

# Using digital technology in the counselling professions

**Good Practice in Action 107  
Research Overview**

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## Context

This resource is one of a suite prepared by BACP to enable members to engage with the current BACP *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* in respect of digital technology and working online.

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## Purpose

The purpose of this resource is to provide an overview of research and literature relating to digital technology for practitioners working in the counselling professions.

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## Using the research overviews

The purpose of this resource is to provide an overview of research and literature relating to digital technology for practitioners working in the counselling professions.

BACP has developed the *Good Practice in Action* series, these are free for BACP members to download. It is hoped these will support good practice in the counselling related professions. They are all reviewed both by member-led focus groups and experts in the field and are based on current research and evidence.

BACP members have a contractual commitment to work in accordance with the current *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions*. The *Good Practice in Action* resources are not contractually binding on members but are intended to support practitioners by providing general information on principles and policy applicable at the time of publication, in the context of the core ethical principles, values and personal moral qualities of BACP.

Specific issues in practice will vary depending on clients, particular models of working, the context of the work and the kind of therapeutic intervention provided.

As specific issues arising from work with clients are often complex, BACP always recommends that you discuss practice dilemmas with a supervisor and/or consult with a suitably qualified and experienced legal or other relevant practitioner.

The studies included in this overview use different terms to differentiate counsellors from psychotherapists and other professionals who provide counselling-related services. However, when this overview was written, care was taken to refer specifically to psychotherapists and counsellors as 'therapists', and to refer to social workers, coaches and those engaged in pastoral care as 'practitioners'. Whether the term 'therapy', 'counselling', or 'psychotherapy' is used depends on how it was referred to within the reviewed study; however, all pertain to counselling-related services.

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## Introduction

Digital technology is increasingly being used in the counselling professions to support the delivery of face-to-face therapy and counselling practice and to deliver online therapeutic sessions in a range of modalities and to different client groups.

The term digital technologies could include:

- using smartphone or tablet apps
- communicating via email
- offering information on or from professional websites and online resources
- messaging tools
- video conferencing
- online therapy platforms
- cloud storage for client records or practice information
- electronic address books
- digital planners or calendars
- digital recorders.

Some of the benefits associated with the use of digital technologies for both therapists and clients include:

- the supportive use of digital technology such as email or messaging can make communication easier between practitioners and their clients
- cloud storage could simplify record keeping
- more efficient management of the counselling practice
- using digital technology to deliver therapeutic sessions could increase client access to therapy, particularly for those in rural areas or for those unable to participate in face-to-face sessions. There could be improved outcomes particularly for client groups who find engagement with face-to-face services difficult.

There are also concerns arising from the use of digital technology in the counselling professions, such as:

- an increased risk of breach of privacy and confidentiality; if technology is used inappropriately, or inadequate systems of security are employed
- not all clients would be suitable, or wish to undertake, online therapy rather than face-to-face sessions
- the reliability of digital tools and resources – not all practitioners are competent in the use of digital technology.

Using digital technology **appropriately** is essential in order to maximise the benefits while minimising the risks.

This research overview examines major areas of research on the use of digital technology in counselling professions and highlights the main findings of recent academic literature.

BACP supports the use of digital technology in the counselling professions, as long as it follows established principles, commitments, standards, ethics, and professional requirements. This resource follows BACP requirements and seeks to provide useful information and guidance to help practitioners use digital technologies appropriately and effectively in their therapeutic sessions and also for supporting therapeutic practice. It draws from the relevant research literature on how digital technologies are applied to various aspects of counselling and psychotherapy, and how emerging issues should be addressed.

Practitioners incorporating various digital technologies must ensure they comply with the requirements of BACP's *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* (BACP, 2018). Practitioners who are planning to deliver therapeutic sessions online need to ensure they have the relevant training and competence. See BACP Telephone and e-Competence Framework at: <https://www.bacp.co.uk/events-and-resources/ethics-and-standards/competences-and-curricula/>. Furthermore, digital-based therapy methods should be tailored to the specific needs of the client, and be easily accessible to both therapist and client. Technology use should be evidence-based in order to enhance efficacy, safety, and suitability in counselling and psychotherapy (BACP, 2018).

