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Sesanate – a pilot project to explore a therapeutic cyber community

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Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this paper is to describe a pilot experiment to establish a web site to enable people undergoing therapy, or having similar problems, to communicate with one another – in effect, the cyber equivalent of a therapeutic community.*

Design/methodology/approach – *Software for a dating web site was adapted as a low cost means of driving the site. It provided for chatrooms, group discussions on topics of mutual interest, notice boards on which questions, responses, articles and poems could be posted and blogs. A volunteer Steering Group worked on the project launch and thereafter manned the site and monitored the project. User feedback indicated that a cyber community could meet the psychological needs of the participants and provide useful support, particularly between visits to a therapist. A surprising outcome was the feeling of community developed by written exchanges, i.e. blogs and forum notice boards. Direct on-line contact generated anxiety in some people, but most found it beneficial.*

Findings – *The paper confirms that such a site would be a useful supplement to other therapeutic services available, and would not be expensive to establish or run, but needed the backing of the NHS or a large medical charity to ensure that the number of users would be at a viable level in the long term.*

Originality/value – *As far as the author is aware the paper reports the first ever study of the potential use of a cyber therapeutic community.*

Keywords *Communication, Interaction, Connection, Cyber community*

Paper type *Case study*

Introduction

This paper describes a pilot project initiated by the writer, based on more than ten years of working both in private practice and also within therapeutic communities and with addicts.

To users, the system that provides counselling and psychotherapy can often appear opaque. Unless clients are in residential settings or intensive therapy, they are likely to see a therapist only once or twice a week, or less. Making positive changes often involves a real struggle. Individuals can feel isolated and alienated from their families or society in general, potentially leading to dependency on the therapist.

The aim of the project was to establish an on-line interactive community that, like a residential therapeutic community, was available to participants on an everyday basis, liberating people from the confines of the client-therapist relationship by providing a means to contact others in a similar position for mutual support. The name of the project, Sesanate (pronounced say-san-art-ay), comes from the Latin meaning “heal thyself”.

This is an extension of the mental health system which challenges existing concepts. However, the existing mental health system is in difficulties and the number of those needing therapy is growing. It was envisaged that the Sesanate project might assist support systems that are already in place.

The author is indebted to all the members of the Steering Group who volunteered their time and skills to help launch the site and man it. She is also indebted to Peter Lister of Artofdata for suggesting the adaptation of the dating software, and to him and his colleagues for providing further consultancy services at minimum cost.

Theoretical background to the role of communities

Many theorists have regarded the sense of self as intrinsically related to the interpersonal world. Cooley (1902) originated the concept of “the looking-glass self”. A person grows out of society’s interpersonal interactions and the perceptions of others, which affect how we see the self. Erikson (1950) considered the importance of recognition by others in affecting self-perception and esteem. Harter (1986) wrote about how significant others matter to children. This continues in adulthood where our self-perception profile can benefit from support, acceptance, communication and belonging. This is significant to human beings and in society we see groups, whether hobbies, work, religion or family, where people get a sense of belonging. Winnicott (1987) saw this belonging as significant in the first years of life. Klein (1987) used the analogy of neural connections to bonding and belonging. On all levels humans seem to have an intrinsic need for validation. One of the most important life tasks is to understand both who we are and how we feel about ourselves.

We have primal needs for contact and relations with others, and we feed off these units of recognition, whether positive or negative, throughout life. Berne (1961) used the term “recognition hunger” to describe this need. Within social intercourse there are overt manifestations called transactions. In adulthood typically these occur in chains where a transactional stimulus from X elicits a transactional response from Y and so on. Interplay is determined partly by our culture and partly by our previous conditioning as an individual. Stewart and Joines (1987) defined a “stroke” as a unit of recognition. Strokes can be positive or negative, verbal or non-verbal and conditional or unconditional. They are our emotional diet that defines our relational patterns, drives and what we seek.

