

# **INTERNET COUNSELING: IS IT RIGHT FOR YOU?**

## ***A Guide for the Consumer***

A project of

***The American Association of State Counseling Boards***

### **What is Internet counseling?**

Internet counseling has a number of names (e-counseling, cybercounseling, etc.). In any case, it is the application of counseling principles through the internet in synchronous (real time, video) or asynchronous (e-mail or delayed) communication.

Currently, the research on the effectiveness of internet counseling is extremely limited. If you decide to pursue Internet Counseling, you may be entering into an arrangement that has many unanswered questions; therefore, you should proceed with caution.

### **Is internet counseling right for me?**

Certain types of emotional problems may not be appropriate for internet counseling. In general, face-to-face counseling is the preferred method to deliver counseling services. The questions in this brochure may also help you to decide if Internet Counseling is the best form of counseling for you.

### **What should I look for in an internet counselor?**

Most states have laws licensing Professional Counselors which usually require that the Counselor be licensed in the state in which the client lives and receives services. A Counselor providing internet counseling in your state, while living in another state, SHOULD be licensed in your state or he/she may be violating the law. To determine if your counselor is licensed, you may access your state licensing body's link through the following organizational website:

•[www.aascb.org](http://www.aascb.org) (The American Association of State Counseling Boards)

Other licensed mental health professions also maintain lists of their members who are qualified to practice internet counseling. You should contact the appropriate professional association for further information (American Psychological Association, National Association of Social Workers, American Psychiatric Association).

Your counselor should provide you with written materials which describe the following:

- the counselors background, license and certifications, specialties, and availability
- how minors' confidentiality and parental permission are addressed
- how records are stored
- a privacy statement about transmission of clinical data & HIPPA compliance
- who will have access to your records (a list of all individuals having access to your records including staff, supervisors, & clerical help)
- whether verbatim session records or other types of notes are maintained
- an overall confidentiality statement

**What guarantees of security and confidentiality exist?**

Realistically, there are no confidentiality guarantees for material sent through the internet. Your counselor should inform you about encryption or other security methods used on his/her computer to enhance confidentiality.

**What protection or recourse do I have if wish to file a complaint?**

Complaints should be directed to the licensing board in the state where you live. You may have little or no recourse in the case of an unlicensed counselor or those whose identity you fail to obtain.

You may also wish to file an ethics complaint with one of the following bodies:

- American Counseling Association                      *www.counseling.org*
- National Board for Certified Counselors              *www.nbcc.org*

**What can I expect in the way of fees?**

Fees can vary from state to state, and from region to region in your state. Since usual and customary fees are dependent on where you live, you should check with other providers or friends in your area to determine what is "reasonable".

Be sure to ask the counselor about fees prior to providing credit card information. Determine how much you will be charged for specific services. In general, counselors do not charge flat fees such as a monthly charge for counseling.

### **What provisions are made for emergency services?**

Clients requiring regular emergency contact may not be best served by internet or other forms of distance counseling.

The counselor should provide you with telephone numbers or other contact information to use in case of an emergency, including any backup counselors assigned to assist you.

**IN THE EVENT THAT YOU ARE IN CRISIS AND CANNOT REACH A COUNSELOR, GO TO YOUR NEAREST HOSPITAL EMERGENCY ROOM IMMEDIATELY!**

### **How can I be a good internet counseling client?**

Counseling is a two way process that depends on active participation by you, the client.

The following are suggestions to help facilitate the internet counseling process:

Be honest about your identity (age, gender), location (state), and the nature of your problem or concern

Be aware of your financial responsibility for services (know what you have agreed to pay)

Be aware of the limits of internet counseling

Don't be afraid to ask questions at any time during the counseling process, especially before beginning counseling

Find out how to access the counselor by telephone, and provide phone numbers where you can be reached. Include information about how the counselor should identify him/herself when calling

Be skeptical - *if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is...*