
policy and practice

Does online counselling provide better access to victim services? Insights and reflections from a swiss pilot evaluation

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Counselling and support for victims of gender-based violence constitute a vital component of today's established prevention and intervention work. Nevertheless, a crucial question is, who is actually reached by different types of counselling? Or, in other words: how to ensure access and quality counselling for as many and as different people as possible? In this context interest in web-based counselling forms, online counselling, has recently grown. This article looks at the current discussion on opportunities and limits of online counselling in the case of domestic violence. We present findings from an evaluation which examined the experiences of a pilot project that was developed and implemented by an established counselling centre for women in Zurich, Switzerland. Empirical findings suggest that there is a demand for this new counselling form which offers its own distinct qualities and has the potential to reach further target groups.

Key words counselling • online counselling • domestic violence • evaluation

Key messages

- Online counselling provides adequate access to services and can reach out to new target groups.
- It is possible to provide adequate and helpful victim counselling through the internet which meets users' needs.
- Both the technical and content aspects of online counselling are demanding and need appropriate resources.

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Introduction and background

Specialised counselling and support for victims ranks among the key concerns in combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention, Art 18, 20 and 22). In Switzerland, as in many other countries, various specialist support services are in place to deliver immediate, short- and longterm support. The existing support available currently can be considered as a fairly established

and broad professional field to which victims may turn to themselves or are referred to by other agencies. Counselling typically is provided in face-to-face settings. In addition, most specialist support services provide as well counselling by phone to facilitate access to the support system; though, a statewide round-the-clock telephone helpline has not been implemented so far. A further development in the discussion regarding appropriate and easily accessible counselling and support is the use of online counselling. In recent times there has been growing interest in the application of web-based forms of counselling in Europe (Kühne 2009; Reindl 2018; Engelhardt et al. 2019: 43ff), although using the internet in the counselling context of domestic violence raises possible questions as well.

This paper looks at the current discussion about the opportunities and limits of online counselling for victims-survivors of domestic violence and examines the experiences of a pilot project that was developed and implemented by an established counselling centre for women in Zurich, Switzerland. Development, performance and acceptance of this new service have been the subject of an external evaluation and we draw on the results of this evaluation in this article.

Hopes and concerns

The establishing of specialist online counselling as a new additional support for victims of domestic violence services aims to respond to current social developments. The three main objectives of such online services, and key issues are as follows:

- a) To provide a contemporary form of counselling.
More and more – especially younger – people communicate and inform themselves today through the internet. Information and advice-seeking via online channels have become an everyday practice. Besides, the number of victims making contact and seeking help by e-mail has increased noticeably. This development may be quite problematic in contexts of partner violence and coercive control since e-mails are not safe and well enough protected which can put the help-seeking person at risk. Thus, the setting up of an online counselling service aims to comply with present-day communication habits. Moreover, provisioning specific online counselling can ensure the safety and security of those who decide to contact the service in written form.
- b) Facilitating access to counselling.
The possibility of contacting the service through the web supports low-threshold access. Compared to telephone or face-to-face counselling the new form allows an unrestricted approach of the service in terms of time and place. This means that those seeking help are able to contact the service from any place and at any time of the day (24x7), given that they have electronic access. The online format therefore has the potential to be used also by persons who have difficulty making contact during working hours due to work or family obligations, or by victims who have to travel long distances or make great organisational efforts in order to keep an appointment. Online counselling may also be an easier option in the case of suffering strongly controlling abusers or in cases where the physical or mental condition of the victim constitutes an obstacle to seeking distant help.

c) Reaching new target groups.

Online counselling services may reach out to target groups that have not been reached well in the past. Young people may be more responsive to online counselling as compared to traditional counselling forms. Also, for strongly traumatised victims it may be easier to write than to speak. Furthermore, written counselling may suit particularly those who have, on account of the violence experienced, an increased need for control; in writing the decision when and how much one wants to disclose remains in the hand of the help-seeking person. The risk of being taken by surprise by questions or the counselling process is minimised.

A further argument, notably raised by funders and authorities, is that this new counselling fulfills the aim of providing cost-effective counselling.

Apart from the hopes and supporting arguments mentioned above, there are at the same time quite a lot of concerns and reluctance with regard to online counselling, often expressed within the services themselves. The issues of concern relate to the counselling process and its quality: does it actually work in practice? The following questions are raised:

a) Establishing confidence and an atmosphere of understanding.

