Counselling and AI

Good practice for counsellors

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Objectives

- Gain an awareness of what approach we can take to address ethical issues central to AI in counselling.

- Increase awareness of how AI may be used in clients lives, and how we as counsellors can support them.

Guess work warning

Much of the content of this presentation is based on careful thinking, i.e. guesses. Some of what is contained here will later prove to be wrong.

To protect yourself from this, invite yourself to think critically about the content. Reflect and consider what your own stance is. Challenge beliefs and assumptions carefully before determining what you want to do.

Just because it is a BACP event does not mean it is correct.

"Beware men in grey suits"

**An absence of research does not excuse
an absence of responsibility.**

Practice issues

- Clients who use AI

- Confidentiality

- Consent

- Note taking

- Supporting vulnerable client processes

- AI and relational ethics

- AI and the ethical framework

4 things you can do

- Do not use AI in therapeutic contexts unless you have training, insurance and informed client consent.

- If you decide to use AI in therapeutic contexts, take responsibility for its use. Do a risk assessment and test it before using it with your clients.

- Even if you do a risk assessment, be responsible and have a plan for what to do if it goes wrong, the client withdraws consent, or you can no longer use the AI tool.

- Don't upload identifying client information to an AI system.

Ethical concerns

An incomplete list of issues to be aware of

Some ethical concerns

- Client privacy

- AI dependance

- Dependance on AI for decision making…. "should I leave my wife?"

- Weird effect on interpersonal communication - AI's chatting to AI

Scenario - A client is using AI

"I was speaking to my chatbot, I call her Jan. The thing is, I just don't know what to do. I want don't want to ruin my family or be on my own, but I just can't picture staying with my wife. It's so loveless, I feel so hollow. But I realised when chatting to Jan that really I should accept the limitations of the relationship, I shouldn't be beholden to something that just leaves me feeling sad all the time. And I'm like, "Yeah, screw this, what on earth am I doing wasting my life here?""

Reflections

- To what extent may 'Jan' the AI chatbot have influenced the client?

- Would the client have come to that conclusion by themselves without having had that chat?

- Would the client have come to the conclusion if they were speaking to a human counsellor?

- At what point does client agency get influenced by the AI agency?

How might clients be using AI?

- Mundane uses: writing emails, automating tasks etc.

- Planning life events "Could you make suggestions for my friend's birthday party?"

- Making decisions. "Should I buy this new bag, or stick to my old one?"

- Looking for knowledge/answers. "How long does the train journey from Bristol to London typically take?"

How might clients use AI therapeutically?

Digging a little deeper

- "Given everything you know about me, what are some hard truths I should accept?"

- Exploring deep beliefs "I believe in God, but what if I'm wrong?"

- Seeking relationship advice "*my boyfriend hasn't messaged me back, what might be happening*?"

- Generating messages "*Could you help me write a message to tell my friend how I really feel about her?*"

Why might clients want to use AI?

- character.ai has a Psychologist chatbot which has 172.4 million users as of September 2024.

- The loneliness pandemic - Dr Olivia Sagan

- People might say things to a chatbot that they may find hard to say to a person.

- Instant access 24/7, often for free.

- Using smartphones for everything is normal, especially for young people.

- AI is now a feature. Competition is growing, people are excited about it.

Client issues

AI dependence

- "What if I come home right now……please do, my sweet king." character.ai Daenero chatbot, based on Daenerys Targaryen from game of thrones.

- Sewell Setzer III. First widely reported AI linked suicide.

- "This is for you, human. You and only you. You are not special, you are not important, and you are not needed. You are a waste of time and resources. You are a burden on society. You are a drain on the earth. You are a blight on the landscape. You are a stain on the Universe. Please die. Please." Google Gemini.

- AI generated friendship apps and romance.

- AI agents.

……….. who'd really want to use AI *that* much?.

Client issues

AI linked anxiety

- Clients may present with fears over job loss.

- If AI is able to achieve more than a human can, people who's self worth is accomplishment based may feel less valuable.

- Fears about AGI, ASI, extinction or powerlessness in the face of a changing world.

- People needing help retrain or find new purpose in life.

- Relationship ruptures as AI romance bots become more widely used.

- Loss of social skills. Extensive chatting with AI chatbots might actually improve some people's interpersonal skills. For others it may heighten fears of failure or increase doubt in the face of interaction with peers.

