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Module 3:

Characteristics of computer-mediated communication in counselling and therapy

Author: Evelyn Schlenk – Innovation in Learning Institute – www.ili.fau.de

Erasmus+

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THERAPY 2.0 Training Course:
9 Modules

1. Introduction

2. The spectrum of technology-enhanced information & communication

3. Characteristics of computer-mediated communication in counselling and therapy

4. Legal aspects

5. Ethical aspects of the e-tools / e-consulting

6. Economic and financial aspects

7. Technical competences for an online advisor, counsellor or therapist

8. Psychological aspects and competences in online interventions

9. ICT based counselling for asylum seekers, refugees and unaccompanied minors

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Module overview

- The module explains how new target groups - especially digital natives - can more easily participate in counselling and psychotherapeutic interventions through the use of ICT.

- It will be shown how both external access barriers and internal inhibition thresholds can be overcome by means of ICT.

- Frequent fears of advisors, counsellors and psychotherapists with regard to computer-mediated client relationships are discussed with reference to both scientific research results and practical experience.

- The module concludes with an advocacy for blended approaches in counselling and therapy.

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Module objectives

Upon completion of this course, the learner should be able to

✓ know the user groups that prefer flexibilised framework conditions;

✓ understand how classic interventions can intimidate clients;

✓ know how psychological inhibition thresholds can be lowered by ICT;

✓ understand the relation between computer-mediated distance and psychological closeness, openness, honesty and commitment;

✓ elaborate the benefits of text-based counselling and therapy;

✓ understand the benefits of blended approaches.

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Module outline

- Introduction

- Unit 3.1: ICT as a bridge between clients and professionals

- Unit 3.2: Degrees of freedom in computer-mediated relations

- Unit 3.3: Benefits of text-based counselling and therapy
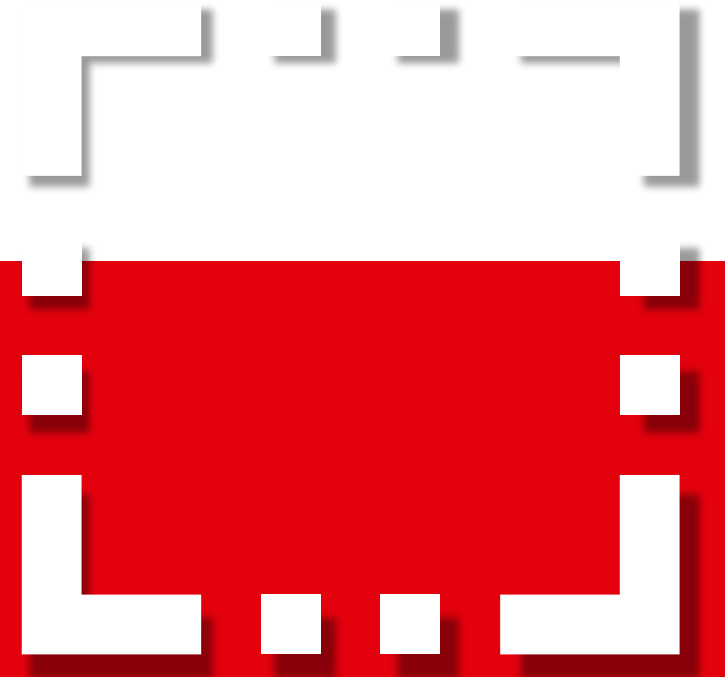
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Introduction

Section Outline

- What's in the news about e-interventions?

- Some questions for you

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What's in the news about e-interventions?

Schools turn to e-counseling to boost college admissions

tes - 17 August 2016

https://www.tes.com/us/news/breaking-news/schools-turn-e-counseling-boost-college-admissions
[21/11/2017)

Is online counselling safe?

