



Counselor's Experience in Conducting Online Psychological Services

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Abstract. The outbreak of the 2019 Coronavirus disease (Covid-19) that hit worldwide has a direct impact on public health not only in terms of physical and mental well-being but also in terms of psychological, social, and emotional well-being. The use of online psychological support is a method that has been used to ensure the community who has contact status gets the guidance and outreach purposes, especially for the purpose of social and emotional support during the outbreak of Covid-19. This approach is seen as an alternative to ensure that the psychology of the community is in a calm and stable state by alleviating the annoyances faced by the community. The resilience of the community plays an important role in adapting to the new norms of life in difficult conditions. Therefore, there are also issues and challenges faced by counselors in helping the community to continue the new norms of life in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, the implications and discussions from the counselor's experience are also stated as well as further research suggestions are also suggested for further research by the researcher.

Keywords: Issues, Challenges, Online Psychological Services, Emotional Support.



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Introduction

Online Psychological Support Services have been adopted among psychologists and counselors as well as government departments and NGOs in providing support services to the community. It serves as a channel to improve the emotional and mental well-being of the community, especially during the period of the Covid-19 outbreak. The use of this Online Psychological Support by the use telephone as a psychological intervention in dealing with crisis situations due to the spread of the Covid-19 outbreak and the command of the Movement Control Command (MCO). The intervention was conducted by a registered counselor with a certificate of practice. However, it cannot replace face-to-face counseling sessions under the provisions of Act 580 of the Counselors Act 1998. It is only more for the purpose of support and providing alternatives for further reference purposes.

Online Psychological Support has become an alternative medium to help clients seek audio help using the telephone and more to provide guidance services to communities in need of emotional support. It is completely different from face-to-face counseling sessions because there are certain aspects of limitations such as the tendency for the counselor to misinterpret the client's meaning as it only depends on the tone of voice. However, psychological help can still be provided to assist clients with the use of basic counseling skills such as using listening skills techniques and providing space to communicate. In fact, in a pandemic situation where movement is restricted due to movement control, online psychological support becomes the main medium for the community in expressing all the psychological issues that plague themselves.

Online Psychological Support has been in use since the 1950s. Initially, the service was used to help clients who had mental health issues and needed immediate help. The service has also been recognized as an alternative for individuals in need of psychological help and for those who are

uncomfortable with face-to-face situations. There are several examples of the use of the Online Psychological Support to help the community who need help such as Befrienders, Lifeline, Samaritan, Crisis Hotline, Kids Helpline, Talian Nur, Women's Aid Organisation (WAO), and many more. In fact, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) also encourages and supports the use of the Online Psychological Support in helping the community in times of pandemics.

The approach in Malaysia is that this online psychological support is opening 24 hours a day during the Covid-19 crisis and always receives calls every day. For example, Talian Kasih 15999 by the Malaysian Board of Counselors under the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (KPWKM) receives up to 800 calls at a time. Apart from that, there are many NGOs that have made proactive efforts in line with the Malaysian Board of Counselors to provide online psychological support such as the Malaysian International Counselors Association (PERKAMA), MARA Counselors and Psychology Association (PEKAMARA), under the Ministry of Rural Development, Department Social Welfare, Department of Health Malaysia under the Ministry of Health Malaysia, Chief Minister's Department of Sarawak through Community of Practice (COP) and includes Public and private Higher Education Institutions as well as many other departments either under the state or NGOs. This shows that Online Psychological Support is the community's choice in sharing and expressing the crisis they are facing.

Purpose of The Online Psychological Support Services

The book *Best Practices of Online Psychological Support* published by PERKAMA International (2020), has outlined five main purposes which were to create a platform to share psychosocial issues of clients without meeting face-to-face, guide psycho-emotional management of clients facing crises toward mental well-being, provide understanding related to the situation experienced by the client, guide the client towards the desired goal and alleviate the emotional burden borne by the client who facing stress as a result of the current situation. In fact, PEKAMARA and the Sarawak State Health Department have included elements of spiritual support such as "Tanyalah Ustadz" for psychological support as a medium of spiritual support among clients who need services in terms of religion. Overall, the main purpose of this online support was created to guide individuals in increasing their resilience in order to continue living.

