



# Counseling as a means of providing safe social support during the COVID-19 pandemic

Poradnictwo jako sposób zapewnienia bezpiecznego wsparcia społecznego podczas pandemii COVID-19

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Krzysztof Trębski<sup>a</sup>, Józef Młyński<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Associate professor Krzysztof Trębski, PhD, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0115-5787>  
Faculty of Theology, Trnava University in Trnava, Slovakia

<sup>b</sup> Associate professor Józef Młyński, PhD, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2475-9658>  
Pedagogical University of Krakow

**Abstract:** The COVID 19 outbreak has affected people's physical and mental health and triggered an avalanche of consequences that many are unable to cope with, and because of the pandemic, even relatives and friends are unable to help in this situation. Many people experience all kinds of difficult situations (such as relationship problems, health, social, educational or economic difficulties) that are not pathological problems but for which individuals are unable to find a suitable solution. Counseling as a helping relationship is a good way for them to gain self-awareness and find the resources they need to make the necessary changes in their lives. The counselors, as professionals in a helping relationship, can help them get through difficult times by providing the necessary support to begin their journey to well-being. The article presents counseling as an opportunity to provide safe social support to people during the COVID 19 epidemic, but also highlights the difficulties this type of service can bring.

**Keywords:** counseling/online counseling, COVID-19 pandemic, social support and security, pros and cons of online counseling

**Abstrakt:** Pandemia COVID 19 wpłynęła na zdrowie fizyczne i psychiczne ludzi i spowodowała lawinę konsekwencji, z którymi wielu nie jest w stanie samodzielnie sobie poradzić. Wiele osób napotyka różnego rodzaju trudności natury relacyjnej czy emocjonalnej, zdrowotnej bądź społecznej, które nie są zjawiskami patologicznymi, ale którym nie potrafią stawić czoła. Poradnictwo/counseling jako pomocna relacja jest dla nich dobrym sposobem na zdobycie samoświadomości i znalezienie zasobów wewnętrznych potrzebnych do wprowadzenia niezbędnych zmian w ich życiu. Doradcy, jako profesjonalści, mogą im pomóc w trudnych chwilach, zapewniając niezbędne wsparcie w przywróceniu dobrostanu psychicznego, postrzeganego jako połączenie dobrego samopoczucia, efektywnego zarządzania emocjami i radzenia sobie z codziennymi wyzwaniami. Zwłaszcza w czasie pandemii wsparcie to jest konieczne, gdy osoba cierpi z powodu niemożności znalezienia niezbędnej pomocy na skutek ograniczeń pandemicznych lub utraty możliwości znalezienia pomocy we własnym środowisku. Niniejszy artykuł przedstawia poradnictwo/counseling, także prowadzony online, jako możliwość zapewnienia bezpiecznego wsparcia społecznego ludziom podczas epidemii COVID 19, ale także zwraca uwagę na trudności, jakie może powodować ten rodzaj pomocy.

**Słowa kluczowe:** counseling/online counseling, pandemia COVID-19, wsparcie i bezpieczeństwo społeczne, zalety i wady poradnictwa internetowego

## Introduction

COVID-19 acronym of english COronaVirus Disease 19, also known as acute respiratory disease SARS-CoV-2, is an infectious respiratory disease caused by the virus called SARS-CoV-2 belonging to the coronavirus family. The first cases were found in China (Wuhan) in December 2019 and have since spread to other countries around the world. This led to the World Health Organization (WHO) declaring

the outbreak a pandemic on 11 March 2020. Globally, as of 4 January 2022, there have been 290.959.019 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 5.446.753 deaths, reported to WHO (WHO, 2021).

The virus mainly affects the upper and lower respiratory tract but can cause symptoms that affect all organs and systems. In more than half of the cases, the infection proceeds completely asymptotically and in about a third of cases it presents flu-like symptoms (pauci-symptomatic form). In a minority

of cases (about 5-6% of cases), however, the disease can manifest itself in a moderate or severe form with risk of complications, especially respiratory.

The COVID-19 outbreak has had far-reaching consequences beyond the spread of the disease itself and efforts to quarantine it, including political, cultural, and social implications. Preventive measures to reduce the chances of infection and infection control actions intended to slow the spread of the disease by minimising close contact between individuals (include social distancing, also called “physical distancing”, quarantines, travel restrictions, closing of schools, workplaces, shopping centres and places of mass gatherings related to culture and sport such as stadiums, theaters etc.), wearing a mask in public, avoiding crowded areas, keeping a safe distance from others, ventilating indoor spaces, washing hands with soap and water often.