Most humans thrive if they feel they belong with others in cultures, religions or other groups. People need personal space, but they also yearn for interaction in their lives. As we move into adulthood, we link with others outside the family to participate in some form of community life. The defining feature of a community is a common consciousness or interest that the group share as a social unit. An obvious example is university students, all living together and studying for their futures, who often develop bonds that persist for the rest of their lives. Another is a faith community where members share common tenets and beliefs. Since the essential feature of a community is member/member interaction, originally all communities were of necessity associated with a local area. The growth of modern communication methods, and particularly of the internet, has allowed the creation of communities who interact electronically rather than face-to-face. The rapid growth of Facebook and Twitter suggests that they still fulfil the fundamental human need for interaction within a community.

Being real and authentic feels risky. According to Gilbert (2009), systems that govern humans include threat and protection. These regulation processes are defences to protect from the risk of sharing the real self. The self is complex and split into the I-subjective knower and me-as-the-object that is known. Contemporary society applies pressure in complex situations that affect self-composition and identity. The false self is a necessary defensive survival kit. C.G. Jung (1875-1961) described it as the process of “integrating one’s personality”. E. Goffman (1922-1982) studied symbolic interaction and the dramaturgical perspective: “Life is a theatre and secrecy underlies all social interaction”. A symbolic personification of the self can take many forms and modern cyber systems are likely to enhance the multiple personification of self. Understanding the meaning and risk of cyber reality is important for our future knowledge of the interpersonal consequences.

Therapeutic communities

A therapeutic community is a specialised community for those needing or undergoing therapy, which provides the common link. Bandura (1986) postulated that therapeutic communities work by reciprocal determinism, meaning that all community members, whatever position they hold or who they are, impact on each other and are involved in the dynamic processes that happen. The “Community of Communities” web site lists qualities which define a therapeutic community, which include attachment, communication, relationships, participation and interdependence. De Leon (2000) noted that no two therapeutic communities are the same. They have separate

cultures that evolve uniquely, differences in client composition and in resources, philosophy, practice and psychological grounding.

Members share common domestic and social facilities. There are timetabled discussion sessions led by a therapist in which the group discuss and share their problems. Both the formal and informal interactions remove the sense of isolation that the participants may well feel in the outside world and provide a source of recognition “strokes” which they may otherwise lack. For cases of severe addiction members may be residential for weeks or even months, but there is a growing trend towards shorter communal periods, i.e. weekend or even day residence.

Development of a therapeutic cyber community

The growth of “part-time” therapeutic communities raises the issue of how participants are to be supported between sessions. The same question arises with clients in ordinary therapy, who may see their therapist only once per week or less. The project was conceived by the writer whilst working both with private clients and in therapeutic communities (mainly for treating addicts). Questions about the provision of support between therapy sessions were repeatedly raised, not only by individual clients, but also by colleagues concerned with the progress of particular clients. Usually the provision of extra therapy sessions was not possible, for financial or logistical reasons. The creation of a cyber community seemed an obvious and potentially viable solution. The idea was not to provide additional therapist-led support as an equivalent to extra normal therapist-led sessions, but instead to liberate participants from the confines of the client-therapist relationship whilst still providing the mutual support and constraints of being in a community.

A therapeutic cyber community has some important differences from the usual therapeutic community. There are some obvious constraints, but other differences may be advantageous.

The obvious negative factor is that members are not co-resident, and consequently some of the casual social interactions from shared residence are lost. Also the visual cues of facial expressions and body language are not available in group discussions. Conversely, those timid at contributing to a group discussion may be encouraged by the physical anonymity of a cyber group.

A physical discussion group must be limited in size, otherwise it becomes unmanageable, and well below this limit, it becomes necessary to impose “debating rules” to prevent people from talking all at once. Thus participants have to wait to contribute, rather than being able to voice ideas as they think of them. Conversely, a cyber group is unlimited in size, and participants can contribute as ideas occur, because the system software enables and sorts parallel contributors.

Not all interactions in a physical community are beneficial. There is a need to manage tension and monitor psychological games. Berne (1961) noted that games must be distinguished from operations belonging to other spheres of intimacy, because, by definition, a game involves a snare or gimmick through an ulterior transaction. In daily life people encounter these games and learn to deal with them. Within a therapeutic community these games, often motivated by a desire to self-justify or achieve dominance, may make others feel more vulnerable. This is why, in a conventional community, group discussions are overseen by a therapist. A cyber community also needs to be monitored for game playing, which implies the need for oversight.