The Telegraph – 11 November 2003

http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/health/3303282/Is-online-counselling-safe.html
[21/11/2017]

Thousands go online for therapy. But does it work?

the guardian – 12 February 2017

https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/feb/12/online-therapy-thousands-but-does-it-work
[21/11/2017]

Surge in online mental health appointments attacked by specialists

Independent – 20 March 2017

http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/health-news/online-therapy-mental-health-help-services-webcam-appointments-increase-messenger-nhs-depression-a7626496.html
[21/11/2017]

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Some questions for you…

How would you define e-interventions?

Do you know somebody offering e-interventions?

What is your personal interest in e-interventions?

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Unit 3.1
ICT as a bridge between clients and professionals

Section Outline

- The classical experience: personal meetings in a practice room

- Face-to-face scenarios require an adaption of the client

- Bridging of temporal and spatial limitations by means of ICT

- Reduction of organizational access barriers through ICT

- Which user groups are likely to benefit the most?

- Further good reasons for offering also online advice and intervention

- Why are advisors, counsellors and therapists sceptical about?

- Inhibitions of the client to direct, immediate contact with the advisor, counsellor or therapist

- Computer-mediated distance and threshold anxiety

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The classical experience: personal meetings in a practice room

Classically, psychological counselling and / or psychotherapy takes place in a face-to-face communication setting.

The person seeking advice or help goes

- to a practice or consulting room
- at a firmly agreed time

and discusses his or her concerns with an advisor, counsellor or therapist.

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Face-to-face scenarios require an adaption of the client

This type of communication requires a client to adapt to the given local and temporal offer of the advisor, counsellor or therapist.

If the client does not have the required mobility and / or time resources, he or she does not have access to a professional consulting and therapy offer.

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Bridging of temporal and spatial limitations by means of ICT

- Through the use of modern information and communication technologies in the context of counselling, coaching and therapy, conventional spatial and temporal limitations can be bridged quickly.

- With an internet-enabled computer or mobile device, clients can make inquiries and receive answers from virtually any location, even outside the opening hours of the practice.

Reduction of organizational access barriers through ICT

A practice, which is permanently available on the Internet and therefore accessible around the clock, already lowers the first organizational entry barriers.

Please discuss in plenary which user groups are likely to benefit the most if they do not (more or less regularly) have to come to a certain place at a certain time?

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Compare your answers with our answers:

New user groups are addressed such as...

- persons who are professionally full-time bound and limited in their flexibility in terms of the usual opening hours of a practice,

- persons who live in sparsely populated regions and / or areas that are underserved with help centres and practices,

- persons whose mobility is restricted due to physical handicaps; or

- people who are abroad and prefer to have counselling or therapy in their mother tongue.

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Further good reasons for offering also online advice and intervention

"Generation Internet" is used to an everyday consultation of the WWW for questions of all kinds.

With just a few search queries and clicks, they find information or come into contact with people with similar interests.

Explanations in the internet or viewpoints shared by others are used for the purpose of information, orientation, decision-making, and as directives.

It is obvious that digital natives take these opportunities not only with general topics such as music, recipes or DIY. Also with emotional, family, school or professional worries and difficulties they search the WWW for information and advice.

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Why are advisors, counsellors and therapists sceptical about the expansion of their professional practice to computer-assisted forms of communication?

Before telling you all the plausible reasons we have found, we would like you to discuss your own concerns with 3 other persons here.

Share your story!

Your group of 3 may write down and / or draw the main reasons in key points on a flipchart and then share with plenary. Be creative.

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Compare your answers with our answers

Advisors, counsellors and therapists are often sceptical about computer-assisted forms of communication because they value the following advantages in personal contact:

- Immediate and rich information from and about the client in the consultation room through various sensory channels.
- Nonverbal information through vocal tone, facial expressions, gestures, breathing, posture, clothing, jewellery, possibly smell...
- Direct perception of consistencies and inconsistencies between wording, nonverbal language and appearance that can be discussed
- Direct observation of the client's condition during the session enables the advisor, counsellor or therapist to instant and sensitive responses in case of crises.