The Importance of Resilience and Psychological Support

According to Glantz and Johnson (1999), resilience generally refers to the ability to bounce back or the ability to bounce back from any resistance, stress, or trauma as well as successfully cope with and adapt to difficult situations. In education, social sciences, psychology, as well as medicine, resilience is synonymous with the terms strength, resilience, success, resistance to stress, competence, and ego-strength (Garmezy, cited in Ibrahim Talib, 2009). Particularly in the social sciences, resilience is associated with stress management, modification, adaptation, and resilience (Glantz & Johnson, 1999). Through all of these definitions, resilience refers to a person's ability to get up, manage emotions, think rationally and subsequently be able to face all the issues and challenges that are being faced especially during Covid-19 transmission.

In times of pandemic, the main issue that needs to be given guidance is how emotional support can be channeled through the Online Psychological Support to the community to enable them to overcome personal weaknesses and environmental pressures, be able to rise again in the face of issues and challenges and maintain personal well-being. Resilience is a psychological strength that can be nurtured, developed, and enhanced. Wagnild and Young (1993) list five important characteristics that can strengthen a client's resilience, namely a meaningful life, perseverance, independence, patience, and self-acceptance. Therefore, it is very important through Online Psychological Support can help clients cultivate high resilience to see all the changes that take place, especially the adaptation to new norms as a challenge and positive change for the benefit of society as a whole rather than obstacles or problems to them. Fostering resilience is important, explained to the community to build strength from the experiences and difficulties encountered during the period of MCO and the spread of the Covid-19 epidemic. In fact, the formation of resilience is a major contributing factor to a client's success in maintaining his or her well-being (Trait, 2008).

Aside from resilience, clients also need social support in their lives. Social support is emotional, financial, and environmental help from those closest and trusted (Smith & Zhang, 2009). Lack of social support will affect their lifestyle and lead to loneliness and feelings of loneliness. In Social Psychology, human beings are social beings who need others to survive. Thus, a sense of being valued, a sense of belonging, and interaction is a human instinct that has been limited as a result of Covid-19 transmission.

Thus, many mental health issues have been reported since the outbreak of the Covid-19 outbreak. Thus, social support is needed in the process of adapting to the new norms introduced by the Malaysian

government in the face of this pandemic and also a challenge to society in adapting to the situation. Among the main support needed by the community is social support from the family as well as psychological support that can be obtained mainly from counselors and psychological officers. Thus, it clearly demonstrates the importance of Online Psychological Support in helping the community to bounce back from any depressing episodes or stalemate and want to seek guidance in resolving the issues in order to build internal strengths.

Method

This concept paper is based on reflection, observation and reading of literature. This technique does not require any special equipment. Among the considerations that need to be considered is to pay attention to the things that need to be observed and adapt to what is to be learned. Based on the focus of this selected study, the researcher should determine the aspects that need to be observed whether the background of the study is clear, what issues and challenges in conducting online psychological support services. Observations also help a researcher reconstruct to gain new understandings (theoretical reconstruction) so that relevant data can be obtained to ensure improvements can be made to assist counselors in conducting online psychological support service during covid-19 outbreak.