The current coronavirus pandemic is unprecedented and impacts society and the world in many different ways. Given physical distance and self-isolation measures, it is not surprising that the COVID epidemic is impacting the physical and mental well-being of many, especially the most vulnerable. The pandemic has profound and widespread effects on mental health and resilience: billions of people struggle to manage their lives and increase anxiety, social isolation, loneliness, stress and economic recession. It is important to be aware of the psychological or mental health impacts of this disaster, especially in people who are already psychologically fragile. Anxiety, restlessness and stress are commonly associated with these types of situations and can have a direct negative impact on thoughts, feelings, behaviors that can interfere with the ability to become fully functional in daily activities.

Preventive measures to fight infections and other measures to slow the spread of the disease have minimized close physical contact between people in society and within families or groups to which they belong. The situation is further aggravated by restrictions, which are intended to reduce and prevent infections, but as a side effect they have the decrease in human contacts and greater social isolation of people. These facts have increased the difficulties in managing emotions in many people. Negative thoughts about oneself, uncertainty and

dissatisfaction for the future, difficulties in family relationships, inability to express positive emotions, feelings of isolation or loneliness: these are just some of the problems reported by those seeking support (Finset, Bosworth, Butow, Gulbrandsen, Hulsman, Pieterse, Street, Tschoetschel, van Weert, 2020).

The impact of COVID 19 affects people’s physical and psychological health and causes a series of consequences that many people are not able to face independently, without the help of other people, who for pandemic reasons cannot provide them with the support needed (Zhang, Lange, 2021).

Counseling is a safe space where a counselor listens and understands a client’s story from their perspective and makes an effort to help them move in the direction they desire. Safety is provided by being calm, respectful, confidential, nonjudgmental, patient and supportive. The fact that many people are now unwilling or unable to access face-to-face counseling, due to their health and any other impediments, means that online support is currently the preferred avenue for many. It is clear from this that this type of counseling can provide an appropriate response to the needs of many people looking to find relational support and safety to face the difficulties of the COVID-19 epidemic (ICMR, 2021).

## **1. Counseling and its field of expertise**

Counseling is a process that entails the inner change of a person (client), who is guided through this path by another person (counselor), who has the appropriate means to promote self-awareness and inner growth of the client, with the aim to increase his or her self-confidence and sense of empowerment.

Counseling is not a therapy, but a helping relationship designed for those who want to be listened to and better understand their problems, make decisions and change the difficult situations in their life. It is a holistic approach that is not satisfied with just taking care of certain aspects of the client as long as it is temporarily functional. Its premise is to change and heal the individual as a whole, which is a necessary step to equip him for his new course of life.

Counseling purpose is to provide people with a realistic vision of themselves through adequate relational and conversational techniques, so as to tackle their existential situation and their choices, developing skills and independence at their best. This is an expansive objective targeting the growth of an individual on every aspect of the personality (the physical, intellectual, emotional, social/relational and spiritual levels). In essence, the process of Counseling presents the client with an opportunity to explore, discover and clarify more profitable ways of living on behalf of a higher level of well-being and security.

Counseling offers the client the opportunity to explore, discover and clarify thought and action strategies to live in a more coherent way, which means becoming aware of oneself, consciously using one's resources.

If we try to define the application areas of counseling, we can say that they are basically:

1. Prevention - is an intervention applied to a discomfort to prevent it from worsening. By discomfort we mean a momentary or circumscribed problem. Discomfort is not psychopathology. Preventive intervention is connected to an improvement in the quality of life and is aimed at the individual to help him/her discover new possibilities at the level of work, couples, family relationships and to activate new personal potential.
2. Support - is the intervention not aimed at solving the problem that is unsolvable in these cases, but which can help the person to live as best as possible with that problem. For example: the counselor cannot heal a terminally ill patient, he can accompany him to help him live a quality life, despite that dramatic situation.
3. Activation of human resources - is expressed in training and strengthening the potential of the person and is particularly appreciated in counseling with work groups, intercultural counseling, social and school counseling.

Counseling is intended to be an excellent approach to support those who find themselves into a difficult decision making process. Counseling may be

represented by the metaphor of 'walking together through a path'. Can be described as helping to help oneself, learning how to solve a problem with one's own personal abilities, without being tied to the other's interpretations, suggestions or rules, even if coming from experts in the field (Corey, 2005). It offers a direction to follow and sustainment to individuals or groups of individuals, favouring the client's skills and development. On the one hand it aims to resolve the individual's inner existential conflicts or the problems that compromise their full and creative expression, on the other hand it favors dialogue between individuals.

## **2. Online counseling as one of the possible answers to the difficulties related to the Covid-19 pandemic**

Online counseling is a type of technology-based counseling in which counselor and clients are in separate or remote locations and utilize electronic devices to communicate with each other (Bloom, 1998).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, online counseling is fast becoming a popular support model, especially for those living in the countryside or in an isolated area, for those with a physical condition that limits mobility or does not have adequate means of transport, for those who are afraid of contagion or have already been infected. It becomes a preferred choice for those who are short on time and are more familiar with modern technology.