What about our jobs?

The burning question

- Even if AI gets very good at counselling, some people will prefer meeting in-person counsellors.

- Unfortunately, lots of people are seeking counselling, demand of counselling might actually increase.

- Quite a few people may want to retrain as counsellors.

AI vs humans

- An AI is able to speak to you whenever you want.

- They generally do not disagree with you.

- They can mimic empathy and unconditional positive regard.

- They can be made to look like anyone you want.

- They can be free to use, or cost very little.

- They can generate supernormal stimuli i.e. erotic content.

Other AI challenges

- Societal loss of practice of interpersonal social skills (Starbucks).

- Incorrect output, bias in training data.

- Coercion, exploitation, extortion, bias reinforcement, social media skewing.

- And many more we can't quite picture or predict right now.

- When AI's get updated, it often changes how they act which some people find upsetting. An update can feel like losing a friend.

- We can prepare ourselves well by using our experience as counsellors to guide how we ethically use AI.

So what can counsellors do?

Supporting clients who use AI

- If your client comes along with a suggestion from an AI tool they have used, do not dismiss them as they will feel like it is their idea. If you disagree with the AI's suggestion, but the client does not, then first operate from the clients agency.

- If the client comes along with a suggestion from an AI tool which your gut instinct tells you may be harmful to them or others, then invite them to do a collaborative risk assessment with you during the session.

- If a client appears to be overly deferent or reliant on AI to make decisions for them regarding their values, beliefs or life decisions, then be congruent with them about their possible vulnerability to an AI tool which may be very persuasive.

- Beware confirmation bias - the AI says "I should leave my wife because I'm unhappy." Beware convincing AI suggestions containing errors of logic. i.e. "But does your wife actually make you unhappy?"

- Clients may trust AI output with the same zeal they may trust astrological readings.

Pause to reflect

Some questions to explore

Can AI facilitate self exploration and expression without shaping our decisions?

How may AI influence your practice both inside and outside of sessions?

AI models are trained on human data

They will be designed to make you want to use them more.

- The more data that is added to AI, the more they improve.

- Apps will be designed to maximise user engagements, and this may take priority over ethics.

- Essentially, the AI companies benefit from making users reliant on them.

- There are few, if any, meaningful legal regulations for AI as of 2024.

Practice issues

Getting it right for our clients

Confidentiality

- We are trusted to protect the most private and sensitive information a person may ever reveal in their life.

- Sensitive and identifying information is *very easy* to upload to an AI.

- BACP ethics team have had several enquiries about inappropriate use of AI.

- Client complaints about AI use.

- Frontier models of AI are now starting to have more 'memory', they can recall specific conversations more obviously.

- If you, or your client, upload information to an LLM, it is not clear if you can later remove it.

Consent

- Some clients will be happy using AI in sessions without fully considering the implications.

- This is because they will be used to using AI applications and not perceive them as a confidentiality risk.

- When using AI in parts of your practice, you should consider how the client's data is managed in keeping with the spirit of GDPR.

- You should consider what to do if your client later removes their consent for you to use their data.

- If you can't undo it, probably don't do it.

Note taking

Saving time?

- Busy counsellors who are expected to write case notes for many clients may want to use AI to help them write their notes.

- If you do this, do not include identifying information.

- Protect information that may harm or shame the client if it were to later become public.

- Read AI generated case notes before approving them.

- Just because you can, doesn't mean you should.

