Kate and DeeAnna in their virtual office

Therapeutic innovations

Rick Hughes interviews **Kate Anthony** and **DeeAnna Merz Nagel** of the Online Therapy Institute to discover the relevance of their resources to the workplace

Kate Anthony DPsych, FBACP, MSc, and **DeeAnna Merz Nagel** LPC, DCC, are leading experts on the use of technology in therapy. They are co-editors and co-authors of *Therapy Online* and *The Use of Technology in Mental Health*, as well as numerous articles, journals and chapters. They are past-presidents of the International Society for Mental Health Online, and co-founders of the Online Therapy Institute. www.onlinetherapyinstitute.com www.kateanthony.net www.deeannamerznagel.com

Tell us a little about what your organisation does

We launched the Online Therapy Institute (OTI) in 2008 to provide a one-stop shop for professionals to find out about the potential use of technology in professional therapeutic services. While professional organisations already existed, we felt there was a gap we could fill in providing new trainings, resources, publications and networking within one educational organisation. Our member resources are many, but the most relevant to BACP Workplace are ethical frameworks for the use of technology in mental health and career guidance; ethical verification and promotion of online services; consultancy and training; and a free bi-monthly online magazine, which launched in September 2010.

How did the two of you meet to form OTI?

DeeAnna and I are both former presidents of the International Society for Mental Health Online, with DeeAnna based in New Jersey USA, and me in Scotland. We already had a strong online relationship, and when we met face-to-face at a conference in the US, that just became stronger, both in terms of a personal friendship and a professional ethos. Working together was a natural progression of that. Although our respective offices are physically 3,500 miles apart, we are virtually in touch all day via a chat (online instant messaging) facility, and via email. I try to get to New Jersey a couple of times a year, but that is more of a luxury, in that it entails finding a couple of weeks to work on a particularly large project (like our textbooks), rather than a necessity.

Do you think that counsellors in the workplace could adopt this way of working?

There are two answers to this. Firstly, counsellors in any workplace should consider whether it would be appropriate and desirable to offer an online service to clients. We offer a QuickStart Guide to give more information on what should be considered before planning any online service, whether for email, chat, Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) systems such as Skype, or videocounselling. Although unfamiliar territory for many, we have successfully trained practitioners for over 10 years and work hard to normalise technology in therapy for counsellors in any workplace. The benefits to clients, when done ethically and responsibly, outweigh the negatives, and it can be very rewarding work.

Secondly, the virtual water cooler should not be underestimated. Working online can sometimes be a lonely place, especially when you are working outside of an office environment. Encrypted secure communication channels can be a valuable resource in sharing information and getting peer support, such as via forums or bulletin boards. DeeAnna and I have offices in Second Life, the virtual world, and often conduct interviews and consultancy, which provides a rich dynamic workspace. We also attend online conferences to meet colleagues and present to practitioners worldwide (as well as more

drive, or in a secure and encrypted cloud source. There are other simple measures that therapists can take in addition to encryption, such as password protecting their computer and making sure virus protection programs are up to date.

Do you not miss or lose the subtle nuances gained by face-to-face work?

There are benefits and losses to not having a physical presence to gain nuances in the work. It is certainly a different way of working, and many practitioners find it harder work, mostly due to the anxiety that having no physical clues introduces. Conversely, not having those clues often makes for a more direct approach to the communication – being more direct in clarifying what is going on for the client, which in itself makes for a more expedient way of working. The disinhibition effect, where the perceived distance between the parties allows each to be more open than one would in a face-to-face situation, often means that core issues are reached more quickly, and at a greater depth than struggling to vocalise feelings and emotions. Recent studies (eg Thomas and Goss[1]) are showing that 'there appear to be therapeutic benefits that are unique to online counselling and benefits that are superior to face-to-face therapy, such as the degree of intimacy fostered by the online environment'.

in light of technology

traditionally convened conferences around the world). We also have a social network for our 800-plus members, where people network and blog about what they are up to professionally – this is linked via an RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feed throughout the internet in spaces such as GoogleSearch, Facebook and Twitter. It is astonishing how linked to the world at large you can feel, even if working alone physically.

