

Voice-Messaging Medical Support Groups

A Powerful New Telecommunications Tool for Health-Care Organizations

An overview

This overview presents concepts for conducting medical and psychological support groups using a specially designed voice-messaging system as a forum for interaction.

On-line bulletin boards and "listservs" create a group dialogue by using an ongoing exchange of e-mail messages. In a similar way, voice-messaging groups create a group dialogue by using an ongoing exchange of voice-mail messages. The interaction is not live but occurs in carefully organized rounds over a period of days, weeks, or months.

Voice-mail or voice-messaging groups can be an invaluable asset to anyone who truly needs a therapeutic or educational support group but finds it difficult or impossible to attend in-person meetings—or to attend as often as is desired. For example:

- A young mother with breast cancer, whose overloaded schedule leaves no time for long bus rides across town to a support group
- An elderly man recovering from surgery—and too weak to travel
- A man with AIDS who would never want to be seen walking into an AIDS-services facility for a traditional face-to-face support group
- An adolescent fighting drug addiction, who needs to “check in” with his support group every single day—but can’t travel that far on a daily basis
- A Russian immigrant with prostate cancer who speaks no English and cannot find a local support group conducted in Russian
- Anyone geographically isolated in a rural area and unable to travel long distances to get to a support group

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Support from university researchers

Individuals offering formal and informal support to this project include research professors at:

- New York University
- Columbia University
- The University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill
- The University of Michigan

Articles published or pending

I have published articles on these concepts and systems in the newsletters of:

- The Association for the Advancement of Social Work in Groups
- The Association of Oncology Social Work

Articles on the pilot project at Cancer Care have been requested by the editors of the following two highly respected, peer-reviewed professional journals:

- Cancer Practice (American Cancer Society)
- The International Journal of Group Psychotherapy

Funding

The recent pilot project at Cancer Care, Inc., was funded under an educational grant from the pharmaceutical company Ortho Biotech.

References

I will gladly supply you with references. These would be from social service agency officials, faculty at various universities, the dean at the NYU school of social work, or other associates involved with this project.

The advantages of voice-messaging groups

Voice-messaging groups have several important advantages over Internet groups:

- They are universally accessible, requiring no personal computer or on-line connection—only access to an ordinary telephone.
- They convey the full sound and emotional expressiveness of the human voice, creating an intimate and very personal interaction. This expressiveness is lost in the e-mail messages used in on-line communication.
- They allow a more spontaneous and natural way of communicating: most people feel more comfortable talking than typing, especially when they are communicating about emotionally charged topics. Talking is also faster than typing.
- They allow client participation from many more locations than on-line groups, because telephones are available in many more locations than on-line personal computers.
- They are inexpensive to conduct, being far less costly than live telephone conference calls, and not requiring clients to purchase or maintain a personal computer.

Successfully conducted tests

The concepts presented here have been tested successfully in several settings, as described below. Both participants and clinicians have reported excellent results.

- A psychiatric outpatient facility

The concepts were tested with schizophrenic and other patients at an outpatient unit of the South Beach Psychiatric Center, a major psychiatric hospital located on Staten Island, New York.

- A national cancer agency

The concepts have recently been tested in a pilot project conducted at Cancer Care, Inc., an award-winning national cancer agency in Manhattan. Cancer Care provides counseling and educational seminars to cancer patients, their families and friends. The agency is a pioneer of service-delivery through new telecommunications media. The pilot project was backed by the NYU Ehrenkranz School of Social work and funded under an educational grant from Ortho Biotech.

- A private practice setting

These ideas have also been tested in a private-practice setting with bisexual men. Participants were coping with issues related to personal relationships and, in some instances, AIDS/HIV, depression, and drug and alcohol abuse. Referrals for these groups were often made through psychotherapists and other counselors.

How voice-messaging support groups are structured

A voice-mail support group can be structured in a great variety of ways. For the sake of simplicity, a very basic interaction is described below.

The interaction described here could be conducted using a relatively simple voice-messaging system. More full-featured systems allow for a much more sophisticated interaction. Even the interaction described below, however, could provide an extremely valuable experience for those involved.

A weekly support-group interaction might be structured as follows:

Anytime during the first part of the week—for example, anytime on Sunday, Monday, or Tuesday—each participant in the group would call the system (at whatever time is convenient to him or her) and, at a prompt, enter a code to access the system. He or she would then hear a brief or extended welcoming message from the facilitator, and then be given the opportunity share his or her concerns (at the tone) in a "sharing message" which would have a specific time limit (perhaps 2-4 minutes). The sharing messages thus delivered would be stored in the system but would not yet be available to other group members.