Chronological account of the project

The first step consisted of informal discussions with colleagues, clients and ex-clients to seek informed opinions that a cyber community was a sensible concept. The positive reaction from these discussions encouraged the writer to proceed with the project in January 2005.

Choice of site name, formation and operation of the Steering Group

The name Sesanate, coming from the Latin “heal thyself”, seemed appropriate for a site with the inherent idea of self-help driven by a peer group of participants rather than by medical professionals.

Clearly the project required other people to be involved, so a Steering Group was recruited to assist. Some were colleagues involved in the original informal discussions, others were recruited during 2008 from the writer's personal and professional contacts. At the end of this process the Steering Group consisted of 12 members. Of these, one was a therapist of national repute whose main function was to act as an internal auditor for site operation and standards. Eight, including the writer, were either trained or trainee counsellors and/or therapists who manned the site. The remaining three were computer literate and contributed to setting up the site and subsequently adding material to it.

The inaugural meeting of the Steering Group took place in March 2009 and throughout the duration of the project meetings took place every two or three months. Members also communicated by e-mail and telephone as and when required.

Software

For any web site project, the provision of suitable software to drive the site is crucial. For a project run by a Government agency, the NHS or a charitable foundation the writing of customised software costing several thousands of pounds would probably have been commissioned. This project was financed by the writer, so this was clearly not possible.

In May 2008 a basic specification and flow chart was drawn up. The writer was recommended to consult Peter Lister of software house Artofdata. He recommended software, written originally for a computerised dating site, which would provide all the facilities needed and other useful capabilities as well. Peter Lister was intrigued by the project and as a result over the next year, Artofdata provided further advice and consultancy, virtually at cost. After this initial contact the domain names sesanate.org, sesanate.com and sesanate.co.uk were registered, and arrangements made to purchase the dating site software and the accompanying licences. The software was installed in the site sesanate.co.uk in February 2009. Over the next few months it was modified by Artofdata, substituting the original content with material supplied by various members of the Steering Group.

As modified, the software provided the following facilities:

1. A homepage with:
 - a large welcoming picture as a caption;
 - an introduction to the project and its objectives;
 - visual signposts to some of the topics in life dynamics offered by the site. For instance, family relationships, work/life balance, nutrition & comforts, books of interest and general emotional literacy; and
 - signposts to the usual necessary terms and conditions, including a code of conduct with warning that those abusing the site could be either temporarily or permanently barred, and a donations policy.
2. Facilities for registration
Participants supplied names and postal and internet addresses. These were system password protected, and accessible only to the site administrator. Each participant registered a personal password which then provided access to the rest of the site and was asked to choose a nickname and a pictorial representation. This could be a personal portrait but most users chose some other form, like a picture of an animal or a landscape. These names and pictures were displayed in a members' section of the homepage, which also provided a visual indication of who was on-line at any time, because the personal picture was highlighted when that person logged-on to the site.
3. A communal live chat room in which all those logged-on could participate
A member could also create a private chat space to talk to a particular other in confidence.
4. The capacity to create member-led groups
A member (or members) could open a group devoted to a particular topic. Others could join by invitation or by their own initiative. The group was then enabled to choose a time to get together on-line to discuss the topic of common interest to them all.

5. Forums

These were effectively notice boards – a general one and one attached to each group, where members could post questions, etc., to be answered later if nobody who was on-line at the time was able to respond. Forum material was preserved permanently, in contrast to chat room exchanges that were not stored.

6. Blogs

7. Space for written articles

These included professional contributions on various topics, accounts of personal experiences and poems inspired by personal issues. This material was accessible to all those who logged-on to the site, whereas the facilities (3)-(6) could be accessed only by registered members via their passwords.

Marketing

The original intention was to allow the web site to grow organically. By the autumn of 2009 it was apparent that growth by this means would not launch the project in the time-scale envisaged. Accordingly, a plan was formulated to market the site to Psychotherapists, Doctors' Surgeries and Local Authority Pathway Organisations.

Psychotherapists were grouped via county and e-mailed a postcard describing the benefits of the web site, including:

1. free on-line support between one-to-one counselling sessions;
2. access out of office hours; and
3. interaction with other members via direct dialogue, forums, groups, articles and blogs.