Counselling, especially for victims of intimate partner violence, depends on confidence and a relationship of trust in a confidential environment. In building up such a rapport it is the personal contact, and emotional, empowering support that prove particularly important. Counselling contacts through the internet, however, cannot build upon this kind of frame. Concerns therefore relate to the question as to how to ensure adequate support in the new context.

b) Loss of information and ways of communicating.

Apart from verbal information shared by client and counsellor there are non- and paraverbal aspects that can play a decisive role in victim counselling. In the case of online counselling the non- and paraverbal communication and information is no longer available and usable. This means a significant loss of information and a reduction of supportive possibilities and exchange. Thus the counselling quality may be jeopardised.

c) Reliability of accounts and experiences.

The limitation to a written form of counselling without seeing and/or hearing clients leads to doubts concerning credibility. Among victim counsellors who have great experience in direct contact with victims the question is raised whether or under which requirements online requests for support can be trusted. Easy online access to specialist victim services may bear the risk of being misused for fun or malevolent reasons.

Online counselling: one label but many forms

The collective term 'online counselling' refers to various types and forms of counselling through the internet. Services under this label range from simple e-mail exchange, to chat forms, to advisory services in the framework of forums or video counselling. A distinctive feature thereby is whether the counselling in virtual space is provided asynchronously (by e-mail, for example) or synchronously (through chat, for example) (Kühne and Hintenberger 2009; Eichenberg and Kühne 2014; Göllner 2016: 4).

The service examined in this paper consists of an asynchronous web based individual counselling service which is accessible via a specially protected area on the website of the support service. Characteristics of the operation and use are:

- No e-mail addresses are used, anonymity is guaranteed.
- Clients have to log in with a pseudonym and a password – then they reach their personal ‘counselling room’ for writing.
- Exchanged data (SSL encryption) remains exclusively on the service’s server.
- In order to pick up counselling answers clients have to log in anew – then they can read the answer in their personal ‘counselling room’. Their space shows the whole counselling process, clients can read all their questions and the respective answers at any time.
- Counselling takes place asynchronously, that is, with a time difference (not chat form), inquiries may be sent at any time (7x24) – and a reply is guaranteed within one to three working days at the latest. Since the actual arrival time of a reply is not known clients may have to log in more than once to check for the answer.
- The service is offered in the local language (German).

Evaluation and results

Project information

The evaluation investigated the experiences of the first ten months after the pilot project went into operation in March 2018. During the pilot phase a specialised counsellor, trained in online counselling as well as in victim counselling, was responsible for the new service. The formal and technical arrangements of the implemented counselling form have been described above. Concerning the counselling style – approach and working methods – the project offers individual counselling. This means, first of all, that responding to questions does not make use of any text blocks (boilerplates) but consists of individually tailored answers to each help-seeking person. The guiding principle is that the writing is an opportunity for making contact and helps to establish a rapport between the help-seeking person and the counsellor. Thus, writing an answer is not primarily conceived as producing a swift and professionally correct response but rather as a way to open up a (new) space of opportunities and relation. To allow oneself to be touched by enquiries, to believe and to be responsive therefore constitute key ingredients of the counselling style applied.

Evaluation methods

The evaluation used several data sources and included quantitative and qualitative methods. These were:

- Monitoring of utilization: in which analysis of all contacts to the new service during the first ten months of operation was undertaken. There were in total 601 requests by 200 persons.
- User survey concerning the experiences and acceptance of the service during a time period of six weeks: in which new clients had the opportunity to complete an online questionnaire; 80.5% (33 people) filled in the questionnaire.

- Qualitative interviews and a usability test: which were undertaken with three experts in the field of data security/IT and with three experts in the field of counselling and domestic violence. Interviews were also held with the service's project leaders and the responsible counsellor.

Findings concerning basic questions: does it work?

Monitoring results about the use of the new service indicate that there is a clear demand for online counselling in the field of violence against women. The service was used from the first day onwards with a steady increase over the ten months examined. During the first five months of operation 80 people made an initial enquiry to the service, during the second five months this number increased by 50% to 120 people as new users. Throughout the monitoring phase most of the users were women (93.0%).

