

The Impact of the Written Word: The Moderators' Unique Inner Experience and Role in the Online Support Group Medium

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Abstract:

The experience of moderating an online support group for people affected by cancer is a powerful model of service delivery and impacts both the moderator and the client in innovative ways. The permanence of the written word provides a rich, compelling and therapeutic environment for the moderator to explore and gain deeper understanding of their clients' struggles while providing the clients with ample support and guidance. This model also encourages a creative approach toward counseling and enables the moderator to develop a distinctive and tailored skill set.

These online support groups are moderated by licensed oncology social workers and the duration of each group is 3.5 months, at which point each group goes on a two week hiatus until the next session begins. Each prospective group member is carefully screened by an oncology social worker before being subscribed to their respective group. Groups are broken down by category, based on whether the client is a patient, caregiver or bereaved, then further specified by cancer type, age, gender and status (partner or loved one). The groups are conducted in a message board format and posts are asynchronous.

This poster presentation will examine the experience of the oncology social worker (hereto referred to as moderator) in the online support group medium while exploring the experiential differences in moderating online support groups versus face to face or telephone groups. This poster will also explore the moderators' need to listen with a different "ear" in order to successfully facilitate in this unique medium; to learn and understand each member's moods and emotional responses, while encouraging cohesion, empathy, support and safety.

Moderator's Inner Experience

The act of reading clients' stories, thoughts on illness and death and innermost feelings about these experiences is at once inspirational and deeply moving and leaves a profound and lasting effect on the moderator in both positive and negative ways. These threads of conversation pose vicarious trauma as well as moments of stimulation, depending upon what is written and being discussed. If the subject matter being shared is painful, sad or traumatic, the words and feelings behind these words have a strong tendency to resonate profoundly with the moderator. Likewise, bearing witness to the warmth and resilience of the human spirit, in writing, can provide the moderator with feelings of contentment, gratification and inspiration.

Emotional Impact

- Moderator has time to identify and manage countertransference
- Moderating is a singular experience and can therefore be more alienating and emotionally intense
- Painful or traumatic subject matter in writing can elicit Secondary or Vicarious traumatization
- Lack of closure when group members die
- Inspirational posts have a lasting and positive/gratifying impact on moderator

"I have been blown away by the tremendous compassion these women have shown to one another...many times it is hard not to be moved to tears. Here is a woman who is suffering with some god-awful symptoms and she reaches down into her depths and writes comforting, caring words to another."
-Moderator of Women's Patient Group

"As an online moderator, I sometimes also feel like a bit of an outsider in the group. You and your posts are not always acknowledged and there seems to be a clearer distinction between you and the group members, a set of boundaries that feel more defined than in telephone and F2F groups where your participation is more actively sought out."
-Moderator of Lung Cancer Patient Group

"Unlike the spoken word, there is always the opportunity to tweak a post, to look at it from another angle, to ask yourself how exactly your readers will interpret your words, before you release it into cyberspace for your group to read."
-Moderator of Bereavement Group

"At the end of a F2F group, you have an opportunity to talk privately with someone who seems to be struggling and you can cover a lot of territory in a short time. Your client and you could speak 1000 words in 5 minutes! In the online groups, I have learned that too many words can get in the way."
-Moderator of Women's Patient Group

"Sometimes, one feels a bit like a "host" at a party and you want to make sure everyone is comfortable and enjoying themselves....I refrain from being too pushy in trying to get the group to chat."
-Moderator of Lung Cancer Patient Group

Differences in Moderating Online Support Groups vs. Face to Face Groups

Moderating in the online medium is an entirely authentic experience which is set apart from the experience of moderating a face to face or telephone support group. This is largely due to the time and opportunity that the moderator has to consider each aspect of their clients' words, as well as the clinical responses and interventions they are delivering within the group environment. In a face to face group, the moderator must absorb both manifest and latent content, while simultaneously crafting responses to this content. In the online medium, the moderator has the freedom to absorb the content, allowing time for responses to become more fully articulated, enabling the moderator to flesh out the latent content in a manner that is careful, even artful. A different level of thoughtfulness is required in order to craft a response as there is an objective permanence to the words being "spoken". Additionally, the act of reading may have a more profound impact on the reader's brain than the spoken word can. "Beyond the physical evolution of our brains, the content that we choose to read shapes our minds in terms of the insights and connections that we make when we interpret what we read. The mind does a great deal of interpreting while reading takes place, as well as afterwards, when contemplation (conscious or subconscious) occurs." -Dalhousie Journal of Interdisciplinary Management - Volume 4, Spring 2009