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## How the literature was identified

Searches were conducted on Google Scholar to identify relevant studies based on the terms 'digital technology,' 'counselling,' 'psychotherapy,' and 'online counselling,' as well as their alternative counterparts commonly used in the USA and Australia such as 'e-therapy,' 'e-counselling,' 'online therapy,' 'tele-psychology,' and 'tele-health.' The search was limited to studies in English, published between 2014 and 2019 from the UK, Europe, and America. The search excluded articles from chapters in textbooks, reference books, guidebooks, and book reviews.

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## Synopsis of research related to digital technology in the counselling professions

A total of 23 studies providing relevant information on the use of digital technologies in counselling professions are featured in this resource. One popular area of study regards the impact of digital technologies on the counselling professions, which includes: the development of new digital-based treatments (Fairburn and Patel, 2017; Schlosser, Campellone, Truong et al., 2018) and the incorporation of technology into existing treatments (Fairburn and Patel, 2017; Benton et al., 2016); transformation of mental healthcare delivery (Treisman, Jayaram, Margolis et al., 2016; Lim and Penn, 2018); and, acceptance of technology use by practitioners and clients (Weatherford, Brooks and Allred, 2016; Topooco, Riper, Araya et al., 2017; Clarke, Chambers and Barry, 2017).

The limitations of using digital technology are also highlighted in the studies by Kingsley and Henning, 2015; Furlonger and Budisa, 2016; Fang, Tarshis, McInroy et al., 2017; Lim and Penn, 2018; Topooco et al., 2017; and Clarke et al., 2017.

Studies describing the application of new technology-based treatments included those by Kaldo, Jernelöv, Blom et al., 2015; Schlosser et al., 2018; Craig, Rus-Calafell, Ward et al., 2018. The combination of technology with conventional treatments to improve outcomes is also explored (Benton et al., 2016; Van Rijn, Cooper and Chryssafidou, 2018).

The use of technology for the education and training of counsellors and psychotherapists is another important area of research covered in this resource. Technology can be used for the dissemination of training and teaching new skills (Murphy, Slovak, Thieme et al., 2017; Kobak, Wolitzky-Taylor, Craske et al., 2017; Khanna and Kendall, 2015), including training on how to effectively use technology for counselling and psychotherapy practice (Anthony, 2015; Davies, 2015; Bond, 2015).

There were many studies touching on legal and ethical issues related to the use of technology in counselling and psychotherapy. Two were selected for this review as they adequately cover all the relevant issues (Harris and Birnbaum, 2015; Lustgarten and Elhai, 2018).

There was a scarcity of studies on how counselling practitioners use technology to support everyday practice, for example the use of email, note-keeping, and cloud storage. The articles available are mainly concerned with privacy and confidentiality risks associated with the use of technology for communication and information storage (Lustgarten, 2015; Elhai and Hall (2015). However, BACP resources by Davies (2015) and Bond (2015) provide useful information on how practitioners can use technology to support the running of their practice.

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## **Studies on the use of digital technology in the counselling professions**

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### **Impact of digital technology in the counselling professions**

Fairburn and Patel (2017) explain how digital technology has brought significant changes to psychological treatments.

New forms of treatments have been developed, such as avatar-based therapy, while existing treatments are being converted into digital interventions, for example internet-based cognitive behavioural therapy (i-CBT). The incorporation of digital technology into psychological treatments is gaining popularity and the focus should be on the assessment of these new methods, and digital training of counselling professionals for effective implementation (Fairburn and Patel, 2017).

Furlonger and Budisa (2016) caution that despite the existence of multiple websites and smartphone apps offering mental health assistance, there is little guarantee of their quality and credibility. In their web-based pilot study, the authors evaluated 69 websites and 30 apps. Only five websites and eight apps met the inclusion criteria. The authors advised that school counsellors should be more proactive in helping students to identify and use credible web-based counselling tools and resources.

Lim and Penn (2018) support the use of digital technology in the provision of treatment and care for mental disorders, including schizophrenia. Digital tools can facilitate continuity of care and improvement in client well-being. Clinicians and counsellors can use digital tools to deliver or augment psychological treatment, for example in conducting clinical assessments, promoting medication adherence, or motivating clients.