Counties covered were Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Cambridgeshire, Cheshire, Derbyshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, Kent, Leicestershire, Middlesex, Northamptonshire, Nottinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Warwickshire, together with Brighton and Hove, Bristol and London. In total, 1,474 psychotherapists specialising in all fields were contacted by December 2009. Few replies were received, the main comment being "How am I going to benefit from this?".

In the summer of 2010 Doctors' Surgeries in Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire were telephoned and the benefits of the web site communicated to the Practice Manager as follows:

- Sesanate is a free on-line support service for people who are vulnerable or in need of further support;
- it is overseen by health professionals e.g. counsellors, psychotherapists, etc.;
- users are anonymous and their personal details rigorously password protected;
- it allows people to air their views;
- it can reduce the feelings of isolation and helplessness; and
- it allows users to share deeper issues and concerns in safety.

If interest was expressed, the postcard used for the psychotherapists was mailed, followed by a telephone call and, if further interest was expressed, a second postcard was provided for display so that patients could browse the web site if they chose. Interest in the web site was much greater and Practice Managers were enthusiastic to learn more. They reacted very positively to the web site being free to join. 55 surgeries requested the display postcard providing more information.

Also, in the summer of 2010, Pathway Organisations were telephoned to introduce the web site and the benefits (as for the Doctors' Surgeries). Pathway Organisations are a free service offered by County Councils and provide expertise in, for example: mediation, counselling, life coaching, mental health and trauma. Offices were contacted in Avon, Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Derbyshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, Lancashire, London, Middlesex, Oxfordshire, Shropshire and Yorkshire. Interested managers were sent the postcard (as used for the psychotherapist group) outlining the benefits of the web site. Out of 40 Pathway Organisations contacted, 26 expressed

an interest. Feedback was extremely positive. Again they were surprised that the web site was “free” and liked the idea of the forums and groups which would offer support to individuals who were experiencing similar problems.

Operational period

Since visual stimulation is more welcoming, particularly to those who may be low or anxious, there was a large picture on the home page created by one of the Steering Group that was intended to express the idea of joining and togetherness. Participants were invited to choose both a nickname and a picture to represent themselves. Examples were Kilmaru the Elephant and Yazz the Cat, or an image of a landscape (chosen by Kiki). Clearly both the choices of name and picture were indicative of individual personalities and personal processes. This method also preserved participants’ anonymity. The Steering Group had concluded that having personal pictures on-line might be too radical, leading to negative stereotyping, given contemporary attitudes to those talking openly about emotions.

In June 2009 the site became accessible to search engines (such as Google) and thus fully operational. It was hoped that membership of the site would grow sufficiently rapidly for it to be active at most times of the day, but in spite of efforts to market the site, membership grew only slowly, starting from the original 12 of the Steering Committee and reaching a total of 85 by the end of the project. Thus there were long periods during the daytime when nobody was active on the site. Since this was damaging to progress, a notice was posted on the homepage listing those times when a member of the Steering Committee would be manning the site. The site worked better but for a restricted number of hours, but sometimes this arrangement was frustrating for the duty members of the Steering Group when nobody came on-line during their shift.

The reduced level of manning created a greater potential opportunity for those who only wished to play psychological games, but this did not prove to be a problem. Only two potentially unsafe and negative situations arose. One person from another site joined and then became potentially possessive and intrusive with the object of discovering the identities of other users. Another person, associated with a commercial site offering counselling for a fee, joined with the obvious objective of luring members from Sesanate to become fee-paying clients of their own operation. Some members found this disturbing and confusing.

After more than a year of operation, the number of users had still not grown to a level where the site could be self-sustaining. Members of the Steering Group increased their efforts in manning, etc., to try to overcome the problem, but eventually, the demands on the time of Steering Group volunteers became unsustainable and in January 2011, with great reluctance the writer decided to terminate the project.

User feedback

This section attempts to measure the success of the project by quoting feedback from site users. Mostly the comments were posted as blogs or on forum notice boards, but some were responses to questions from the Steering Group member manning the site at the time. All participants were aware that any material posted could be seen by any other member and oral consent was obtained to quote the items in this section. The comments listed were deliberately chosen from as wide a range of participants as possible. For clarity, the comments have been grouped under relevant headings.