The direct and multimodal approach to the client is a particular strength of the face-to-face setting.

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Inhibitions of the client to direct, immediate contact with the advisor, counsellor or therapist

However, the direct face-to-face contact does not seem to be equally appropriate for all clients:

Many potential clients feel intimidated by the fact of his or her direct and seemingly undisguised visibility for the practiced look of the advisor, counsellor or therapist.

This can be a major reason to refrain from professional help.

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Distancing by computer-mediated communication leads to the reduction of threshold anxiety

In such cases, the interposition of a medium in computer-mediated communication can help to bring about a greater distance between client and advisor/ counsellor/ therapist, thereby expanding the density and intensity of counselling / therapy.

The increased distance contributes to lowering the client's threshold anxiety.

Do you think it is a good idea to deal with shy clients in a computer-mediated way?

Or do you consider it an important success factor of counselling that a client can overcome himself or herself to a personal meeting?

Please discuss.

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Unit 3.2
Degrees of freedom in computer-mediated relations

Section Outline

- Sovereignty over the degree of anonymity

- Sovereignty over contact time

- Channel reduction

- How close, honest, coherent and binding is a computer-mediated relationship between client and advisor / counsellor / therapist?

- Closeness in computer-mediated relations

- Openness, especially in text-based counselling / therapy forms

CONTENT

Sovereignty over the degree of anonymity

One of the most appreciated benefits of clients is that they can determine the degree of anonymity themselves in online contact.

Depending on the counselling or therapy offer it is possible either to stay completely anonymous or to assign a pseudonym (nickname).

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Sovereignty over contact time

In online communication, advice seekers feel much more autonomous in controlling the counselling process than in a face-to-face setting.

Particularly in the case of asynchronous consultation (e-mail or forum), they have a high degree of freedom in choosing the appropriate contact time:

Clients determine the time they will spend on formulating an issue, sending it and reading the response, they rework their texts, regulate the advisory intervals by their own response frequency, and, if necessary, can be more uninhibited than in a face-to-face situation to break up the measure.

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Channel reduction

Furthermore, the reduction of communication to selected communication channels contributes to a more relaxed attitude of the client.

Particularly in the case of fear- and shame-filled topics, it can be easier for advice seekers to choose a text-based form of online communication.
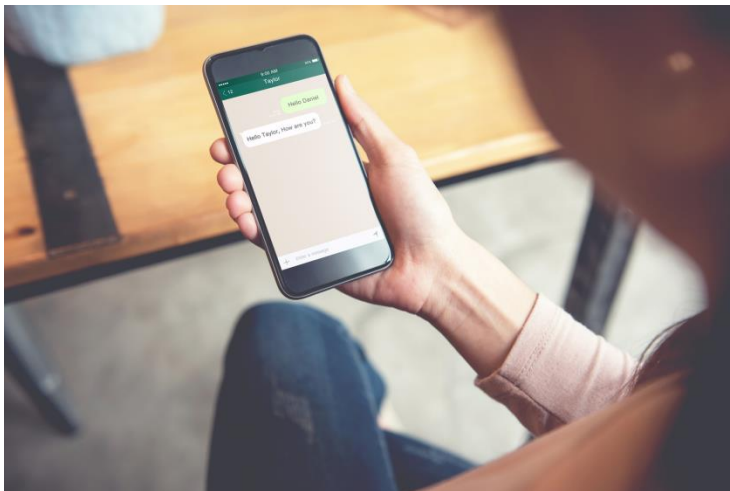
Then the problem described is in the foreground and not the person in their overall appearance.