Lim and Penn (2018) also highlight the limitations of using digital technology for mental health treatment and care, such as: poor design and implementation of the intervention, low rates of adherence to digital tools, and failure to identify patient risk – for example, relapse. The authors recommend that digital tools need to be tested for compatibility with conventional treatments, and mental health professionals should receive training on how to effectively implement digital technologies for the treatment and care of clients.

Treisman et al. (2016) demonstrated that digital technologies used for the provision of electronic health (e-health) services can potentially transform mental healthcare delivery. By focusing on schizophrenia, the authors found that e-health enabled early recognition of symptoms and intervention, improved client access to helpful information, and extended client access to services. Other positive outcomes included improved client engagement, where physical and psychological evaluations are tracked, adherence to medication such as antipsychotics, antidepressants or anti-anxiety drugs, self-management, and integration of care.

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## Acceptability of digital technology for counselling and psychotherapy

Weatherford et al. (2016) recognise the widespread use and acceptance of digital technology in society, including among newer generation mental health professionals. Technology-based mental health services are projected to grow, and modern practitioners need to focus on how to effectively use technology to work with clients.

Topooco et al. (2017) also highlights the support for digital treatments in mental healthcare among mental health services' stakeholders.

In an online survey on the treatment of depression, involving stakeholders such as government bodies, care providers, and service-users from eight European Union countries, the authors reported high acceptability for digital treatments, especially for mild forms of depression.

Participants also preferred the combination of digital and conventional treatments – also known as blended treatment – rather than standalone digital treatments. Cost-effectiveness was the main advantage associated with the incorporation of digital treatments into routine care, while lack of preparedness was the main barrier highlighted.

In a survey of 900 mental health professionals, up to 98% of participants expressed readiness to use online resources to help their clients (Clarke et al., 2017). This includes searching for helpful information online from dedicated mental health websites. The most reported searches were for guidance on how to work with young people and their parents to promote positive mental health outcomes. The professionals also highlighted some of the barriers to the use of online resources for mental health services. These included: concerns about reliability of information, lack of organisational support, and lack of training on appropriate use of online resources to help clients.

Kingsley and Henning (2015) point out that the internet has replaced the telephone as the main medium for non-face-to-face counselling. This reflects an increasing use of digital technology to enhance communication and support different aspects of counselling. However, the authors concluded that it is more difficult for counsellors to develop a therapeutic relationship with clients through web-based platforms compared to face-to-face sessions.

This is because the therapist is limited in their ability to read body language and facial cues during an online counselling session. In contrast, in a systematic review and meta-analysis, Andersson et al. (2014) found in their study no significant differences between internet-based cognitive-behaviour therapy (CBT) and face-to-face CBT. These two approaches were found to be equally effective in treating psychiatric and somatic conditions.

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## Use of technology for therapeutic sessions

Kaldo et al. (2015) evaluated the efficacy of an internet-delivered Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for insomnia (ICBT-i) by comparing it with an active control treatment. The primary outcome measured was insomnia severity, while secondary outcomes included use of sleep medication, sleep diary, and perceived stress. Measurements were taken before and after eight weeks of treatment, with follow-ups after six and 12 months. The findings showed that internet-CBT was significantly more effective in reducing insomnia severity and the need for sleep medication. Subjects receiving internet-CBT reported improved sleep efficiency, sleep latency, and sleep quality. Furthermore, treatment gains were sustained for up to one year after treatment.

Schlosser et al. (2018) demonstrated the efficacy of a mobile app intervention for the treatment of schizophrenia. The mobile app, known as PRIME (personalized real-time intervention for motivational enhancement), is designed to improve motivation and quality of life in young people with schizophrenia. In a randomised controlled trial, participants in the PRIME group performed better than the control group in terms of improvements in self-reported depression, self-efficacy, and social motivation.