This type of distance relationship includes counseling and psychoeducation, from a qualified professional to a client through remote communication technologies such as telephone, asynchronous e-mail communication (a delayed response exchange), synchronous chat (conversation between participants who immediately receive and respond to each other's exchanges) and videoconferencing (Mallen, Vogel, 2005).

Online counseling, especially in times of pandemics, has numerous advantages for the clients. It can take less time away from home or worry about traffic. The flexibility of electronic communication can also

increase the accessibility of a consultant, especially for clients with irregular or busy personal schedules (Peterson, Beck, 2018).

This type of counseling overcomes the barriers that can prevent people from seeking help. Offers an unusual level of privacy. For those uncomfortable with face-to-face meeting, allows access to such services privately in their own home via the computer (Cohen, Kerr, 1998). It can also allow the client to feel less stigmatized without having to be seen by others in the waiting room, by the administrative staff or by any other person. The anonymity of online counseling can also alleviate discomfort and potentially embarrassing disclosure of behaviors and thoughts (Lange, Van de Ven, Schrieken, 2003). It can be especially important for individuals with issues of shame or fear and also for those who are afraid of being judged (Fenichel, Suler, Barak, Zelvin, Jones, Munro, Meunier, Walker-Schmuck-eret, 2002).

From the perspective of clients, online counseling allows them greater flexibility in working hours, family obligations or caring for a loved one. It is economically more convenient because it reduces travel expenses for clients and the cost of using the office for the counselors. This makes online consulting services more accessible financially (Griffiths, 2001).

It is important to remember some drawbacks of online counseling. Traditional counseling is largely based on the characteristics of both verbal and non-verbal cues as a form of communication. These are considered essential to assess what the client feels and to identify discrepancies or inconsistencies between verbal and non-verbal behaviors (Abney, Cleborne, 2004). Online counseling does not give an indication of characteristics such as voice tone, facial expression, body language and eye contact (McCrickard, Butler, 2005). This can potentially impact negatively on the counseling outcomes as the counselor has no opportunity to observe and interpret such cues (Trębski, 2017).

The lack of visual cues (for example in the counseling by telephone) is also particularly important for clients who wish to discuss a visible physical disability and want their counselor to be able to see exactly what they are talking about.

The lack of face-to-face interaction could increase the risk of misdiagnosis by the counselors and therapists (Recupero, Rainey, 2018). For this reason, online therapy is deemed inappropriate for psychiatric problems such as suicidal or homicidal feelings, chronic and psychotic depression, for those who are experiencing a severe crisis that interferes with their general functioning. In these situations, counselors must be on site to observe the client in person, assess the degree of risk and best course of action, and possibly refer the client to a mental health specialist. Other potential drawbacks of online counseling are that unskilled people can take advantage of vulnerable people. Unfortunately, "counselor" is not a legally protected word in most countries, which means that anyone can claim to be a counselor and offer services that may appear to be psychotherapy.

Likewise, it may not always be easy to know that the client is receiving evidence-based counseling. In fact, in many countries counselors have gathered in various associations that do not always communicate with each other and often there is no single national list of professional counselors that can be consulted by potential clients. It would be important that licensing laws protect clients and ensure that only those who are trained and qualified to practice receive a license.

Another drawback associated with online counseling concerns the use of computers as a means of communication. Ideally, technology simply acts as a communication tool, however even the best technological tools sometimes require attention, and can be frustrating if this occurs during the counseling session. Hardware or software failure or internet service failure can impact the online availability of both counselor and client (Baker, Ray, 2011). Someone could hack the client's or consultant's computer or plug into the Wi-Fi connection. Since what is revealed during the meeting can be very sensitive, both the client and the counselor must be aware of the significant privacy risks.

Online counseling raises concerns about legal and ethical issues. Considering the legal aspects of counseling and respective territorial jurisdiction, many online consultants offer e-mail advice only to clients over the age of 18. Of course, the client

should be made aware of the potential risks of receiving online mental health services. For example, the potential risks of email can include failure to receive messages and breach of confidentiality. Emails may not be received if they are sent to the wrong address (which may also violate confidentiality) or if they simply may not be noticed by the consultant. Confidentiality could be breached in transit by hackers or internet service providers. Additional safeguards should be considered when the computer is shared by family members or others who have access to the same device or email account (ISMHO, 2000). Despite some perplexities raised by online counseling, this approach during the COVID-19 pandemic seems to guarantee clients greater benefits and safety than other types of counseling.

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## Summary

Online counseling aims to be a useful tool to improve people's well-being and their ability to creatively rediscover their resources. Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, when there is a lack of human and professional support to find solutions to important personal problems, this method of providing help corresponds to the growing need to find innovative and safe solutions. Even as the COVID-19 outbreak subsides, online counseling shouldn't lose its importance. It is important that counselors, enriched by their experience in the field, continue to participate in the definition and development of guidelines to improve this modality of help, maximize the benefits and mitigate the risks.