Note:
Further information on channel reduction can be found in Training Module 8: "Psychological aspects and skills in online interventions. "

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How close, honest, coherent and binding is a computer-mediated relationship between client and advisor / counsellor / therapist?
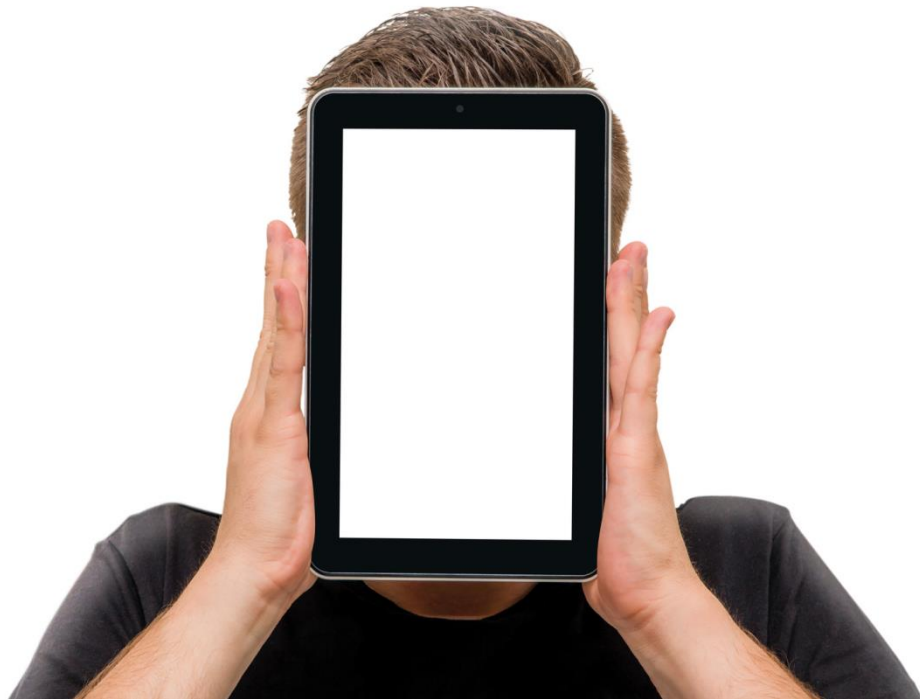
What do you think?

You may discuss this in plenary.

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Closeness in computer-mediated relations

Distance-proximity-paradox:
Computer-mediated distance keeps the proximity of a face-to-face contact away, but it makes it easier for the client to let the absent and often unknown advisor / consultant / therapist participate especially close in his or her personal experience (compare Döring, 2003, p. 367).

Experiences from practice confirm that online contacts can be emotionally very intense. Clients explain that it is easier for them - especially in asynchronous, text-based consultations - to explain problems they would not even talk about on the phone.

Are you surprised?

Do you have a personal experience?

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Openness, especially in text-based counselling / therapy forms

Especially in the case of text-based counselling and / or therapy offers, it can be assumed that clients, through the constellation of **anonymity, distance, contact control, channel reduction** and the high **sovereignty over their degree of openness**, feel a sufficiently high sense of security, that allows them to address and elaborate anxious or shame-filled concerns openly and relatively early in the process.

Thus it feels safer to take off the mask and show yourself.

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Unit 3.3
Benefits of text-based counselling and therapy

Section Outline

- Higher degree of self-reflection

- Clarity and relief by self-reflection

- Permanent documentation of the consultation process

- Development of a new reflective level

- Try it out and see!

- Reflection on the exercise: the client's perspective

- Reflection on the exercise: the counsellor's perspective

- Blended Counselling und Therapy

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Higher degree of self-reflection

The description of the inner world of experience requires concentration, intensive thinking and self-reflection.

The writer finds words, conceptions, sentences for his or her problem situation, and at the same time considers what information an advisor / counsellor / therapist would need in order to understand.

Usually the writer reworks his or her text while writing, finds more appropriate words, deletes sentences, works out important aspects more clearly, or rewrites text passages.

As written words remain, they have a higher binding character than spoken words.

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Clarity and relief by self-reflection

A valuable effect in the act of writing is that a client, through his or her high cognitive performance, often reaches new, more advanced ideas and insights when he or she elaborates on his or her concerns.