Benton et al. (2016), building on earlier research by van der Vaart et al. (2014) on blending online modules and face-to-face therapy for depression, found that the use of digital technology in combination with traditional face-to-face therapy produced better outcomes. In their experiment, therapist-assisted online (TAO) psychotherapy was used to treat clients with anxiety and compared with another group receiving conventional psychotherapy for the same condition. TAO treatment included continued engagement with clients through text reminders, video conferencing, mobile apps, and online educational resources. Clients who received TAO treatment reported greater reduction in anxiety levels, and greater improvements in their sense of well-being, global mental health measures, and life functioning.

Craig et al. (2018) demonstrated the effectiveness of digital avatar therapy in reducing auditory hallucinations in psychotic clients. Participants from an NHS-funded clinic in South London were recruited for a randomised control trial testing the efficacy of the digital-based therapy. When using avatar therapy, the therapist provides the voice of the avatar, which represents the person the client is hallucinating about. This enables the therapist to guide the dialogue in a way that calms the client. The findings showed that 12 weeks of avatar therapy was more effective for reducing the frequency and severity of auditory hallucinations in psychotic clients compared to traditional counselling.

Van Rijn, Cooper and Chryssafidou (2018) also found an avatar-based counselling intervention to be effective when used with young people in a school setting. The intervention uses software that provides additional opportunities for clients to communicate with the counsellor about their inner worlds using digital imagery.

The authors concluded that the use of digital software, such as this avatar-based counselling intervention, can enhance communication and facilitate positive change, especially for clients who are enthusiastic about the technology.

Fang et al. (2017) highlight the advantages and disadvantages of a text-based online counselling programme used by counsellors of undergraduate students. The authors conducted a qualitative analysis of the transcripts of email sessions and chat exchanges. Some of the advantages identified included increased flexibility, accessibility, and immediacy. The main disadvantages were associated with technical difficulties and increased workloads for therapists.

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## Education and training

Anthony (2015) advises that mental health professionals need training to enable them to transfer their face-to-face therapy skills to the online environment. The author recognises that digital technologies are increasingly being used in the provision of mental health services, therefore adequate training is required for it to be effective. Furthermore, technology continues to evolve, and continuous training would help mental health professionals to effectively use the latest digital technologies available to assist their clients.

Murphy et al. (2017) suggest that the integration of new technologies into counsellor education is not happening quickly enough and have called for more research and development in this area. The authors presented an online system, known as 'mPath', designed to support skills training sessions for counsellors. The system also promotes deep reflection by practitioners about their professional practice. The authors affirm that technology-enhanced training, such as using 'mPath', can benefit students' learning.

Kobak et al. (2017) propose the use of technology to improve the dissemination of therapy training. The authors tested a technology-enhanced training protocol for community clinicians involved in the delivery of CBT for anxiety disorders. The training consisted of an online tutorial, after which the clinical skills of trainees were observed remotely through video conferencing. The results showed a significant increase in trainees' knowledge about the concepts and techniques of CBT, and their competence in applying the skills learnt.

The impact of training on client outcomes was also assessed, and the findings showed that clients treated by clinicians who had received the training experienced significant reductions in anxiety and depression. Furthermore, the clients reported high user-satisfaction ratings.

Khanna and Kendall (2015) also support the use of technology for training mental health professionals in CBT. Web-based training can increase therapists' access to CBT training programmes and is associated with several advantages. These include increased flexibility, consistent quality, and cost-efficiency. Learners can potentially experience both didactic and interactive learning supported by remote supervision and consultation.

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## Legal and ethical concerns

Lustgarten and Elhai (2018) recognise how digital technologies have transformed mental healthcare delivery. However, this is associated with potential legal and ethical issues that are not being addressed sufficiently. There is a need for development and understanding of ethical and legal issues related to the use of technology in counselling through training opportunities. While BACP's competence framework does indicate fulfilling ethical principles and values whether working online or face to face, specific competency standards should be established to facilitate the effective use of technology in counselling.

Harris and Birnbaum (2015) conducted a systematic review of ethical and legal challenges associated with online counselling. Some of the issues highlighted relate to anonymity, accessibility, informed consent, online security, liability, and credibility. The authors identified gaps in the literature and legislation regarding online counselling and called for further research to address the existing gaps.

In particular, there is an urgent need to investigate the effectiveness and appropriateness of using technology in counselling diverse populations.