How do you address concerns about online security and confidentiality?

We have created an ethical framework for practitioners, which states that all therapeutic communication between therapist and client, as well as between therapists in consultation, should be encrypted. Encryption ensures that the highest measures are being taken to ensure client confidentiality. Therapists are also instructed to store information in a secure and encrypted manner on a separate server, in an encrypted file on the hard

Does online work not create a culture of greater insularity and social detachment?

I think this approach to concerns about online work is less relevant in today's society in light of the whole Web 2.0 experience. Web 2.0 embraces social networking and online communication methods (such as blogs or microblogging sites such as Twitter).

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> # 'If you define the online and offline worlds as being blended, then online work enhances communication with others'

It was certainly relevant to a society when the internet and mobile phones were alien, but the future professionals and clients have grown up in a world where such technologically mediated communication is second nature. If your definition of society is purely based on face-to-face and landline communications, then I understand the anxiety it produces, but if you define the online and offline worlds as being blended (as many people do these days), then online work enhances communication with others, rather than it meaning a detachment or insularity.

You mentioned a new magazine – how did that come about?

Our original thoughts were around a Journal of Online Therapy, but we felt that this would be an expensive option for practitioners and organisations. On Kate's last trip to the US, we decided that what was needed was a free online magazine, that could have worldwide accessibility via the internet, for information, articles, resources and recruitment. We created TILT – *Therapeutic Innovations in Light of Technology*, a free bi-monthly glossy magazine, that we are very proud of. We have regular columnists writing about research, law, marketing, new services, online therapy, online supervision, online coaching, the use of media such as film in therapy, and even a resident cartoonist – a client who has their own take on being in therapy. That it was a free resource was important to us, as that meant we could reach more people, from the mildly curious to the person seeking information.

Once we had decided that this was something that we wanted to take forward, we recruited our columnists, offered advertising slots, invited articles and it started coming together quickly. The inaugural issue has articles on healing the inner child through virtual reality, the use of text in online counselling and reaching the iGeneration for therapeutic services. The second issue includes online mindfulness-based therapy and a review of the award-winning documentary Life 2.0, which is about the often misunderstood worlds of virtual environments such as Second Life. We feature websites that have been through our verification process and books on the subject of technology and therapy. From conception to publication, the entire process took us a little under two months, and we are working on our third edition, which will include an article on how to navigate conflict in email. There is something in there for everyone, from the purely face-to-face therapist to the practitioner fully immersed in cyberspace.

What do you have lined up for the future?

Firstly, we want to expand our trainings. We currently have introductory modules on existing in cyberspace, online relationships, online therapeutic relationships, ethical issues, working via email and chat, and online supervision. These were designed to train in an up-to-date innovative multimedia way, rather than like anything that was already available online. As well as introducing more short (five-hour) modules on further uses of technology, we will be launching a larger experiential facilitated course on several levels, from the use of text as is currently widely practised through to offering services in virtual worlds.

We also have two more books in process, on online supervision and a guide for clients in choosing an online therapist, as well as rolling out the magazine every two months of course. Our internationally applicable *Ethical Frameworks for the Use of Technology* are expanding to include crisis intervention, social networking and online coaching, as well as the ones already mentioned.

Is there anything else you feel would benefit BACP Workplace members?

We are aware that BACP Workplace is already developing the website in response to the recent members' survey, and encourage the division to consider educating members more about what online work could look like within their services, particularly for EAP work, which is where a lot of our interest lies in conducting short-term focused therapy. With the rise of online communication affecting relationships for therapists and clients, training and education is becoming essential. We encourage BACP Workplace members to take advantage of our resources and look forward to the development of this sector of the profession in embracing technology. ■

Reference
1 Thomas H, Goss S. The pros and cons of counselling in cyberspace: a study of online practitioners' perceptions. Therapeutic Innovations in Light of Technology. 2011; 1(3):12-15.

Further information
The free TILT magazine is available at www.onlinetherapymagazine.com or via www.onlinetherapyinstitute.com or www.onlinetherapysocialnetwork.com

The Online Therapy Institute's ethical frameworks are at www.onlinetherapyinstitute.com/ethical-framework/