

# *Life Transitions Newsletter*

*October 2007*



*Dear Clients,*

*This month's newsletter focuses on Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) and burgeoning field of computer therapy.*

*We have three spots left for the "Becoming the Woman You Want to Be" teen group. If you or someone you know is interested please call me.*

*Sincerely,*

*Penny Blazej, LCSW, BCD*

## *Is Computer Therapy Beneficial?*

It seems like computers are becoming an integral part of almost every aspect of our lives. It is hard to find any job that does not have the requirement of computer skills. Schools now just assume that their students are computer literate.

And if you think computers are just dominating our professional lives, think

again. The second most successful way of meeting your life partner is now through computer dating (the first remains through family and friends introducing you). Even our entertainment is found on the computer. So why not psychotherapy?

The North Country Times on October 5<sup>th</sup> published an article titled "*Patients turning to computer, not couch, for therapy*". The article cites that in Britian, there is a 6 month wait to get to see a psychiatrist and the vast majority of depressed individual do not get treated. Hence. the government (yes, I did say the government) is recommending the computer program title "Fearfighter" to treat mild depression, anxiety and phobias. The government even pays the fee for this software!

So are computers going to replace therapists? Of course the answer is no. However, there are many programs that can be used to help the therapeutic process and actually decrease the number of sessions needed. For problems that have set treatment protocol, like phobias, software like "Fearfighter" can be of great use.

In addition to these types of software programs, after a therapeutic relationship is established between a therapist and client, telephone and/or e-mail therapy can be beneficial. There are three specific situations where I believe that phone and/or computer therapy can be beneficial.

First, for those who cannot come to the office, phone or computer therapy may be the only way they receive treatment. A case that comes to mind is a 16 year

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old boy who had school phobia along with agoraphobia. His father had died the year before and he just refused to leave the house. After a few home visits during which time a therapeutic alliance was developed we started doing therapy over the phone and via e-mail. After 12 weekly sessions the young man was able to come to my office. And shortly after that he was able to return to school and resume a normal life (I am happy to say that he did graduate from high school and college).

Other examples would be clients who are bed ridden from chronic or terminal illnesses. I remember a client who had advanced MS was bed bound. It took a great deal of energy to get her to a doctor's appointment. We developed a strong therapeutic relationship with some home visits and were then able to do computer therapy thereafter. Without the computer, this person would not have been able to access therapy.

Secondly, those who are shy and unable to open up to a therapist during an office visit, computer therapy can be beneficial. For many, it is easier to open up through writing and in a medium that provides complete privacy.

Lastly, those who are located in rural communities where traveling to a therapist's office involves trips in excess of 100 miles find phone and or computer Therapy the only realized way to access mental health treatment.

There are some concerns of course. First and foremost is the confidentiality issues. If you are pouring your heart out about private matters, you really do not want all of cyber space accessing your writings. There are some pretty good

computer blocks that can be put in place these days, however, the risk still remains that someone can cut through even the toughest security system. Secondly, unlike Britain, our insurance companies do not cover computer therapy. For those who need insurance reimbursement this could be a significant road block.

It is my belief that the new generation, that is very comfortable conversing in cyber space, will demand computer therapy. For one, it is very convenient and does not involve travel time. Secondly, it is a medium that provides easy communication. Lastly, you can go back and read what was communicated and get additional insights or be better prepared for the next sessions.

One main objection that has been cited is lack of visual contact. I am sure that most of you have heard that 80% of communication is done through body language. However, advances in computer cameras, visual can be added to computer communication overcoming this major objection.

Net – computer therapy is happening and I believe it will be growing in the future. It has some outstanding benefits as well as limitations. The key is to determine which medium or mediums are best for you. I have had clients ask for monthly face-to-face sessions and weekly e-mail and/or phone sessions. Like many of our existing therapy tools, computers can be added to enrich therapy IF it is the right tool for you. That is the bottom line.

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## *Is SAD real and how do you treat it?*

We all experience some emotional changes as the seasons change such as sleeping more, eating heavier foods like stews and soups and wanting to stay indoors more. These are normal reactions to our changing environment. People with seasonal affective disorder (SAD) experience a much more serious reaction when summer shifts to fall and on to winter.

SAD is a type of depression that presents itself with feelings of lethargy, fatigue, blues, hopelessness, anxiety, oversleeping, weight gain and lack of motivation. The good news is that there are very successful treatments for people who suffered from this form of depression.

The cause of SAD is not really understood. However, the experts are clear that there are two key risk factors: living in northern locations like Washington or Alaska and family history.

There are three key treatments which are light therapy, medications and/or psychotherapy.

Though there are few good clinical trails on the effectiveness of light therapy, many find it helpful. Essentially the treatment is sitting in front of a light box that mimics outdoor light and causes a biochemical change in your brain that lifts your mood. There are many organizations that sell the proper type of light boxes – many offer a money back guarantee so the risks are minimal to you.

For more sever cases the traditional antidepressants can be helpful. Keep in

mind though that it generally takes several weeks for antidepressants to become affective. Your doctor may want you to stay on them year round because of this. Like other depressive disorders the best treatment is not just medication but also psychotherapy. There is a wide range of studies that agree that it is the combination of medication and therapy that produce best results.

Hence, the answer the to question Is SAD real is Yes and there are good treatments that reduce or eliminate the symptoms.

For more information go to:

<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/seasonal-affective-disorder/DS00195>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seasonal\\_affective\\_disorder](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seasonal_affective_disorder)

## *Your Comments*

Let me know if this newsletter was helpful for you. Just e-mail me at [pblazej@vcweb.org](mailto:pblazej@vcweb.org).