Issues and Challenges of Counselors Conducting Online Psychological Support Service During Covid-19 Outbreak

Online Psychological Support is a positive initiative in helping the community relieve emotional tension and open up alternative avenues to issues faced. Especially in situations of limitation to have face-to-face meetings with counselors or psychological officers. Online Psychological Support is a major reach for those in need of emotional support during a pandemic. On the positive side, many communities are aware of the need for emotional and mental support as well as calling using the telephone can be used as a manifestation of emotional support utilizer. However, because Online Psychological Support is the main medium in times of movement limitations and pandemics, there are some issues and challenges experienced by counselors or psychological officers in understanding the context of issues brought by clients because they cannot meet clients face-to-face. Apart from this, the issues and challenges faced by counselors or psychological officers while operating the Online Psychological Support are shown below:

1. Cross-cultural

Based on the experience of counselors who conduct online psychological support, cross-cultural issues that often arise are related to language factors. Not all clients who make phone calls are fluent in Malay and English languages. This is due to a handful of clients who are not from Malaysia. There are some clients who come from China, Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Nepal, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Indonesia, and other countries. Language factors become a barrier for counselors to provide full psychological help. Since connotations and tone of voice are also basic things that counselors will take into account in interpreting client issues, language limitations make client issues difficult for counselors to understand followed by different speaking contexts between countries making it difficult for counselors to understand the level of the issue. This has resulted in the counselor and the client not reaching a consensus on achieving the goals desired by the client as a result of the language factor in communication.

2. Clients with special needs

There are also a handful of clients with special needs who need psychological help. Among them are clients who have hearing problems as well as disabilities to get help using this online psychological service. Although not many from that group they are still there and also need help. The use of audio and telephone mediums does not help the client and the counselor to communicate well due to the limitations of the client and the inability of the counselor to help this group. Even though this group is a minority but it is still present in the community and they also want to get help through the Online Psychological Support service. The challenge of communicating with clients with special needs is difficult in terms of responding because of slurred speech. The inability to help this group use phone calls can cause clients with special needs often despair of seeking online psychological help (Beecher et al. 2004).

3. Complicated issues

Issues that are too complex are also difficult to deal with over the medium telephone and need to meet face-to-face. Complicated issues especially issues that have been repressed for too long require constructive face-to-face counseling sessions. Dealing with complex societal issues will also take time as it requires the formation of trust from the individual as well as in-depth and detailed exploration sessions from all aspects including non-verbal cues of the client. Sometimes it also requires the help of an inventory to identify the real problems of the individual as a whole. Usually, complex and complicated issues such as individuals facing mental health issues will be more complicated if the individual is at a very serious level

of mental health but the counselor is unable to make an identification in relation to it due to limitations in terms of communication through online medium. In fact, there are individuals who face difficulties in expressing the real issues they are facing and this also makes online coaching sessions quite difficult to conduct as well as those who need therapeutic tools and so on to identify the real problems they are facing.

4. Problems that need immediate attention

Throughout the pandemic in Malaysia, there were two categories of clients who have benefited from this medium. The first is the general public and the second is clients (Person Under Investigation (PUI) and Person Under Surveillance (PUS)). The general public usually raises issues related to extreme stress, crime, or abuse, while PUI and PUS clients are more focused on the concern of the spread of Covid-19 among them. Both of these types of clients not only need psychological help and support but there are some issues that require the individual or client to seek help or referral from relevant parties as it can be self-harming. For example, there are issues that require counselors to refer clients to psychiatrists or certain parties to help clients achieve more optimal personal well-being in line with client needs (Chester & Glass, 2006; Manhal-Baugus, 2001). Referring clients to certain parties sometimes takes time because most of it can only be done online and has specific procedures as well as taking longer time. Therefore, at this time the expertise of a counselor or psychological officer is needed to help the individual or client relieve the ongoing tension while waiting for help from relevant parties.

5. Limitations of counselor expertise

Some client issues require specialized expertise from the counselor. For example, issues involving mental health need psychiatric assistance as well as issues of domestic violence that require counselors to know the procedures of the Department of Social Welfare in shelters. The diversity of client issues causes counselors to have a lot of knowledge and expertise as well as the ability to make referrals to specific parties to help clients. The limitations of counselors' expertise make it difficult for counselors to provide the best possible service when assisting clients in need of assistance through telephone calls at an immediate rate (Manhal-Baugus, 2001).