The resulting increase in clarity often leads to a first emotional relief even before the counsellor / therapist was contacted.
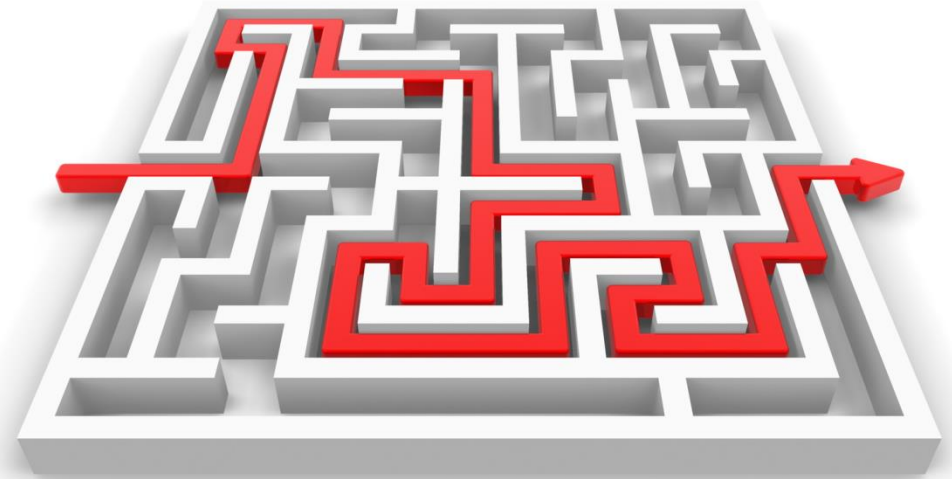

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Permanent documentation of the consultation process

Since online counselling and therapy predominantly takes place in written form, e.g. in the form of e-mail, chat or forum advice, the entire counselling or therapy process can be documented.

Not only the counsellor or therapist has the possibility to read the client's text several times and from different angles, but also clients can repeatedly read the written answers of the counsellor or therapist.

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Development of a new reflective level

It is often found that, when reading a text again, different aspects come to the fore as compared to the previous reading.

Re-reading helps to gradually understand an answer in its complexity. Thus it can still be a rich source of inspiration even after days or weeks.

Likewise, a look back at the entire consulting process can lead to meaningful insights about the implemented development steps so far.

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Try it out and see!

1. Put yourself in the role of a client. Invent a problem you want to ask an online counsellor. Please do not choose a real, personal problem for this exercise.

2. Write down the problem within 15 minutes. It would be ideal to use a computer's text editor to write and print your inquiry, but if no computer/printer is available, write it manually on paper. Mark your request with a recognition symbol.

3. The trainer collects the inquiries and distributes them randomly in the group. Make sure that you do not get your own request back. Now take on the role of an online counsellor receiving an inquiry.

4. Read the inquiry and formulate an answer within 30 minutes. It would be ideal to use a computer's text editor to write and print your answer, but if no computer/printer is available, write it manually on paper. Put the recognition symbol on your answer.

5. The trainer collects the inquiries and answers and gives them back to the questioners. The recognition symbol helps with the assignment.

6. Go back to your original role as a client. Read the answer to your inquiry.

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Reflection on the exercise: the client's perspective

- Did you find it easy to formulate a request?
- Did you have enough time?
- Have you written the text in one go or revised it every now and then?
- Did you have the feeling of having found the right words?
- Did you find it difficult or easy to write to an anonymous counsellor?
- How did you feel after you gave the text out of your hand?
- How did you feel when you got an answer?
- How long was the answer?
- Do you think the answer matches your questions?
- Any questions left unanswered?
- Do you feel understood?
- Do you feel encouraged to continue communicating in this way with your online counsellor?

