



Report Supporting at a distance



workshop on
supporting at a distance
mainz, 28/29 september 2017

hosted by



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1. PARTICIPANTS

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2. ROUND OF INTRODUCTIONS

Facing an ever increasing demand on the internet for psychological support advisory organizations have been continually broadening their services to cater to the needs of victims seeking help.

A growing number of victim support organizations now offer their support services online e.g. in the form of email or chat consultations. These online consultations are accessible to many affected individuals who would not have sought help from a victim support organization via traditional channels. However, with many organizations still being in the process of lining out their service or just having started to offer online consultations, online victim support is to be regarded as an emerging field.

This workshop has therefore been organized to exchange views, knowledge and networks about the implementation and use of 'supporting at a distance' with a focus on online guidance throughout various organizations in Europe. Many bodies are yet more inclined to continue focusing on traditional means of communications and they are encountering more specific challenges in regard to an increasing request of services offered online. These challenges may materialize as technical requirements or accessibility prerequisites as well as in difficulties establishing mail-, chat-, messenger- or video support. Hence, communication across cultural and national borders is essential in improving services of each of the single victim support organizations.

To encourage and broaden this interchange, *Victim Support Europe* and *WEISSER RING Germany* invited the co-organizations of Victim Support Europe to attend a workshop. Subsequently representatives of ten different European organizations assembled in September 2017 in Mainz, Germany. All but one organization already had some experience with online victim support, for they offered some form of services prior to this meeting. The age of those well-established services ranged one year of online support up to a lifespan of twelve years offering support via email, chat, Facebook, purpose built online consultation platform, Skype and YouTube.

The following information should strengthen the ability to deliver high quality services whilst forming a network of individuals focused on this field.

3. RESULTS

3.1 PART ONE, WORKGROUP A

TECHNICAL IMPLEMENTATION AND DOCUMENTATION

FABIAN LINDNER, WEISSER RING

This workgroup had a strong focus on spotlighting the established service of the host's organization – WEISSER RING Germany. During the workshop a manifold of questions arose about the structural working of their implementation. The summary below offers some answers to the most salient questions.

TECHNICAL AND STRUCTURAL BASICS

As a starting point the technical execution of WEISSER RING's online support implementation was addressed. The host's organization uses a dedicated software platform which currently offers mail counselling. Yet, since the software platform other modes of communication, chat victim support can be included easily. The decision to offer only mail support for the time being is owed foremost to the fact that the service was created a little over a year ago. Furthermore, according to the host's organization, email support is perfectly suited to accommodate the counsellors, which participate on an honorary basis. The accepted time frame to answer emails both helps the counsellors provide appropriate answers and supports the structural organization of labor.

The software platform works similarly to an email platform. Both counselors and victims connect to the platform via an encrypted SSL connection (https). The software itself is located on an encrypted server providing a high level of security. The physical location of the server is off side in a safe locked room with only a few software engineers being granted access. Hence, precautions have been taken to prevent any form of data theft, providing all the necessary security for sensitive victim data.

Apart from any initial costs for the customized software there are monthly costs for maintaining and securing the server and the platform. Various companies offer their services with differing cost-plans, depending on how specific and tailored the requirements and features are.

An alternative to customized off-the-shelf software utilized at this organization is to have dedicated software created from scratch. Obviously, this offers a possibility to obtain a product exactly tailored to the needs of the organization. However, when establishing an online consultation it might often be difficult to foresee in detail every single requirement and feature

and in this case a cooperation with a company proving expertise in the field of online consulting can prove advantageous. Yet, the initial start-up costs for a tailor-made software are without a doubt much higher and subsequent maintenance will most probably be more expensive.

Clients access the service via the official website. From there, the enquirers are forwarded to a subdomain hosted on the aforementioned encrypted server commencing the SSL encrypted communication. No personal information has to be submitted unless wanted otherwise other than a nickname and a password. Neither does the server track IP addresses nor any other data from the client's connection. Even cookies will be deleted automatically upon closing the browser. After clients leave their message they are offered the option to enter their email addresses allowing the platform to notify them once one of the counsellors left a reply.

DOCUMENTATION

A second focus was laid upon documentation of the counselling process. Despite anonymity being the main focus, the nature of victim support sometimes calls for personal information to be shared. While there will be no pressure to share personal data executed, information such as location can under some circumstances be helpful in relaying customers to local branches or to offer interpersonal support.

