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Dial-A-Shrink

By Lisa Bendall

When Kara Kurylłowicz's mother died suddenly, she realized she needed a boost to shake off her grief. Finding time to stretch out on the proverbial couch and work through what she calls her "black hole of depression"? Less straightforward for the busy Toronto corporate writer.

That's when she dialled a life coach – and joined a growing number of Canadians seeking touchtone treatments. Unlike hotlines, which have long helped those in crisis, phone therapy offers in-depth, sometimes long-term, analysis and counselling for problems ranging from addiction to parenting stress. Last week's issue of BMJ (British Medical Journal) even lauded it as an effective method for patients with obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Of course, some practitioners are skeptical about such an arm's-length approach. Psychoanalyst Jon Mills of Ajax, Ont., rarely does sessions over the phone, reluctant to strip away those essential non-verbal cues. "You simply cannot duplicate the human need for relatedness and genuineness that you get from a live person who is present and emotionally available," he says. Others worry about gauging whether clients are a danger to themselves by phone.

But for many people – too rushed to squeeze in a visit to an analyst's office, yet looking for something more intimate than, say, an on-line chat room hosted by a psychologist – a good old-fashioned phone call may spell the difference between seeking help and shunning it.

Phone therapy offers increased privacy, for one thing. "Nobody wants to have their car seen parked in front of the counsellor's office," says Lucy MacDonald, a counsellor in the Ottawa valley whose entire practice is now by phone.

Interestingly, since she began offering services by phone, she has seen a particular rise in her ratio of male clients. "Some men would never consider going to counselling face to face because they're embarrassed," she says. "Having to look at someone and state what the problem is, it's more than they can handle. Telephone counselling removes that."

Ongoing studies at the University of Calgary show that phone therapy can also help problem gamblers, 90 per cent of whom are typically unwilling to pursue face-to-face ministrations. And as proved in another Canadian study, telephone treatment can bolster those with anxiety disorders like agoraphobia, who may panic at the thought of an office visit.

As for the chronically overscheduled, they don't have to make childcare arrangements or negotiate time off work to make an appointment (for that matter, they can talk to a therapist even in the middle of a business trip). And Toronto psychotherapist Beth Mares, who now connects to almost a third of her clients by phone, adds that phone

therapy is vital for those from remote parts of Canada. "The majority of my phone clients are from underserved communities," she says.

Still, even in major centres, wait times can keep patients from more traditional therapy. That's why Patrick McGrath and his team at IWK Health Centre in Halifax started offering phone counselling for moms struggling with postpartum depression and families dealing with children's behavioural difficulties. Of the long waiting lists for office visits, Mr. McGrath says: "It's amazing that anybody gets through a clinic, given the barriers we put in their way."

Convenience aside, what's most important about phone therapy is that it offers real help. A study conducted in Seattle, Wash., reported that 80 per cent of adults on antidepressants felt "significantly better" after telephone therapy was added to their treatment. A University of California trial last year showed people with multiple sclerosis could be successfully treated for depression by phone. In Canada, studies have shown positive results for a variety of clients, from urbanites trying to quit smoking to stressed-out farmers in need of emotional support.

For Ms. Kurylłowicz's part, dial-up treatment certainly worked wonders. "It made a huge difference in my life," she says. "And there's something about being on the phone that somehow makes it easier to spill your guts."

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