The existence of others

Knowing someone is there has been helpful, even if I don’t use the site that often.

I do see myself as less lost than before as I know there is somewhere to go.

I did not feel safe on Facebook expressing some of the things I have on this site.

At times I thought I was the only one who had certain thoughts or feelings, which drove me crazy. Sharing and knowing others are around has been great for me.

I do get a sense of security knowing that the site is here.

It's been amazing seeing other people that want to be honest and have their own struggles.

So refreshing, as sometimes in life I have to hide how I really am.

Comment

These comments suggest that knowing that others exist who have similar issues or shared realities was a comfort. That others could understand and relate was important. Even if the site was only used sometimes, knowing that it existed was significant. A sense of security was created because others were around who might be able to relate to you. Additionally, there was the safety of knowing that on the site you and others could be real without incurring judgement. It seemed to provide a means of being honest and safe without needing to save face as often happens in the external world.

Commonality

I could not believe that so many people had stress with life.

It was great to have a good old rant.

I found others that saw their life as being overtaken by work which made them miserable.

God, people do fight with themselves and their therapy, what a relief.

I was really touched when someone I connected with shared her difficulties with depression.

I got to know a lady who knew what disassociation was, which was so rare.

We all have fed-up with life syndrome and that is why it is good to talk about it.

I have often thought it's only me that has at times found difficulty with stresses of life.

I used to really give myself a hard time about this not always being able to deal with everything. A right old moaner.

It feels like we are all in it together.

I'm not honest in life if I look at it and no one else is either. We don't know what really goes on for people. On this site I could be honest and others are too.

It's really not just passing the time away with trivial rubbish like we do every day. I know other people are fed up with this as well.

Comment

Commonality is sharing of features or attributes. Here strong interpersonal relational patterns exist. Someone says something and recipients reveal a common theme in response. The detailed dialogue seems secondary to the process of linking with people likeminded to the self. We are relational animals possibly having different needs. For this community group, it seems that relating and sharing commonality on a deeper level, rather than superficially, was important.

Saving face

A place to be real and honest where the rest of the world seems okay.

Sometimes I see the outside world as bullshit, people don't really mention the hard times.

They all want to be seen as fluffy and doing well.

No one knows what happens behind closed doors, this means more than just the house and its front or back door, it's what's in the head as well.

I need to air the nitty gritty of life; that's including my own.

What is the point in not being honest, that's what life is.

Since mum was ill when I was little I know that life isn't all great. I see others as not having those experiences. I am sick of putting on a show for their benefit.

I don't always feel good, I want to just hide and go away.

I need to be able to say this and not always accommodate other people so as not to cause discomfort.

Comment

In saving face we are often selective with the truth or completely hide what is really going on, often as a defence to protect us from being judged, censured or pitied. We protect ourselves by creating facades, hiding what is really happening for us. It often seems risky for us to be real and honest, so many people opt for the face-saving solution. This protects our vulnerability. Participants seemed to be weary of this life strategy and wanted to be real and have their say about what was really going on.

Maybe having nicknames and pictures as their community profiles made members feel safer. Anonymous names and identity pictures allowed users, in a psychological sense, to occupy centre stage in the comfort and containment of being risk free. For some there was anger at having to save face for the comfort of others, or anger at others for saving face. This raises the question of what is real when we relate, how much is about saving face and protection and how honest are we? The site provided an exploration playground for this idea.

Reading articles – blogs – forums

Reading people's experiences and articles was really interesting.

I found myself following the Kiki blog every week, this person's life was better than my book.

I was drawn into the reading and the poems and how life was for others.

Even if I did not go on chat, the blogs and forums provided a lot for me.

"I found the writings inspiring and exciting and was compelled to contribute myself."

Reading is something that I find a sanctuary and so for me this provided the solace I needed.

If the site had carried on I would have been up for doing my own blog.

I found the articles and blogs so honest and with this brave.

Comment

Many users found the writings to be brave, inspiring, captivating and honest. Reading others' writings and experiences, narrated in such a deep way, perhaps provides an emotional link and connection to them. The writer did not expect this part of the site to generate such powerful feedback. People got comfort, solace and interest from reading others' contributions, without a sense of superiority or judgement. This may provide a relational tool for a therapist to offer a sort of psychological permission to a reader, that it is actually okay to be real.