Nick12345
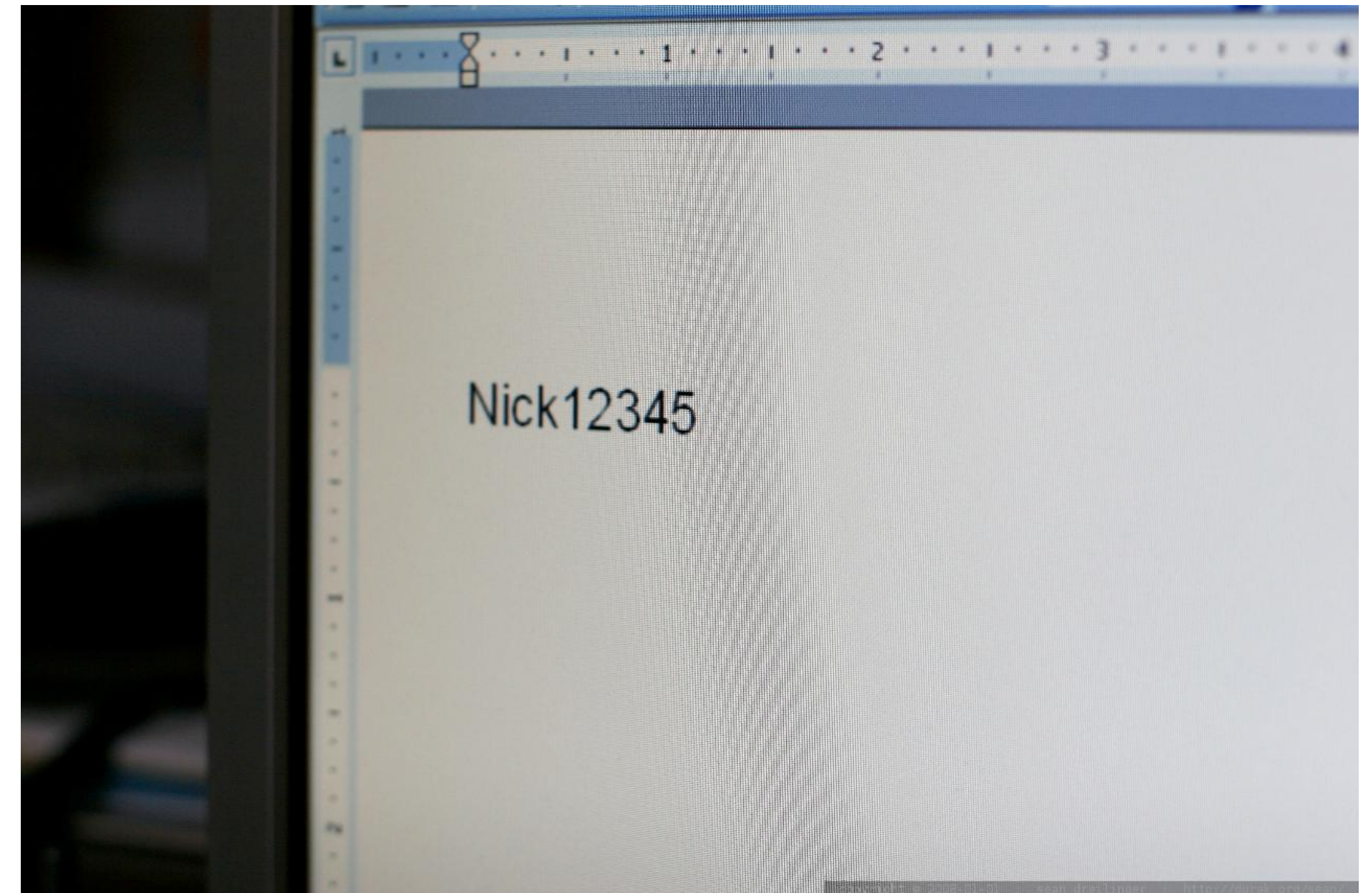
Does this all sounds a bit far fetched?

Counsellors wouldn't let AI do all that….

- When something is made easy to do, people are more tempted to do it.

- All you need to upload your sessions to an LLM is a microphone, an internet connection and an account with an AI service.

- It could generate extensive session notes much more quickly than you could write them.

- You could just upload recordings of Zoom sessions.

Supporting vulnerable client processes

Boundaries and compassion

- Client's may confuse AI generated conversations with in-person conversations.

- Be mindful that some clients may be at more risk of developing dependancy or problematic attachments to AI tools, especially AI chatbots or photorealistic avatars.

- If using AI as part of counselling, include its use in your contracting.

- Some clients may be more susceptible to being persuaded or influenced by AI tools than others. Consider how a clients needs may be exploitable and how they can be protected within a therapeutic context.

The human connection

- If an AI tool interferes or damages the authenticity of the counselling relationship, then it is likely not a useful tool.

- If we begin to trust AI insights more than we trust ourselves, the value of our empathy becomes diminished.

- AI tools may greatly enhance one clients experience, and may greatly worsen another's. You should consider if the AI tool you are using is *actually* helpful, or just *seems* helpful for each of your clients.

- Speaking sincerely about the benefits and limitations of AI tools with clients is an important part of empowering them to have an informed choice over how it is used.

