

OrlandoSentinel.com

You've got mail -- from your shrink

Robyn Shelton

Sentinel Medical Writer

June 16, 2008

People use computers to buy cars, locate the nearest Italian restaurant and even find their soul mates. Why not to get mental-health counseling?

A growing number of people are turning to the Internet for therapy via instant messaging, e-mail exchanges or videoconferencing. Count Joanna Pepi among them.

The New York resident has felt emotionally drained in the past year. Her mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease.

Her two children hit big milestones: one graduating from high school, the other from college.

Pepi, 52, has been traveling a lot to Florida's west coast, where her parents live. She wanted to talk with someone but squeezing appointments into her schedule seemed impossible.

Her answer: therapy through e-mail with an Orlando psychologist.

"This is a very emotional time for me, and it's just easier to type than to have the words coming out of my mouth," Pepi said.

"It's almost like I'm talking to a friend online rather than a therapist."

But the approach isn't for everyone. Some mental-health professionals say the lack of face-to-face contact undermines meaningful therapy.

Pros

*Convenience. There's no need to drive, line up baby sitters or miss work.

*Anonymity. The therapist can't put your name to a face, adding another layer of privacy.

*It's just better in certain cases. Some people, especially those who have grown up texting and e-mailing, are very comfortable expressing themselves via computer.

With e-mail therapy, for example, people have time to focus their thoughts without the pressure of a ticking clock, said Michael Freeny, a personal counselor in Orlando. He said people are more likely to be honest in written communication.

*More people can get help. Mental-health professionals aren't available in many places. It's even harder to find someone who specializes in, say, phobias or sexual-orientation issues. The Internet brings expertise from miles away.

Also, a lot of people are embarrassed to see a psychologist, said Lucille D'Amico, a licensed mental-health counselor with Global Counseling Associates in Windermere, which offers Internet-based therapy. She doesn't see the Internet as taking patients away from office practices so much as offering a choice for those who would never get help otherwise.

*Starter therapy. Some people use Internet counseling to test the waters, Freeny said. Many have no idea what's involved and think Dr. Phil's in-your-face method is standard. Then they try a few sessions online and decide to begin in-person therapy.

Cons

*Cost. Mental-health coverage rarely includes Internet counseling, so most pay upfront with credit cards. Therapists say the rates are comparable to those for traditional counseling. For example, an hourlong session may run \$80 to \$150.

*Out of sight. The therapist loses many cues in an online session. "The old saying is that 90 percent of communication is nonverbal," said Altamonte Springs psychologist Alan Keck. "It's not what you say but how you say it, and all the postural and facial clues that go along with it, and that's completely lost" in most Internet-based therapy.

*Privacy. Family members, spouses or friends might come across e-mail or other records of the counseling sessions.

*Limited use. Internet therapy is not suitable for everyone, including those with diagnosed conditions such as bipolar disorder or schizophrenia. Boston-area psychologist John Grohol said most Internet clients are struggling with life's curveballs: the demise of a relationship or career problems. "These are people who are trying to get through difficult patches," said Grohol, who runs the site PsychCentral.com.

*Wild West. There are no laws or regulations for Internet counseling. What if a Florida resident is getting counseling from a therapist in Idaho? Where can the client turn if he or she needs to make a complaint? For now, nowhere.

Robyn Shelton can be reached at rshelton@orlandosentinel.com or 407-420-5487.