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## Supporting therapeutic practice

Lustgarten (2015) affirms that professionals using cloud communication and data storage technology have the responsibility of protecting and maintaining client records, but existing practices are not adequate against emerging threats to client confidentiality. The author is calling for more research to establish best practice and provide regular digital security updates.

Elhai and Hall (2015) found that mental health practitioners who use electronic communication with their clients increase the risk of compromising client confidentiality. The authors conducted an online survey on technology use to support practice among psychologists and psychology student trainees. Participants were asked specifically about their use of electronic communication with clients, and the safeguards they use to ensure patient confidentiality. The findings revealed that a significant portion (one-fifth to one-half) of mental health practitioners do not use adequate electronic security, thus putting client privacy at risk.

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## BACP Guidance

As highlighted in the BACP's *Good Practice in Action 040 Commonly Asked Questions: Social media (audio and video) and the counselling professions* (BACP, 2015), the use of social media in counselling practice should comply with the provisions of BACP's *Ethical Framework for Counselling Professions* (BACP, 2018).

The client's objectives remain the counsellor's first priority, and the counsellor must uphold the clients' rights to respect, privacy and confidentiality, and informed consent. Practitioners who store personal client data on computers, laptops, smartphones, and tablets are required to take additional steps to protect them. These steps include registration with the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) as a data controller and having password-restricted access to clients' electronic data to prevent access by unauthorised persons (BACP, 2015).

Social media has facilitated new ways of working with clients and providing continuous support. This is made possible through digital tools such as video conferencing, messaging services, and online resources. Counsellors have the responsibility to use social media in ways that are most suitable for addressing specific client needs, while also upholding professional standards (BACP, 2015).

Davies (BACP, 2015) advises that practitioners should carefully assess the suitability of using social media with each client based on their specific situation. Certain clients may not be suitable candidates for online counselling due to the nature and severity of their mental illness, for example, those affected by substance abuse. Such clients may require direct observation or respond better when the therapist is physically present.

The client's ease of access to online self-help resources and support services for emergency situations should also be taken into consideration, especially if the counsellor and client are far apart geographically.

BACP's (2016) *Training Curriculum for Telephone and E-Counselling* sets the minimum standards and requirements for the training of counselling practitioners on the use of digital technology when working with clients. The curriculum content is research-based and outlines best practice in telephone and e-counselling.

Some of the issues addressed in the modules include: assessment of clients, contracts and boundaries, effective communication, and risk management when using telephone and e-counselling. The overall aim of the curriculum is to ensure practitioners have the knowledge and competence to practise telephone and e-counselling effectively and ethically.

BACP's *Supplementary Guidance on Working Online* (BACP, 2015) seeks to offer guidance on ethical and policy issues that are specific to counsellors and psychotherapists working with clients online. The use of digital and information technology has many potential benefits but also presents high risks, especially in relation to privacy and confidentiality, and client vulnerability depending on the nature and severity of their mental health condition. The Supplementary Guidance also explains the legal requirements for working in the UK and Europe and how to work online with clients from other countries. Practitioners are encouraged to exercise professional vigilance when dealing with digital technologies to ensure the benefits of working online outweigh the risks (BACP, 2015).

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## Summary

This research overview provides a summary of the evidence available on the use of digital technology in counselling and psychotherapy, both to support face-to-face practice, and when providing online therapeutic sessions. It seeks to address important areas related to the use of technology by counselling professionals.

Gaps in the existing body of knowledge on the topic have been highlighted with the hope that continuing research will help fill the gaps and provide comprehensive, research-based evidence and knowledge on the use of technology in counselling and psychotherapy. It is the professional obligation of counsellors and psychotherapists to keep up to date with relevant research in their field of practice, and to learn ways of using technology appropriately and effectively to support their professional practice.

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## About the author

Dr Nicola Davies (MSc Comm.; PhD; MBPsS; MBACP) has a PhD in Health Psychology. She is also a person-centred counsellor and freelance writer. She has extensive experience in conducting systematic reviews for the Department of Health and other government organisations. She has also been extensively published in both academic journals and off-the-shelf magazines.

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