



What we offer

We work using Microsoft Teams to offer synchronous audio and visual communication as well as text-based only communication. In an initial online assessment appointment, the counsellor would work with you to understand your current situation and concerns. If you and the counsellor decide together that the arrangement of some online counselling sessions is the best way forward, we would proceed on the same basis as we do at the service when working face to face: for the most part we offer brief counselling interventions. We would arrange further online appointments, think with you about their regularity and timing, and be clear about what we can offer. We would be very likely to discuss with you a range of very useful online support and self-help materials and programmes which you might access to complement the work we do with you.

As part of this assessment process, we would also consider together whether our online service would best suit your needs at this time. For some people, face to face therapy or medical help nearer to where they live now, might be preferable. Some of the most important work that could be done online with us, might involve thinking about your present needs and working out how best to access the most appropriate support. This may take one online session or a few.

The initial online assessment appointment would also involve some information gathering by the counsellor with regard to what other sources of support are available to you where you are. We would always be keen, for example, to know that, wherever you were in the world, you had access to medical services, should you need their support.

We are unable to provide online counselling if you are feeling actively suicidal, engaging in serious self-harming behaviours or if you have severe or enduring mental health problems. In these circumstances we would discuss with you the need to access face-to-face support through your local GP/psychological service. Online counselling cannot provide an emergency service for clients. In the event of an emergency arising whilst you are engaged in online work or if you were experiencing suicidal thoughts, your counsellor would discuss with you the appropriate support that you could access during this period. If you found yourself in a major crisis and were considering serious self-harm, it would be vital to get immediate help. This would include contacting your GP, or your nearest accident and emergency service (A & E).



Is online counselling as good as face to face counselling?

All our online counsellors have additional training to manage the technology that we use (Microsoft Teams) and have been trained to communicate with you in an online counselling relationship.

Online Counselling can be effective and useful, if you are comfortable using technology to communicate and have the commitment and motivation to engage in counselling.

It is certainly possible to have a therapeutic relationship online. The way that the counselling takes place does change the nature of the communication. This is a phenomenon that you may well notice, and may want to bring up during your work with your counsellor. The most notable differences include: the lack of physical presence in the room; the potential for the disinhibition effect where you may disclose more, sooner than you might with face to face counselling; the increased potential for misunderstandings especially when using text only communication, differences in the way confidentiality and security is addressed.

Working online is different and may not suit all students. This is something that we will think carefully with you about during our initial online assessment meeting.

How does it work?

Once you have contacted the service to request an online counselling appointment, you will be sent some general information about the counselling service, a link to these webpages so that you can remind yourself of the online provision we offer, and three forms to fill in.

We will ask you to complete a 'Pre-Intake Form', a version of the form all students contacting the service for an appointment, are asked to complete. We will also send a link to a 'Core Form', which we require you to complete. CORE is a research tool we use to assist us in helping you. It is a questionnaire with 34 statements. Using CORE also enables you and your counsellor to consider how things are for you right now and to assess whether online counselling is actually suitable for you. The third form asks for some basic information from you and provides information about record keeping, data protection and confidentiality. We ask you to sign this (through printing your name and dating it) to show that you agree to our policies in this area. We are aware that the amount of information we are sending, and the number of forms we are asking you to complete, might seem off-putting. We consider it to be very important, however, to get a good idea of your current situation and welfare. This is especially crucial because you are not in Oxford and may not be linked up with the normal sources of support available to students in college.



After you have returned the forms, you will be contacted to arrange a suitable time (you will have given details of your availability on the pre-intake form) for your initial online assessment appointment, with your counsellor. You will also be given details of how to sign up to Microsoft Teams and whether they will be using video or text for the first meeting.

It may be that you have attended the service previously and worked with a counsellor face to face here. In that case, we would try to match you with the counsellor you have previously seen, to continue the working relationship, online. This may not be possible if this counsellor is not specifically trained to work online with students. In this case, you will be cross-referred to another suitable counsellor, who will have read the notes in your previous file and/or talked directly to your previous counsellor.

The initial assessment appointment is a chance for the counsellor to get to know you and your concerns and to cover a number of relevant areas which will enable them to help you to find the best way forward. The nature of the online counselling we offer will vary considerably according to the nature of your concerns and your situation. It may be that a few sessions of working through Skype, either weekly or spaced out over a couple of months, would be most helpful. It may be that the work will involve helping you to connect up with appropriate services local to you. It may be that we would work with you to offer what might be called 'supportive counselling'. We would certainly want to know about other sources of support you might have locally and to get an idea of your living/ working situation and general environment. We would want to assess, too, any risk factors there might be for you.

How do we decide which online counselling option to choose?

We offer either face to face online audio/video communication via Microsoft Teams or text-based only communication. We feel that the synchronous nature of communicating in the counselling relationship is important, so would not want to enter, for example, into a prolonged asynchronous email dialogue online. Synchronous communication online helps people to be able to clarify, discuss and challenge in order to better understand. This is best done directly and immediately.

During the initial online assessment appointment, you will be invited to discuss with the counsellor whether text only or audio/video communication would be the preferred option.



Making the Most of Online Counselling

To fully benefit from the process, think in advance about the problem(s) you are experiencing right now. Maybe look again, before the initial online assessment appointment, at the pre-intake form, so that you can think about your answers: what would you like to bring to counselling and how can this online session (and possible subsequent sessions) work best for you? Give some thought to whether you would feel more comfortable instant messaging or using audio/video.

