Online counseling and therapy for mental health problems: a systematic review of individual synchronous interventions using chat

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CRD summary
This review concluded that evidence for the efficacy of individual synchronous online chat counselling and therapy was not sufficient to draw definitive conclusions and further research was needed. Limitations in the identified studies mean that this conclusion is likely to be reliable.

Authors' objectives
To evaluate the evidence related to the outcomes of individual synchronous online chat counselling and therapy

Searching
Academic Search Complete, CINAHL Plus, Psychology and Behavioural Sciences Collection, PsycARTICLES and PsycINFO databases were searched from 1995 to 2012 for relevant studies in English. Search terms were reported. References of relevant studies and reviews were searched.

Study selection
Randomised controlled trials, quasi-experimental trials and naturalistic comparisons were eligible for inclusion in the review if at least five participants were engaged in one-on-one online instant messaging or chat with a therapist. Studies needed to measure psychological symptoms, interpersonal and social functioning and/or quality of life. Studies that evaluated audio/video chat, web-based programmes and group-based interventions were excluded.

Included studies compared online chat against face-to-face counselling, telephone counselling or waiting list controls. The study populations included adults, children and undergraduate students. Most studies evaluated a single session of online chat; one evaluated a cognitive behavioural therapy-based intervention delivered over multiple sessions. Studies were conducted in Australia, Canada, England, the Netherlands and USA.

Two reviewers independently selected studies for inclusion. Any disagreements were resolved by consensus.

Assessment of study quality
The authors did not state that they assessed study quality.

Data extraction
Basic characteristics of the included studies were presented in the article; the authors did not state how data were extracted.

Methods of synthesis
The studies were briefly discussed in a narrative synthesis

Results of the review
Six studies of synchronous chat interventions met the inclusion criteria. Studies included diverse groups of participants (children, adults, university students) with different presenting problems (such as anxiety, relationship issues, home situations, depression) and measured different outcomes (such as anxiety, well-being, perceived burden, depression, distress, functioning).

All six studies reported a significant positive effect of online chat from baseline: one study reported it was superior to waiting-list control and one reported it was equivalent to face-to-face help. Other individual studies variously reported online chat to be better, worse or equivalent to telephone-delivered care.

Authors' conclusions
This review provided tentative support for the efficacy of individual synchronous online chat counselling and therapy
but the evidence was not sufficient to draw definitive conclusions and further research was needed.

**CRD commentary**
This review was based on a broadly defined research question supported by appropriate inclusion criteria. The authors attempted to identify relevant studies published in English and made efforts to minimise errors and bias during study selection. No attempts were made to identify unpublished studies or studies in other languages so evidence (possibly reporting less favourable outcomes for online chat) may have been missed. The authors noted not only that participants and outcomes in the identified studies were diverse but also there was inconsistency in the observed benefits of online chat interventions relative to comparators such as telephone-delivered interventions. The authors did not formally assess study quality but they noted that several studies did not have adequate controls or did not prevent contamination of the intervention with additional treatments. The diversity, inconsistency and limitations of the retrieved studies precluded meaningful conclusions about the effectiveness of online chat interventions.

Limitations in the identified studies mean that the authors’ conclusion that the evidence was not sufficient to draw definitive conclusions is likely to be reliable.

**Implications of the review for practice and research**
The authors did not state any implications for practice.

**Research:** The authors stated that further research (particularly randomised controlled trials with adequate follow-up) was needed on the effectiveness of online chat interventions in relation to other therapy delivery methods. They added that research should address different types of interventions (such as non-directive supportive counselling, cognitive behavioural therapy) in different presenting problems (such as anxiety, mood disorders). The authors added that future research should focus on children and younger adolescents and that the value of single sessions of online chat was yet to be established.

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