Anxiety and scare

It took a while to engage as it was pretty intimidating and scary.

I had to pluck up courage to go on the site.

I stood in the sidelines for a while watching the others chat.

It felt like such a big step when I did chat.

Even putting a forum up was leaving myself open.

I was really really anxious at first and didn't think I would do it.

I had butterflies in my tummy but wanted to join in.

Comment

The level of anxiety provoked by the site was interesting. Possibly this could be because the others on the site were not previously known or because the pictures and fictional names hid who they really were, giving the site a clandestine quality. Linking with strangers is the antithesis of Facebook. The level of resistance and anxiety is an interesting subject for further research. What feelings are evoked in people before they decide to become real by relating to others that they do not previously know? Maybe relating to others at this level feels intimidating because it risks exposing personal vulnerability.

Seeing others and being seen

I got a lot from reading the articles and blogs of other people.

Yes, I liked looking but can't see myself doing the same thing, not yet anyway.

I loved it when I got comments back on my blogs, it was like friends replying and understanding.

I do blog feedback but I'm not really bothered either way, just love writing them.

I find some of the people are so brave putting themselves out there.

I get a lot from sharing and then even if people say something you do experience being cared about.

I count.

Comment

Some of these comments reveal the significance of being seen and of attuning to others on the site and what is gained from this process. Human interaction theory suggests that a person is influenced by being seen by others and is in turn impacted by what others present, project or mean to the person concerned. On the site, regardless of whether the member was revealing himself/herself to be seen or merely observing others, the process affected how the interaction was experienced, even though it was only through reading. Individuals still experienced another's reality, which was powerful for them. The thinking or experiences of the others on the site impacted or influenced each member in some significant way.

Chat

When I sometimes go on I am alone so I don't tend to anymore.

I just can't bring myself to go onto chat, what would I say.

People when I went on to see all knew each other.

It's just really weird going onto a chat line when you don't know who each other is.

I can do Facebook but that is different, I use it for keeping up with mates and posting photos.

Other sites I use for chat but I know people and it's not deep.

In time I want to try and get to know more people.

I find the discussions on chat really stimulating.

I wish there were more talks on chat.

I think chat will take time to get busy.

Comment

Here there are really mixed messages about the chat services. These provide insight into the frames of reference of the members and their boundaries. Some members found it too risky to join the chat and talk to anonymous people. Since the purpose of the chat was to discuss issues and themes, rather than superficial time passing, it proved too much for some people. Some members had no problem using Facebook, but found this site very different. Conversely, when members did engage, potentially it was stimulating and rewarding for them. They wanted more people available to chat and more regular discussions in which they could participate. Generally members had different experiences and perceptions of the chat facility that depended on how they felt, how much they wanted to interact and their perception of the exposure associated with the chat service. This relates to the feeling of risk, which did not affect some members, but others clearly were affected and therefore avoided this part of the service.

Miscellaneous comments received

It helped when I was struggling with my counselling and I could voice this with a member of the site. It felt safer than my counselling did at times.

When my therapist is on holiday the site is really good to connect with. Just knowing it is there is a relief as I feel I can go somewhere if I really need to.

Talking to a member gave me hope that life can be good at times. I tend to hold a lot of negatives and feel that it is hopeless so it gave me reassurance and a new friend.

The experience of the site was very up and down for me, I was really happy at some of the chats and felt secure. Then at other times when people were not on, it was like being at a party on your own.

I was really excited by the site and made some friends which was all good. Someone then said they would catch up with me and we had the possibility of running a group which had really deep meanings for me and they never got in touch again. I felt angry and let down. I did talk this through with others which helped but felt I had experienced a rejection.

Sometimes I go on and just have a look at who is there, it has given me a curiosity I did not know I had. Took some time for me to go onto chat as I did not know what to say. I don't know these people and everyone has names that are not really theirs. I really got a lot out of reading the experiences of others on the site. That was well cool.

Discussion

The discussion falls naturally into two parts. First, what was learned from the pilot study about the mechanics of operating such a site, what worked, what were the snags and how these could be avoided in a future operation. Second, consideration of whether such a site can meet the psychological needs of the user cohort.