6. Assessment is limited to the client's verbal (verbal) only

With the use of Online Psychological Support, the counselor is unable to see the non-verbal (non-verbal) behaviors and reactions of clients who contact the counselor. According to Murphy and Mitchell (1998), the absence of this physical presence will make the counselor lack resources in interpreting the client that is in terms of body language. The online counseling support service certainly has no body language that can be observed by the counselor other than the intonation of the voice only. It is difficult for the counselor to ensure that the information received is correct and in line with the client's gestures.

7. Limitations of confidentiality

In certain cases, the client is also concerned about the confidentiality of the information provided to the counselor. Leaks of confidentiality are of great concern to clients, especially in cases involving domestic violence problems. Nevertheless, the counselor will reassure the client with respect to issues of confidentiality and limitations that may require the counselor to disclose the client's information based on the client's consent except in cases involving the client's safety. In fact, this component has been made a mandatory requirement in the Code of Ethics of E-Counseling Practice (Chester & Glass, 2006; Manhal-Baugus, 2001). Therefore, it is the responsibility of the counselor to explain in detail the Code of Ethics for Confidentiality so that the client has the confidence to share the problems faced as well as share real information so that the client can be given appropriate assistance.

Suggest and Discussions

There are a number of issues and challenges faced by counselors as well as clients in online psychological support services. As listed before this, there are some limitations in this support service, however, it does not make the counseling session less effective. The counselors can make improvements, for example, being sensitive to cross-cultural issues such as foreign language skills or referring clients to another professional counselor to ensure clients can be helped. Therefore, counselors need to have an extensive network and know where or who can be consulted if faced with an issue or client that is beyond their expertise. Especially in the current situation of Covid-19 where there are also foreign workers or tourists who are also affected by this epidemic, even though they are not Malaysian citizens, however, they are still individuals who need help and emotional support like others. PERKAMA also through the expertise of its members moves proactively by developing a Standard of Procedure (SOP) for Tele-Psychological Support which is used as a guideline to help counselors in providing online emotional support including the Sarawak Chief Minister's Department which actively provides guidelines during the Covid-19 outbreak. Therefore, it is time for the university to consider a syllabus to provide the online

emotional support service in the formal learning in order to face the 4.0 revolution as well as the issues and challenges ahead.

For clients with special needs, it is recommended that there are other methods used to help clients who need assistance such as email and chat rooms to facilitate the disclosure session so the real issue can be presented. Apart from that, there is no doubt that there are also complicated issues that need to be expedited during this MCO period. Therefore, in situations of these limitations, the counselor can ask the client to focus on the key issue so that the counselor can better understand the client's problems and know what help is needed at an immediate rate. There are also limitations to the expertise of counselors who have to refer to a psychiatrist or a particular party. Good relationships with other agencies will make it easy for counselors to help and also get the right information for clients as well as meets the expectations of clients.

Moreover, it is undeniable that there are limitations in terms of nonverbal behavior. Nevertheless, basic counseling skills will help counselors in delivering and understanding clients' issues. While the limits of confidentiality are also important in that it ensures that clients feel safe and know the importance of the referral. Overall, the Online Psychological Support method also provides a space for clients to share the problems they are facing more comfortably and is the primary medium for those in need of immediate help. Even this is an online service but this alternative is also a good medium as an option for clients to get help, able to change a person's perception and in turn help them in dealing with the issues that they have encountered

Conclusions

The Online Psychological Support Service is a medium that is used during a pandemic but is also an alternative medium for individuals who need help and constraints in terms of physical facilities to see a counselor. Although there are issues and challenges faced by counselors when conducting an online psychological support service, it is a space and opportunity for counselors to make improvements in providing an initial impression in order to provide better services to clients more effectively and efficiently. The use of this online emotional support also proved to have a positive effect and further studies related to the effectiveness of the use of this psychological line are very helpful to improve the quality and efficiency of counselors in providing this service.

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