Clinical Considerations

- Impact of spoken word is often buffered by fading memory but written words can be visually recalled and revisited
- Time can be taken to savor posts before making psychological shift towards responding
- Crafting a response is a slower, more deliberate process
- Ability to thoroughly consider all aspects of clinical intervention
- Different impact on psyche of spoken versus written words



The Art of Online Moderating and Developing a Written Persona

In the online support group, there is a need for the moderator to listen with a different "ear" in order to successfully facilitate in this unique medium; to learn and understand each member's moods and emotional responses, while encouraging cohesion, empathy, support and safety. Once the moderator achieves mastery within this medium, the use of the self can be instrumental in facilitating therapeutic freedom of expression within the group and supporting members in their quest to heal as well as gain a deeper understanding of their individual experiences with cancer. Finding an authentic "voice" as a moderator in this medium is a complex psychological process and requires a great deal of patience as well as the ability to observe and contribute responsively to the group's unique rhythm. Developing a therapeutic alliance through the written word requires the ability to convey warmth and accessibility. The more personal and conversational the moderator's postings, the more the group members obtain a sense of the moderator as a source of support, inspiration and information. These elements, of who we are as clinicians, are conveyed by establishing a "written persona".

Clinical Techniques/Skills

- Use of Self -developing your "voice" as an online clinician and writer
- Pacing- learning the delicate dance of when to step in and when to stand back
- Establishing safety via written directness and care
- Develop ability to understand client mood through their unique writing style without benefits of tone, body language, facial expression, voice quality
- Moderators come together in "Moderator's Corner" to share issues of transference, personality conflicts, other clinical landmines
- Clinical creativity - use of poems, songs, literature, etc.

"You need to first convey warmth, safety and caring and offer concrete assistance as succinctly as you can. You support the clients for having the courage to share their truest selves and ask for help. This challenges you to carefully consider the words you are typing... they need to be spot on, truly the best words possible, so they provide the same impression and meaning for most people in your group."
-Moderator of Women's Patient Group

"If someone is having a hard time (and it's not an emergency) I try to wait a day to let another group member respond since it more meaningful coming from a fellow member and it allows the group to do some good work. Usually the other members offer the right support, advice and care."
-Moderator of Women's Patient Group



Client Quotes

"When I came here I was a mess. A complete and total mess. Talk about lives of "quiet desperation", that was me. Yes, I had other therapy, and craft and art therapy. But it meant more to me to have a group where I could tell my secrets, only to find out we all had the same ones."

"Your words bring comfort and a sense of feeling safe when I find it hard sometimes to feel safe. I can't ever remembering feeling fear this deeply as I have this past 7 months. Finding this safe place was a blessing."

"Our group had a wonderful 'rhythm' to it. We shared support for each other in non-cancer-related concerns or burdens. We shared some recipes! Most of us learned to know and enjoy each other more fully-not just within the narrow window of lung cancer."

Unique Client Benefits of Participating in an Online Support Group

Many clients who are in desperate need of support and camaraderie may never receive it because of their physical, geographical or emotional limitations. Participating in an online support group can reach these clients in profound ways. Reading the threads of conversation over and over again creates a unique, perhaps more thoughtful connection among members as each participant discovers different elements of the text that may not have been identifiable or obvious during the initial read. Many clients also feel a greater sense of safety as opposed to in a face to face or telephone support group where they may feel more exposed and less comfortable speaking their minds with the added pressure of physicality and all that this entails. Ego defenses are often quickly dissolved, making way for members to become connected with one another intimately and compassionately. Members may even use this group as they would journaling and tend to therefore share more deeply felt emotions, even "secrets".

Aspects of Online "Intimacy"

- Not being in vivo enables members to craft more fully developed thoughts/clarity of thought
- Online groups reach people who are limited physically, emotionally and geographically
- Posting of links, resources, books are all in one place, which clients can go back to at any time
- Re-reading past posts can create additional sense of "containment" for client
- Clients can easily share other aspects of their lives, including blogs, poems, jokes, links to pictures
- Sense of ownership/community in group space
- Serves as a space for therapeutic journaling

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CancerCare's Mission

CancerCare is a national nonprofit, 501(c)(3) organization that provides free, professional support services to anyone affected by cancer: people with cancer, caregivers, children, loved ones, and the bereaved. CancerCare programs—including counseling and support groups, education, financial assistance and practical help—are provided by professional oncology social workers and are completely free of charge.



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