Site operation

This pilot study demonstrated that a potential cyber community could be created at a modest cost. The original intention was to let it grow organically, but this did not happen quickly enough to render the site viable. Publicity via marketing achieved only limited success. A sad comment on contemporary society was that those contacted had difficulty in believing that a free service was being offered! Clearly a successful launch would require major publicity. The response from

therapist professionals was disappointing but anticipated, as the site may have seemed a potential threat to their status and income stream.

Malicious interventions, such as psychological game playing, were not a problem, maybe because of the limited number of site members. Psychological game playing is bound to occur, but since the number of observers would increase as the number of site users increased, given the healthy philosophy of the site and the control features available in the software, the problem should still be containable at a higher user level.

There was no hands-on management of the site content (except to deal with malicious interventions) and members were free to generate groups at will. The positive outcome was that groups were created which might not have happened otherwise – for example “Experiences of Christmas”. The downside was that users created new groups without checking to see if one already existed which covered their interest. The result was a proliferation of groups, none of which were attended at a viable level. This suggests that group creation needs to be lightly managed, for instance by administration imposing a quorum before allowing a new group to be formed.

Meeting the psychological needs of the users

Sesanate was more like a therapeutic community than a standard self-help site because it was monitored and supervised by counselling professionals and thus presented to users a safe and supportive environment in which to communicate, share and be respected. This embodies the principle of containment that underpins the philosophy behind therapeutic communities.

The feedback from the site suggests that it provided an environment for safe interaction that is intrinsic for belonging, acceptance, connection, respect and interpersonal relations. This has healing qualities by providing warmth, substance and generosity of spirit. The impact of sharing these interactions governed what benefits a user gained from the site. Even joining the site and being there passively seemed to provide some important human ingredient. These results are in accord with the ideas of belonging expressed by Winnicott (1987). The interpersonal qualities of Sesanate provided recognition by others, in accord with the ideas of Erikson (1950), Berne (1961) and Stewart and Joines (1987). The safety of the site promoted intimacy and thus encouraged members to be real, honest and to take risks, without compromising acceptance.

Members benefited from the site because it provided comfort, interest and commonality and acceptance. Some members posted writings that stimulated the sharing of thoughts and experiences. Through reading members could connect without obligation to respond. Members could e-mail, post responses in the forums or even blog. If someone found an experience moving or evocative he/she could respond. The e-mail process succeeded because members communicated even if they did not know each other, perhaps because e-mail feels safe and familiar.

Other members posted blogs which contained accounts of experiences and beliefs. Readers could relate to, enjoy and be inspired by the writings to participate either by doing their own blogs or by responding to other elements of the site. In exchanges the writers found doing the blogs liberating and cathartic, particularly those members who were anxious beforehand about exposure. Similarly the forums provided a communicational tool where members started discussions and others provided less elaborate responses to topics.

Not as successful were the chat room and the groups that were constructed by the members. Group subjects included hobbies, work/life balance, stress, depression and relationships. While others joined the groups and felt inspired by the invitation to be part of something, keeping groups active proved difficult.

To summarise, the project suggested that a cyber community like Sesanate would work well with more members. Establishing the “critical mass” needed for a cyber community to work is a topic for further research. There may also be an upper limit of participants above which the site would cease to work effectively, but there is no evidence available from this pilot study because

while the number of registered participants grew steadily, it never reached an adequate operational level.

Most of the processes that are relevant to therapeutic communities occurred. These included the cognitive, experiential, relational, observational and mirroring of members that provided psycho-education, commonality, intimacy and human interaction. Individuals learned from sharing the experiences and writings of others. They were immersed in the community and therefore powerful dynamic processes did take place justifying the connection in the title of the community to self-healing.

Conclusions

This paper describes the setting up and running of a pilot project to provide a therapeutic cyber community. The site differed from superficial on-line chat sites that pass the time, without discussion of serious issues. It offered support and sharing and encouraged people to be open and real. Given the limited resources of manpower available it was not possible to sustain the project permanently, so it was shut down after 20 months of operation. Feedback from users suggested that a cyber community could successfully meet many of the needs of potential users, and provide a useful supplement to other therapeutic services. Such a community is not expensive to set-up, but would need sustaining by either the NHS or one of the larger medical charities.

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