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Reflection on the exercise: the counsellor's perspective

- How did you feel when you received the inquiry?
- How long was the inquiry?
- Did you get a clear picture of the facts?
- What emotions did you perceive while reading?
- How often have you read the inquiry or parts of it?
- Did you find it difficult or easy to formulate an answer?
- Did you have enough time for your answer?
- How long was your answer?
- Have you written your answer in one go or revised it every now and then?
- Did you have the feeling of having found the right words?
- Did you find it difficult or easy to write to an anonymous client?
- How did you feel after you gave the text out of your hand?
- Would you like to continue the communication in this way or are you missing something?

Note:
Further information on how to understand and respond to a client's inquiry can be found in Training Module 8:
"Psychological aspects and skills in online interventions."

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Blended Counselling und Therapy

Both face-to-face and online formats have their own peculiarities, which can be both beneficial and challenging to clients and consultants.

It is regarded as ideal, if an advisor, counsellor or therapist is able to offer a client a variety of low-threshold access paths to counselling and therapy, and, in the knowledge of the respective peculiarities in the different communication formats, flexibly works together with the client to develop viable paths for personal development.

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Check your knowledge

1. What barriers can be overcome by modern communication technologies?
2. What is one of the most appreciated benefits of clients in online contact?
3. What is channel reduction?
4. What does the proximity-distance paradox mean?
5. Indicate the main advantages of text-based interventions.

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Results

1. **External barriers:** classical counselling and therapies require the client to visit the specialist at certain time and place
Internal barriers: The client's fear of exposing oneself to the experienced perception of a specialist and being more visible and transparent to them than the client feels comfortable with at the beginning of a relationship.

2. **Anonymity / pseudonymity**

3. **Channel reduction** is, when only a part of the information is transmitted by the selection of a certain communication 'channel'. E. g.: In a text-based inquiry there is no information about facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice etc.

4. **Proximity-distance paradox :** Computer-mediated distance keeps the proximity of a face-to-face contact away, but it makes it easier for the client to let the absent and often unknown specialist participate very close in his or her personal experience.

5. **Advantages of text-based interventions:** Higher degree of self-reflection, clarity and relief by self-reflection, permanent documentation of the consultation process, development of a new reflective levels through repeated reading

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Imprint

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Coordinator: media k GmbH, Goethestr. 10, D-97980 Bad Mergentheim,
         phone +497931 99 27 30, fax +49 7931 99 27 31

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Author of Module 3 – Characteristics of computer-mediated communication in counselling and therapy

Evelyn Schlenk – contact: : Evelyn.Schlenk@ili.fau.de

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Therapy 2.0 Partnership

Germany		**media k GmbH (Koordinator)** Dr. Karin Drda-Kühn / Hans-Jürgen Köttner • Therapy2.0@media-k.eu • + 49 7931 99 27 30
Germany		**Innovation in Learning Institute – University of Erlangen-Nuremberg** Evelyn Schlenk • Evelyn.Schlenk@ili.fau.de • + 49 9131 856 1111
Slovenia		**Integra Institut, Institut za razvoj clovekovih potentialov** Sonja Bercko Eisenreich • sonja.bercko@eu-integra.eu • + 38 659 013 2641
Croatia		**Sveuciliste u Rijeci, Medicinski Fakultet** Dr. Tanja Franciskovic / Dr. Marina Crepulja • tanja.franciskovic@medri.uniri.hr • + 38 591 2000 000
Iceland		**Iceland Academy of the Arts** Björg Jóna Birgisdóttir • bjorg@lhi.is • + 354 552 4000
Austria		**Wissenschaftsinitiative Niederösterreich** Dr. Wolfgang Eisenreich • office@wissenschaftsinitiative.at • + 43 676 944 5447
Portugal		**Instituto Politecnico do Porto** Dr. Regina Silva • ras@eu.ipp.pt • + 351 222 061
Greece		**GUnet Akadimaiko Diadiktyo** Pantelis Balaouras / Constantinos Tsibanis • costas@noc.uoa.gr • + 30 210 7275603

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End of module

Congratulations!
You have completed this module!