Although clients have the prerogative to remain fully anonymous, counselors have to document every new client. They have to record all information regarding the offence that can be deducted from the client's initial email. Moreover, the counsellors are responsible to register the timespan they spent dealing with every single case and categorize it as either "communication", "documentation" and "research".

All exchanges between a client and a counselor are stored until a client chooses to delete their account or half a year past the client's last login. Counselors cannot close accounts manually. There is no permanent documentation of the exact conversation.

Any further data which might be picked up by the counsellor during the conversation will be documented as well. This includes, for example, the sex and age of the victims. But also which advice has been given in the course of the consultation, that is whether or not cues have been made to contact the local police, a lawyer or seek professional psychological treatment. All this documentation will be used for statistical analysis and will be used within quality control processes.

Some particular processes are handled differently. For example any complaints are flagged within the documentation and are then forwarded to

the head office, since they are not part of the consultation and therefore the voluntary advisors are not to be the persons of contact.

3.2 PART ONE, WORKGROUP B

QUALITY ASSURANCE AND EVALUATION

KARL GRECH, VICTIM SUPPORT MALTA

Online counselling creates a new modality for individuals looking for a different service, this acts as an inclusive platform which deviates from the one size fits all approach. This kind of service provides users with more possibilities than face to face services does. Online counselling gives the opportunity to interact with professionals which would otherwise not be an option as in situations where commuting is an issue, disability or a fast paced lifestyle.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

The host asked the group: “Why do we gather empirical data?” Among the answers were: tweaking of service, to check what people want, to collect demographics, for funding and sustainability, to find out mistakes and, finally, to know the status of the victim. Evaluation, therefore, implies that you want to know something. One aspect which was brought up by the presenter was that besides all of this, it is necessary to evaluate in order to provide the best possible service for our clients.

There are different options to evaluate such as pre & post questionnaires, assessing transcripts, comparative data and follow up calls. Designing questionnaires can be time consuming and tedious. In consequence, a participant in the audience had encountered issues with using questionnaires within their organization and to amend this issue, they started using feedback questions that pop up right after the interaction. As a result they experienced however that some users are inclined not to answer these pop up questionnaires. The conclusion was that the questionnaire should be short and questions need to be well thought of and ideally they should exhibit good reliability or validity scores. Questionnaires and/or focus groups with constant supervision had been shown to improve quality of the service and provide further knowledge about advantages and disadvantages of the service.

EVALUATION

So how could we get feedback besides from questionnaires? One person in the audience stated that sometimes smiley faces or scaling are fine if one requires simply a general idea of the service. It's also important to have a look at one own personal evaluation and to exchange with one's colleagues as a way of internally evaluating your service. Client's feedback and internal evaluation works well in conjunction with each other. In addition one should keep an eye on the social media because people communicate there a lot. Transcripts of emails and chats have been used for evaluation too, however this should be carried out by an external source.

During the process of designing a concept of evaluation constant assessment is of utmost importance. The concept itself should be analyzed externally to reduce bias and to provide with a reliable consideration of both the pros and the cons. Once the design has finished an overall analysis will be necessary followed by a steady evaluation once the design has been implemented.

Evaluation is an important aspect for the sustainability of the service. However it should never cross any ethical boundaries. That is it should never use client data for other reasons than self-evaluation. Yet, the limitations of any evaluation process should be kept in mind and a triangulation approach in which both qualitative and quantitative methods are utilized in order to get a better picture of your service should be utilized. Thoughtful consideration of the issue empathy vs. data needs to be in place and client data should always be respected and treated accordingly.

Each of these methodologies has its benefits and disadvantages. Each company of organization should, therefore, be aware of their expectations and choose consequently a suitable method for their quality assurance and evaluation process. In the end, there is more than one way to skin a cat and the process of evaluation has to be tailored to the individual needs of each organization.

Should the process of evaluation not yield viable results, one should keep in mind that all clients have been victim of a crime and might not be willing to opt in. This is something that can hardly be avoided.

Yet one way to circumvent this might be to shift the process to the counsellors. They established during their work a personal connection with their clients are might therefore be able to drive more insightful results. This, however, has to be conducted with care and within the right moment to avert any further pressure from clients. Inquiring years or month after the counselling process, for example, can lead to what might be called a secondary victimization. Hence caution and empathy need to be a major consideration while implementing such a process.

In an aftermath some of the workshops participants, who have not yet rolled out an online counselling service, shared their experience with a common method to evaluate their helpline services. Executing follow up calls, to consenting clients helps to broaden the insight of their evaluation.

