- legal advice
- onsite outreach at events which includes free drug analysis and brief interventions with drug users
- information and exchange through their website www.CheckYourDrugs.at
- monitoring drug usage and drug trends, which includes involvement in an early warning network regarding new risks to drug users
- the production of information materials on relevant topics, a list of which is available on www.vws.or.at
- training for people working with the target group, including youth workers, teachers etc.

email: checkit@vws.or.at

Web: www.checkyourdrugs.at

ChEck iT! is a joint scientific project of:

Verein
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**MEDIZINISCHE
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FESAT
The European Foundation
of Drug Helplines

FESAT is a network of Drug Helplines services across Europe and beyond who aim to promote co-operation and exchange between its members, with the ultimate aim of improving the quality of drug helplines services being offered to its service users. The network holds a charter of ethical principles to which all members much adhere.

FESAT work includes:

FESAT Monitoring- statistical reports monitoring trends in drug use across member organisations.

Conferences

Learning Exchange visits between Drug Helplines in Europe

Training seminars on relevant topics

Publications such as Families and Drug Helplines; Guidelines for Good Practice on telephone helplines (German) ; Guidelines for setting up a helpline; Equal Access for all Ethnic Minorities and Drug Helplines; and Drug Helplines and Legal Aspects.

A series of magazines in French and English entitled Lines

Regular e-newsletters from 2005 to date.

email: info@fesat.org

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