Factors Related to Success of Helping Highly Distressed Individuals through Emotional Support Online Chat

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Online Therapy and Support

- Started in mid 1990s
- Email and later IM and chat
- Individual and group interventions
- Outcome research usually positive
- Process research lacking

Characteristics of Online Support

- ➢ Possible anonymity and unidentifiability
- ➢ Invisibility
  - Lack of nonverbal communication cues
  - Lack of physical-related information
  - Lack of eye-contact
- ➢ Text-based communication
  - Writing & reading as therapeutic factors
  - Sense of aloneness

Research Questions

➢ Are there identifiable session process factors in text-based therapeutic communication that are related to session success?

➢ Are there textual parameters that are related to session success?

SAHAR: Support & Listening on the Net

- Exclusively online support
- Located in Israel; service in Hebrew
- Highly distressed and suicidal people
- Most frequent difficulties:
  - Violence and sexual abuse
  - Stress and anxiety
  - Disappointed love and other emotional difficulties
  - Failure, layoff from work, economic problems
  - Depression and psychopathologies
- Individual support mainly through IM and chat
- Support groups in 4 forums
- Trained nonprofessional helpers on shifts
- 60% of referrals are adolescents

Study 1: Correlates with Client's Perceived Support

➢ Compared between 2 groups of clients:

• Those who explicitly and deliberately indicated they were helped and/or felt relief by the conversation (n=40)

• Those who did not mention anything about the value of the session for them (n=40)

➢ 4 different helpers

➢ All sessions lasted at least 45 minutes

Study 1: Measures

➤ Four trained judges blindly rated the 80 sessions on four 7-point scales (Stiles') for

- Depth (vs. shallowness)

- Smoothness (vs. bumpiness)

- Positivity (vs. hopelessness)

- Arousal (vs. indifference)

➤ The number of positive and negative emotional words used by client

➤ Length of helper's and client's text

Study 1: Results of Session Ratings

Factor		Group		
		Successful (n=40)	Unsuccessful (n=40)	t
Depth	M	5.53	4.94	3.21**
	SD	0.59	1.00	
Smoothness	M	5.64	4.83	3.84**
	SD	0.62	1.20	
Positivity	M	4.98	4.29	3.27**
	SD	0.91	0.97	
Arousal	M	5.21	4.83	2.63**
	SD	0.59	0.68	

**p < .01

Study 1: Results of Textual Measures

Variable		Group Successful (n=40)	Unsuccessful (n=40)	*t*
Negative Emotional Words	M	5.10	4.05	1.26
	SD	3.90	3.70	
Positive Emotional Words	M	1.83	1.80	1.27
	SD	1.72	1.40	
Total Emotional Words	M	6.93	5.85	1.67*
	SD	4.83	4.25	
Text Client	M	635.33	656.23	0.63
	SD	325.74	354.62	
Text Helper	M	365.03	387.55	.51
	SD	182.61	209.58	
Total Text	M	1000.35	1043.78	1.03
	SD	426.30	507.57	
Client/Helper Text	M	2.09	1.92	0.57
	SD	1.37	1.16	

*p < .05

Study 2: Correlates With Helper's Rating of Success

➢ Asked helpers to rate on 1-9 scale the degree of contribution of session to client's condition, following end of session

➢ 60 (other) clients, sessions by 6 (other) helpers

➢ Same factors as in Study 1 were examined
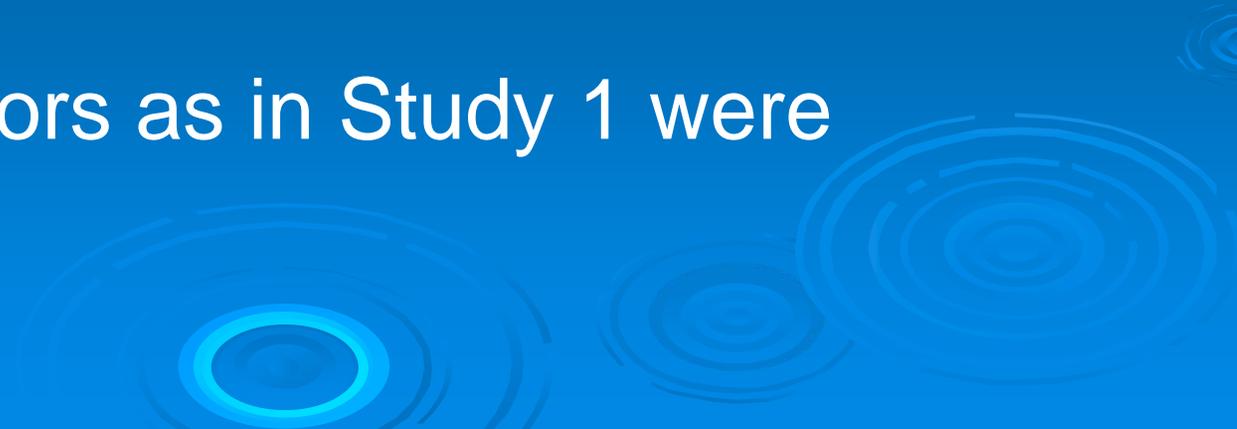
Study 2:
Simple Correlations and Regression

Factor	Correlation	Beta
Depth	.40**	.28*
Smoothness	.33**	.24
Positivity	.45**	.46*
Arousal	.29**	.71
R	.54**	

*p < .05   **p < .01

Study 2:
Correlations of Textual Measures & Ratings

Factor	Correlation
Negative emotional words	.07
Positive emotional words	.04
Total emotional words	.08
Text length – client	.42**
Text length – helper	.29**
Total text length	.42**
Client/helper text	.13

**p < .01

General Conclusions

➤ Usefulness of an online support chat can be predicted by process factors of a session

➤ In using different criteria for success of chat support conversation, in different samples, the factors of session depth, smoothness, positivity, and arousal were found to consistently correlate with session impact. **Depth** and **positivity** seem to be of higher value

➤ Length of session in terms of quantity of words used by helper and by client seem to be important for helpers' perceived usefulness of chat, but not so for clients

Thank you for listening