3.3 PART TWO, WORKGROUP C

ACCESSIBILITY, COSTS FOR THE USER, ANONYMITY

FABIAN LINDNER, WEISSER RING

ACCESSIBILITY

This workgroup talked about more direct implications of using online support. One of the main concerns was accessibility. In the organization of the workgroup's host online support along with its encrypted server can be accessed straight through the main page of the organization's website. The helpline via phone and list of local branches are available there too and the website is designed to adjust itself to smartphone and tablet screens.

Whereas the platform is available all year, all responses will be made by a counsler within 72 hours. One a counselor has been assigned to one the clients, the counsellor will handle all communication with this client – identified anonymously by their nickname.

Other organizations used similar techniques, with time frames differing. Some offer chat support for a few hours daily, during the night or even occasionally through social media chat features.

Establishing these services came with a couple of challenges. Communication between local branches and head offices can prove quite difficult, so can the transfer from online to direct support.

New ideas are the implementation of video conferences as webcams are widely available and even VR technology has recently been seeing usage in treating patients of phobias and PTSD.

COSTS FOR THE USER

Yet another major issue can turn out to be is funding. The software, running a server, and continued maintenance can add up and organizations might face difficulties to break even. While fundraising though advertising the organization, promoting their services and improving this process might help

to boost government funding and private donations, but it also can also be challenging – especially within different areas and countries.

Funding such services is connected directly to questions about the costs any client has to bear. While most participating organizations offered free support, whether face to face or online, clients might still face legal fees, costs for psychological treatment or more general needs. Yet most organizations admitted that their financial limitations restrict their ability to help in such cases. Key to these issues, to making sure clients receive proper support, are reported to be close partnerships with official agencies and other charitable organizations – of course always within the boundaries of organizational structure.

A few organizations reported to be dealing with cases that require large amounts of legal and clerical work, as well as, time in general – while other organizations appended that their major issues are hesitant government funding.

ANONYMITY

Lastly, anonymity within web counselling was discussed. It has already been mentioned that anonymity is salient when dealing with crime victims due to the personal and legal implications this poses. Each organization reported to handle this differently according to their internal structure. Yet, in general, if extensive web based support is available clients have the option to stay anonymous.

Within face to face counselling complete anonymity was regarded as nearly impossible. Even omitting using real names would still lead to some form of identifiability. Yet some instances might require bypassing anonymity. Cases with require financial support of the organizations will often need some form of proof of income to prevent single clients from abusing the system.

Counselors will stay somewhat anonymous too, by changing their last names or using fictional names, which provides them a certain safety should particularly problematic clients turn out to be threatening.

3.4 PART TWO, WORKGROUP D

SOCIAL MEDIA

**MARIA YANSHINA, VICTIM SUPPORT FOUNDATION and SÓNIA REIS,
APAV**

The usage of social media varies significantly throughout the represented countries. Some of the participating organizations have been using these platforms for many years, some of them don't offer this service yet while others want to improve their online offers.

ACTUALITY

Nowadays many people use social media. It's becoming a bigger part in almost everyone's life. Therefore, for all participants there is no way around getting used to it. It offers a possibility to target youngsters and other people these organizations are usually having a hard time to approach with their services and allows for a smooth process of evaluation. But, to offer counselling via social media definitely needs professionals and constant training. One organization has a one person dedicated to manage social media activity which has proven to be particularly helpful in gathering information and statistics. All in all it can be said that using social media is beneficial in giving clients an opportunity to come in touch, and it can be also utilized as a medium of information and campaigns about the organization.

MANNER

Online counselling is already offered by some organizations on the following platforms: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, Skype and common e-mail and chat service linked to the website. Some participants mentioned that for their website is still the main platform. Salient items need to be visible on the front page.

Facebook is employed by many represented companies already. One person remarked that Facebook has been their main entry. Yet a discussion among the participants arose about the risks inherent in the usage of Facebook as a counselling platform. For example exposure of sensitive information within Facebook was commented. Nonetheless, it was agreed upon that Facebook would be a good outlet to spread information about the organization.

YouTube can be chosen to show videos of different types e.g. interviews of lawyer, TV interviews or video lectures. One organization collects and shared external videos but also produces their own videos. There are also

competitions for persons who post a video. In case of collecting external videos, they preview them and if they are fine, they publish them.