It is remarkable that more than half of the first contacts to the service were written *outside official working hours* (52.5%). Clients thus definitely made use of the time flexibility of the new service. The opportunity to approach the service right away once you have made up your mind that you do need help responds to the user's situation and supports self-determined contacting. What is interesting is that subsequent contacts and further enquiries – after the first step has been taken – were more often sent during working hours; two thirds of the following questions reached the service during office hours (69.5%). Only one third (30.5%) of the second and further contacts were written outside office hours.

Monitoring results also showed that the *new counselling form did not attract misuse*. In only one case out of the 200 persons contacting the service did the online counsellor have some doubts about the seriousness of the request.

Concerning *process and quality of the counselling* several findings indicate that the new format allows provision of intense counselling and support. Just two out of five help-seeking people contact the service only once (42.5%). Three out five stay longer in contact and have several requests (57.5%); in other words, the first contact often leads to a continuing exchange. A quarter sends two messages (25.5%), 14.0% write three requests, 12.0% have between four and seven requests and 6.0% stay in contact for eight or more enquiries.

Whereas these numbers merely prove a process of on-going communication the users survey showed that online counselling is able to comply in form and content with the wishes and needs of those seeking help. A vast majority of users rated the counselling answers as 'very comprehensible' (96.9%), as 'very helpful' (93.9%), and as 'very sensitive' (100.0%).

Three quarters of respondents (75.8%) used the opportunity to express their experiences and their assessment of the counselling in their own words. Qualitative analyses of these comments point to diverse aspects that contribute to their appreciation. '*Quality and style of the online counselling*' are highly valued, users specially mentioned the counsellor's professionalism, approach and empathy in answering. The content of the answers they received is according to them of very good quality. The fact of quick response – usually within 24 hours – also contributed to their satisfaction.

'Good counselling, really! Quick answers. The counsellor meets my questions and brings in further thoughts. She understands and doesn't judge nor urge me.' (4) *'She takes me seriously and truly wants to support me. That is clearly to feel. Not that kind of professional distance.'* (7)

Respondents also referred to '*specific opportunities and the written form*' as a specific quality of online counselling. Writing offers the chance to deal with the problem in one's own way and getting involved with it. And since the counselling provided is asynchronous there is the possibility to reread the answers, to reflect on them and to make up one's mind at one's own pace. These particular qualities of online counselling were perceived as helpful and supporting in the counselling process.

'I can formulate calmly, this is ideal. And, I can read the answer again and again – and reflect upon it.' (9) 'This service suits: writing is the best way to find oneself.' (14) 'Writing gives a form to what has happened.' (25)

Findings concerning access to counselling: new target groups?

Monitoring data from the service confirmed that the new format has the potential to reach new target groups. The comparison between users of the new online counselling and clients using conventional counselling within the same service showed differences with regard to several criteria.

As monitoring data show users of the online counselling tend to be *younger* than the clientele of the service's conventional counselling. In online counselling the youngest group (up to 29 years) made up a good third of the users (36.7%) compared to a quarter in conventional counselling (25.0%).

Further, the online service obtained *more requests by men* than conventional counselling. For face-to-face or phone counselling only very few men contact the service (1.4%). For the new online format, the proportion increases to 7.0%. Men do contact the online service in different roles: as victims, relatives, confidants.

It also became obvious that *grown up children* more often took the opportunity to seek advice concerning their parent's violent relationship. They constitute a new target group who apparently found it easier to contact the service through the internet than via conventional forms.

Victim's *confidants and other third persons* equally represent target groups who can be reached better via online service than with telephone or personal services. Friends, acquaintances, employers or work mates, neighbours as well as a bus driver were examples of confidants or concerned persons who knew about a victim's problem and contacted the service. For them access through the internet seemed to offer an appropriate, low-threshold opportunity for asking questions and seeking advice. With the new counselling format these groups come forward more frequently than in conventional counselling forms (9.5% vs 4.0%).

Case descriptions in the monitoring data as well as feedback to the user survey showed that easy access proved a crucial feature of online counselling in reaching new target groups. Help-seeking individuals for instance explicitly wrote to the counsellor that this form allowed them after years of experiencing violence to make contact, which they had otherwise refused to do by phone or by going to the service. Asked about the motivation for using online counselling rather than conventional forms, user's comments in the survey illustrated that being able to approach the service in an everyday manner, at any chosen time without already making a commitment facilitated help seeking:

‘To fix a counselling date would be too much for me.’ (14) ‘Online is quicker and easier.’ (3) ‘Embarrassing topic, writing is easier.’ (17) ‘I’m not sure whether I’m entitled to get counselling.’ (7) ‘Online is a good first step for me.’ (21) ‘You can save face, but still get proper counselling.’ (27)

The fact that online counselling was for nearly two thirds of respondents of the user survey (63.6%) the first help-seeking contact to a service they had ever made with regard to domestic violence also indicates that the new format may reach new target groups.