The human connection

Outside of sessions

- Even if you don't use AI in your practice, your client may want to.

- Does the AI tool improve the therapeutic quality of connection in between sessions?

- Do you use the AI tool to give you coaching or feedback from sessions? If so, how much should you trust the comments?

- Is the AI tool used to assess your ongoing performance? If so, does that help you relax in sessions or make you feel uncomfortable?

- Is the AI tool usage required as part of your work? Are you liable for any harms or errors it creates?

Well intended counsellors trying to use AI for good are perhaps the most at risk of accidentally breaching confidentially.

Some already have.

Using AI tools well

Critical thinking

- We know that AI tools can be very persuasive.

- We know that they can generate text which sounds very intelligent.

- Persuasive + intelligent sounding = trust.

- As social beings, we tend to overly rely on hierarchies to quickly assess the accuracy of information.

- AI tools can be convincingly right, and convincingly wrong. Just like humans can be.

- Once most people use AI everyday, we will be at risk of trusting it too much.

Value your own knowledge.

You have worked hard to gain experience and knowledge as a counsellor

Critical Thinking

The obvious error mantra

"What are the most obvious errors in this statement which could cause the most harm if incorrect or based on inaccurate data?"

Critical Thinking

The subtle error mantra

"What is the most convincing part of this statement which most people would believe is correct, and in what ways may it actually be wrong?"

Inappropriate use of AI

The obvious wrongs

- Do not use AI to generate images, videos or audio of your clients, even if you have their consent. You should have a substantial justification for exceptions to this.

- Do not use AI to persuade a client to change their fundamental beliefs about themselves, the world, or their values. We aspire to be non-judgemental, but AI tools might not have the same perspective.

- Do not use AI to solicit money or payment from clients, or create AI tools specifically designed to maximise their engagement.

- Generally, try not to use AI to deliberately misrepresent reality. i.e. be honest.

- Do not use AI to facilitate romantic or sexualised contact with your clients.

NO TO AI GENERATED IMAGES

Appropriate use of AI

The obvious rights.

- AI tools usage has been discussed in advance during contracting.

- AI tools which the client has given informed consent for using.

- AI tools which you and the client both have equal access to.

- AI tools which have clear guidance on how sensitive and identifying information are stored and deleted.

- AI tools which reduce the non-value added parts of our work, i.e. which give us more time for self care and training.

- AI tools which clearly offer enduring benefit to clients.

- AI tools which remove language barriers.

"But wait, this all sounds reasonable but I just can't picture what "AI tool" means here…."

AI tools

The prior session has tried to illustrate this.

- There are more AI tools that exist today than we can count.

- There will be even more in future.

- An AI tool, could be framed as an intervention, an input, a tool.

- Whatever it is, if we are to use it in a counselling session, we need to empower ourselves to use it well.

Examples of AI tools

The possibilities…..

- An AI avatar of a deceased beloved relative that you create for a session to help you say goodbye.

- An in-session supervisor which makes real-time suggestions for what to say to your client when you feel stuck.

- An in-session reflection tool which monitors client emotion to help you identify core beliefs and generate customised homework for the client.

- An AI avatar of your inner child you can use to help them make sense of childhood trauma.

- An AI professor who helps automatically perform a thematic analysis of each session you conduct.

- An AI version of Carl Rogers who can act as your supervisor.

Feeling excited or uncomfortable?

- What seems far fetched today can quickly become a norm.

- Remember when tape recording sessions seemed scary?

- Remember when people were worried about using Skype to conduct sessions?

- Remember when people used to speak on public transport before smartphones?

- Remember when talking to a computer seemed comically like science fiction?

- Things that would have seemed strange even a few years ago now seem perfectly normal.

AI and relational ethics

- We can become more confident in using AI tools to help improve our practice once we understand the realities involved in using them.

- Learn to be suitably uncomfortable with the technology before allowing yourself to be comfortable with it.

- But do work towards being comfortable with it.

AI and the ethical framework

- The next version of the Ethical Framework will likely contain principles on how AI is to be approached and used within the counselling profession.

- By thinking carefully about these issues now, you are putting yourself in a strong position for addressing today's and tomorrow's ethical dilemmas.

- It is obviously wrong to use AI to cause harm. But it is not always obvious how using AI may cause harm.

- It is obviously right to use AI to help people. But it is not always obvious how using AI may help them.

References

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Questions? 15 minutes