Some participants reported to use Skype. In one country this service is starting right now. So far, not many Skype calls have been recorded, but it is seen as an additional channel of contact and a possible outlet to get in contact with people in a distant location – even rendering national borders meaningless. As an approach to an integrated service a combination of face-to-face counselling and a Skype service could be thought of.

Yet, some participants had their doubts about the personal safety of a Skype counsellor, after all one could take pictures of them and spread through the internet. Therefore a solution is to be found.

PROS & CONS

Again there are benefits and disadvantages to be seen in the use of social media as a counselling platform. Social media allows the victim of a crime to connect and to ask for support swiftly and hassle free. An answer can be provided in a timely manner and any service provider can collect and spread news and messages with a wider range.

One of the disadvantages for the client is a possible loss of privacy should they not use an unpersonalized user account. Of course, as common in written language, a immanent risk of misrepresentation is to be kept in mind. In other occasions they could become victims of cyberbullying. The cons for the service provider are: it's time consuming, creating a platform of cyberbullying, irrelevant information and spam also as risk of being misrepresented.

USE

One participant was free to share their experience with social media counselling. In their opinion social media is a good medium to scrutinize their clients' status, to resolve if their client had been the victim of a crime indeed. In the most cases, victims first contact is via messenger and the employees subsequently can advise to call the helpline or come by an office – depending on the particular case. So to some extent intermodality of media is indeed already common. They also offer a monthly newsletter and an information app. The news letter is published on their website and also sent to partners, to make sure that everyone has access to this newsletter.

As the use of social media is increasing, one country has created a platform that is called "clientscape". It's a platform only visible to the staff which receives and gathers all information and communication on all social media channels that are offered. The staff can answer through this platform. It's even possible to look up if in the past there had been a conversation with the same client. It's all filed and registered. The represented organizations

usually don't openly advertise response time. Most of them try to answer as soon as possible, usually on the same day.

A big issue was how to deal with data protection. Some participants see a big problem there. Therefore they try to lead the victims to other options. That's definitely a point to discuss in future.

3.5 PART THREE, WORKGROUP E

SELECTION AND TRAINING OF ADVISORS

MAATU ARKIO, RIKOSUHRIPÄIVYSTYS

This presentation was based on chat service offered by one of the organizations. The host informed about a lot of feedback from young people in questionnaire and also group discussions (not in use anymore). Henceforth the platform they use was explained in detail. While some participants think chat work would be something socially isolating, the volunteer workers actually get in contact with quite many people (clients, employees and other volunteers).

SELECTION

In Finland volunteers and staff members are encouraged to do their work via chat. Basically all volunteers are welcome and right before they set off, they receive a basic training. For it is of importance that the counsellors have basic IT skills. It has to be made clear that they should obtain some form of training here as well. Otherwise it can become a barrier. Nevertheless, creating the software one uses in a user friendly way is a plus though all volunteers are supported and guided by staff members via skype. Should an urgent question arise there is always the option to call some other staff member. This helps with one important ideal, to make all volunteers be part of a team.

TRAINING

In regards to the training of their volunteers one participating organization elaborated on their strategy's salient points. One need to let their volunteer staff know that there is no need to know everything. They will only need to hand out information they are absolutely certain of. It is fine to look up things, ask a team member or even to admit not to know something. The volunteers can, of course, also relay to a counselling agency. Of course all volunteer counsellors are provided with all important contacts and

information within their basic training to spare them from looking up all minute details. Yet, they are encouraged to share their knowledge with each other. In some cases preparing a short cheat-sheet has proved helpful in daily operations. They also give information about guidelines, required laws, instructions for emergencies and a handbook. Those guideline – or rather the ready made answers – are most helpful in case for critical situations like mass shoot or suicide. It's important to teach the volunteers step by step so that they know what to do in each case and speed up the process. Beside the theoretical part, all volunteers also receive a more practical training. One organization explicitly made the experience that a practical training is asked for more and more.

The volunteers can work from home. They only have to make sure that nobody else will hear (in case of Skype) and they should have enough space on their workplace to let things open there. An access to skype is also obligatory.

One organization organizes a training once a year. On this occasion they focus on talking about interaction. The aim is to teach the volunteers to give words more space in chatting (e.g. ok = that's right, I see what you want to say). That's their understanding of teaching the volunteers the ability to empathy. Empathy comes from giving full sentences in conversation. One participant gave an example in form of a hamburger. That means: soft start of the conversation (top part of sandwich), the real hard part (meat), and end with the soft (bottom part of sandwich). The last part could be ended like: "It was right that you asked". The main thing is to remain to interact like on helpline or in face-to-face contact.