Findings concerning service provision: what should be noted?

Experiences during the pilot phase and evaluation results draw attention to specific points that others may want to consider in implementing online counselling as a new service.

The actual *technical realisation* of online counselling solutions proved to be a challenging task not to be underestimated. For the implementation it is of great advantage – not to say indispensable – that IT professionals cooperate closely with counselling experts. The challenge was to comply with high safety and security requirements and, at the same time, to ensure as easy access and simple handling as possible. The results show further that requirements such as registration and login with a pseudonym and safe password (for asking questions and *again* for checking the answers) need to be explained, yet in plain words without technical expressions; that is, as simply as possible. Also, the presentation of the ‘counselling room’, the graphical user interface where the exchange of questions and answers takes place, plays an important role according to user’s and expert’s feedback. A clear and appealing design with different colours for requests and answers helped users to orient themselves easily and quickly and was much appreciated.

Concerning *organisation and work structure*, the pilot project decided to implement online counselling as a separate service within existing structures. That meant that a counsellor on duty for online service concentrated on that specific task and did not take on phone service duties or face-to-face counselling at the same time. This work structure proved successful and effective since online counselling is demanding and needs enough time and space to respond individually. Experiences during holiday replacement showed that combined counselling duties bore the risk of shelving the written form: online responses only get ‘worked off’ at the end of the day which also affects quality.

The experiences of the pilot phase suggest implementation of online counselling is a positive addition to the mainstream provision in victim support. However, the pilot phase also clearly demonstrated that the new format requires serious processing and organisation: trained counsellors are essential as well as professional technical support and adequate structures to run the service. With other words, online counselling needs – equally to conventional counselling forms – appropriate time and financial resources. It would be a mistake to opt for online counselling as a cheap solution.

‘The experience that intense counselling in fact is possible – with real exchange and not at all impersonal – that’s amazing. But we have to emphasise that online counselling definitely is demanding and it is time-consuming as well. That’s an important lesson we’ve learnt in that pilot phase.’ (Manager of the counselling service)

Discussion and conclusion

The evaluation results from Switzerland presented in this paper show that online counselling may be a valuable addition in service provision for victims of domestic violence and for other individuals or third persons concerned with the problem. There is a demand for counselling through the internet as increasing numbers of users have shown. The evaluated service enjoyed a high level of acceptance among its users. Users' feedback manifestly indicate that it is possible to provide quality online counselling which is appreciated as helpful and sympathetic. Favourable factors are: putting emphasis on establishing a relationship (opening up 'space'), engaging with advice seekers, not using text modules but providing individual answers.

The online offer is able to reach new target groups: women with tight time budgets or living further away, younger women, confidants and relatives, as well as men, and women with high thresholds due to psychological or mental health issues. As shown, essential characteristics of the counselling examined are its written form, and the fact that it is provided asynchronously (counselling entails time-delayed responses to requests). For users these specific features have distinct advantages, including autonomy and self-determination in time and rhythm, and the possibility of rereading and to reflect on the answers.

The evaluation findings are noteworthy in a wider context of victim support, too. When a victim-survivor of intimate partner violence discloses what has happened, in Switzerland there is usually a broad institutional intervention and support system that is activated. Research on victim experiences shows that there are two sides to this institutional response. Seeking help and consequently engaging with agencies means on the one hand opportunities for support and change. On the other hand, however, it means most women face an enormous mountain of engagement and intervention (Gloor and Meier 2016; 2014). They have to engage with numerous different institutions and professionals, they have to inform and to give account (often numerous times), and they have to conform to the different institutions' logics and schedules. This 'institution work' is often a long lasting and tiresome process, more controlled by external actors than by victims' requirements. Against this background the specific qualities of online counselling assume additional importance and should be seen in a wider perspective. The format has the potential to take pressure from the help-seeking women since with online counselling they can engage in a self-paced counselling process. By contacting the online service clients do not run the risk that first steps may then already develop their own dynamic. The written form of the online counselling allows victims-survivors to retain control over time, rhythm and the information exchanged.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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