Online counselling sessions, like face to face sessions, offer a space to explore your concerns further and gain a greater understanding of yourself and your situation. This is likely to involve you in considering how you might want to change things for and in yourself, as well as some external changes in your life that you might want to make. The sessions might well involve thinking about what other support you might need to access alongside or after the online sessions.

During online counselling you may experience what is known as the 'disinhibition effect'. This is where a person feels more able to express themselves openly and possibly disclose information at an earlier stage than they might have done, had they met with their counsellor in person. This might be something you could usefully acknowledge and discuss with your counsellor. Equally, as you will certainly have experienced, there may be misunderstandings that arise online, particularly if you are using a text-based approach in the sessions and the clues derived from body language and tone of voice are absent. It would be important to question and raise concerns in sessions, if you have them.

After each session, you might want to allow yourself some time to reflect on what you have experienced during the session and what thoughts and feelings you are left with. Do remember that sometimes we can be left with concerns that might lead us to ruminate. This might be especially likely to happen following an online session. If we feel we have been misunderstood or we make negative assumptions about the meaning or tone of the counsellor's words, in an IM conversation for example, we might be likely to go over and over things. Bear in mind that sometimes you may be getting things out of perspective, when you are thinking back on the session.

Give yourself some space to relax and compose yourself for what lies ahead during the next few hours and the rest of the week. If you decided to make some changes, maybe think about how you might put these into action. Use your support network (friends/family) during the week. Treat yourself, take some exercise and practice a healthy eating and sleeping routine.

At the end of the counselling process your counsellor will help you prepare for the end of the sessions. They may want to discuss with you how you can access further support, perhaps some online self-help, longer term face to face or online



counselling or help from medical or other professionals. They may well suggest that you make contact with the service when you return to Oxford.

After your counselling, you will be sent an email with a link to an anonymous survey as well as the same Core form that you filled out at the beginning. Completing this survey will help us gain a better understanding of your online counselling experience and will enable us to make service adjustments to better meet student needs.

Will my identity/information be secure?

No service can offer 100% security. We will however put everything in place to maximise security and we will encourage you to do the same.

Confidentiality - our commitment to you

We aim to provide a secure and confidential online service and take reasonable steps to protect your privacy.

Following an online text-only session, the counsellor will delete the written dialogue and keep written paper records of the session. In audio/visual online sessions the counsellor will make brief paper records of the session. All of these paper records will be placed in files along with the forms you initially filled in, a record of your appointments, and other documents, if there are any, relating to you coming here (e.g. doctor referral letters). When you have finished your online counselling, the counsellor will shred your notes, leaving the forms you have filled in and a brief summary of your initial and ongoing sessions. This information will be kept securely for six years in line with legal requirements and then destroyed.

The content of your sessions will not be communicated to any third party except for the purposes of supervision of the counsellor's work.

We would seek to maintain the confidentiality of all communications online, as we do when working face to face with people at the service. Both in online and face to face counselling relationships we would only consider breaking confidentiality if there was a very serious threat to your own safety or if we thought that you might be a serious threat to others. If at any point during the counselling you were in need of emergency support, you may be asked for your consent to contact your GP or other medical professional, and/or recommended to alternative avenues of support other than online counselling. We may in some circumstances ask you for permission to contact a tutor/supervisor.

Your responsibility for security

It would always be important to protect your Microsoft Teams account so that only you can access this account. Never share your login passwords with anyone else. Always password protect your Wi-Fi connection. If you write passwords down – keep



them somewhere safe. If you suspect that your password has been compromised, get it changed immediately. Use strong passwords.

Always avoid spying, prying eyes and eavesdropping. Are you likely to be overlooked or overheard? Don't leave your computer while you are logged in or before you have deleted content. Ensure the computer you use is protected against attacks from viruses/hackers/spyware etc and has a firewall in place. If at any time you believe you have been hacked or your system compromised, please inform your counsellor as soon as possible to reduce the impact of the attack. Delete your browsing history, cookies and temporary files especially if using a shared computer.

Do Respect yourself and others. Please remember to be respectful of the counselling relationship and do not post, publish or otherwise share any information on the internet or anywhere else about your counselling communications. In order to protect the confidential nature and the boundaries of the counselling relationship, your counsellor will not accept any invitations to join your social networks, even after the counselling has ended.

Technical difficulties

If for any reason Microsoft Teams is not working and so the session cannot take place, there should be email communication between you and your counsellor to explain the situation and re-arrange the session.

No absolute guarantee

We cannot guarantee 100% security as we have limited control over your actions or the actions of 3rd parties.

In using a company such as Microsoft Teams, we cannot control data absolutely nor guarantee total security. We would proceed to work with you on the basis that you have understood and accepted the risks and were happy to enter a counselling relationship on that basis. We would ask you to give your agreement to working on this basis by signing the Online Registration Form that we would send you when you contact the service asking for an online appointment.

The link below provides you with more information with regard to Microsoft Teams and security: <https://help.it.ox.ac.uk/nexus365/teams-security-guidelines>

If you do have serious concerns about online security and feel that you cannot agree to these conditions, then online counselling as offered may not be the best option for you. If this is the case, do contact the service so that we can find a way to discuss alternative options.



Online Counselling for Oxford students who
are temporarily not resident in Oxford
University of Oxford Counselling Service

Contact

If you do have any further questions or concerns about the online provision and how it works, do not hesitate to contact us counselling@admin.ox.ac.uk