At the end of the workgroup there was a discussion about giving report to the police station or court in case of sexual abuse of a minor. Most participants agreed that volunteers shouldn't do that, only staff members. Topics like sexual violence are really common to talk about in the chat services. Another topic that is coming up is crime in the internet.

3.6 PART THREE, WORKGROUP F

BLENDED COUNSELLING

DANIELLA PROVOST, STEUNPUNT ALGEMEEN WELZIJNSWERK

A representative from the *Belgian Center for Adolescence* held this presentation about Blended Counseling. Blended Counseling is the general concept of offering clients a variety of communication and support tools, whether it is

video, chat, face to face or financial support. The organization has been doing online support since 1999, starting with email communication. After a few years the usage of MSN as a chat program for counselling was established for young kids were slowly adapting new means of interacting with each other online. Nowadays adults are mainly online too.

While online support is quite common in Europe now, it is often solely used to redirect to local branches or initiate face to face contact and is rarely used for actual online support.

In many cases the professional counselling organizations tend to have misguided ideas about online support, as they are inclined to believe in the inferiority of online support. After all, from their point of view, face to face counselling trumps a distant online communication. However, apart from other benefits, online support helps to target groups of people formerly excluded by traditional means of counselling. Adolescents, for example, claimed that the presence of an online service enabled them to freely talk about their issues, which they would have not dared in a face to face counselling session or even with a psychotherapist. Blended counselling is then to be understood as tailored care, as a solution that is adjusted right according to the personal needs and wishes of each client.

In the past blended counselling was helpful in getting young adults to talk about taboo topic they would otherwise be too ashamed to talk about, or the usage of digital maps to help visualize the journey of South African refugees or in the discussion of any sexually related topic. Furthermore, it has proven helpful in reaching distant client, to distant to obtain face to face counselling or even clients too sick to travel.

Advantages of blended counseling can be, on a practical level: granting a safe haven by letting clients write from the comfort of their own home or not forcing shy or ashamed clients to direct eye contact. Furthermore, travel expenses or time travelling can be saved and can in consequence be directed to supporting a client more efficiently.

There have been incidents of using chats with clients while in the same bureau, showcasing how supportive certain tools can be if used appropriately. Yet, it can work the other way around as well. Clients that prefer chat support on a regular basis might feel the need to shorten the distance between client and counselor by adding regular phone calls or doing similar things. Hence, not only creating distance between counsellor and client can prove to be helpful. Creating this distance can also aid in establishing a closer relationship between counsellor and client.

Forcing blended counseling, overcomplicating things or using the wrong tools out of personal preference are dangers that counselors, among others, need to be cautious about.

Social media for instance might be better used as a one-way tool of communication, providing general information and updates rather than client communication. To establish a direct client communications a system should be established separately.

One thinkable way of handling high costs to establishing these systems is sharing them with other organizations and splitting the costs.

Some participating organizations expressed their concerns that for instance face to face interaction still is of the utmost importance and that some projects just can't be funded or maintained in a good quality and prevail. It was also highly advised to work with as many counselors as possible when offering blended solution, as an individual cannot be expected to learn perfect usage of every single one of the many tools incorporated. Instead, assembling a team of professionals in various fields is the better option.

Another issue introduced was to remain open, for organizations might unwillingly become clogged with services which might start hurting the overall quality of the services. Young people are using the internet very differently than many adults. Hence, focusing on these new ways is important.

As mentioned before, having highly trained staff, whether it be paid or volunteering, is a must when it comes to counseling. Especially in online settings, high pressure situations might come up and untrained staff could panic and possibly leave the situation damaged. One thinkable instance would be a suicidal person and the lack of options a counselor realistically has in situations like that. The pace of a chat also requires counselors to have information memorized and accessible at all times.

By now, Virtual Reality (VR) has been implemented in more professional settings. Patients of phobias can confront them thanks to VR-goggles and under supervision of therapists and even PTSD patients can be treated using similar methods. Organizations dealing with victims should try to keep up with the technological advancements and the advantages they might have.

One point has been made clear by several organizations, and that is to not underestimate the challenge of online support. Initially, a lot of people believed online support to be a rather easy task counselors can handle additionally to their usual work. Experience shows, this could not be further from the truth, as shown by the many issues online based support has been shown to have.

4. Imprint

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