Midway through the week (probably on Wednesday), the group's facilitator would call the system and enter a special facilitator's code. He or she would then review the messages; create a new introductory and a final, summarizing message; intersperse between the group members' messages his or her own brief comments; and issue system commands to make all messages available to participants.

During the last part of the week (anytime Thursday - Saturday), participants would call the system, enter the access code, and listen to: the facilitator's introductory message; the messages of all the other members of the group (one by one, including any comments added by the facilitator); and, finally, the facilitator's final message(s).

Though the interaction among members is not instantaneous as it would be in in-person or live communication, it does provide—week by week—a full opportunity for interaction. Members are able to address each other directly, ask questions, make suggestions, and respond to what others have shared. Round by round, interaction builds. The time-delayed nature of the exchange allows time for reflection and makes participation extremely convenient.

If more frequent interaction is desired, a "round" could be completed once every day instead of once a week. For example, in a recent test of these concepts which I conducted in connection with the South Beach Psychiatric Center in New York City, six schizophrenic outpatients used these concepts to create a group dialogue over the weekend, when many of them felt isolated. Each would call the system Saturday morning and leave his or her "sharing message"; the facilitator would review these messages Saturday afternoon; and all messages would be available to the group Saturday evening. The same procedure was used on Sunday, creating two full rounds of communication over the weekend.

The concept's three major uses

Voice-messaging support-group “meetings” will probably be used most often in the following three ways:

- As supplemental “meetings” scheduled between traditional face-to-face meetings

Traditional support groups may find it difficult or impossible to meet as frequently in person as is necessary or desirable. These groups can maintain the flow of communication with “interim” voice-messaging meetings. For example, if an in-person meeting is possible only once a month, weekly interim voice-messaging “meetings” can be scheduled between the face-to-face sessions.

- As complete substitutes for traditional meetings

In certain situations, it may be impossible or undesirable ever to arrange an in-person meeting. In this situation the voice-messaging interaction will be the only “meeting” participants involve themselves in. These meetings can still be extremely valuable for participants.

- As an introduction to a face-to-face support-group

Newcomers may be hesitant to attend a face-to-face group because they fear they will be embarrassed or intimidated, because they do not know what to expect, or because they feel awkward about revealing personal information in front of a group.

Voice-messaging groups allow them to join a group interaction easily and from a safe distance. As they discover that others are supportive and helpful, they may decide to attend in-person group meetings.

The benefits to participants

Participation in voice-messaging support groups provides a number of advantages to participants, including:

Ease of participation and scheduling—which makes participation possible even for those overloaded with responsibilities at home or at work.

A less intimidating environment for those reluctant to share difficult personal issues face-to-face.

Access for individuals with limited mobility, such as the elderly, the disabled, the bed-ridden, those who are ill, children, or adolescents too young to drive.

Access for those isolated geographically—for example, those living in outlying suburbs or rural areas.

Easy access from multiple locations—from anywhere a telephone is available, whether at home, at work, at a friend's, or in a car.

Access to peer support for conditions or situations that are rare or less than widespread (an in-person group may be unavailable locally, even when a condition is relatively common).

Closer and more consistent connection with the group, which can easily “meet” and/or “check in” often (perhaps even daily) and thus build greater intimacy.

More-private participation—or even anonymous participation—for those especially concerned with privacy.

Potential for around-the-clock availability, which means members are at no time completely cut off from their support network.

Access to a particular group leader or simply to high-quality leadership, neither of which may be available locally. (Voice-messaging groups can also be conducted as leaderless self-help groups.)

The benefits to health care organizations

Implementing the program I am proposing will enable you and your health-care organization to:

Extend your community outreach

This system will allow your organization to deliver support-group services into the homes and day-to-day lives of your clients.

Focus and tailor your outreach efforts

You can offer voice-messaging support groups selectively, adding them in the areas of interest you have targeted as particularly important to your organization.

Create a powerful emotional bond between your organization and its clients

Support-group exchanges conducted via this voice-messaging system can be extremely moving and extraordinarily uplifting. If your organization provides this kind of interaction, many of the individuals involved will feel deeply grateful now and for years to come.

Build ongoing involvement with your organization

Many patients need ongoing support. Voice-messaging support groups—which might meet daily, weekly, monthly, or even quarterly—will keep them involved with your organization on a continuing basis.

Extend your outreach to women and the elderly

The overloaded schedules of most women and their understanding of the value of group support, and the reduced mobility of the elderly, make these two important populations prime targets for voice-messaging support-group interactions tailored to their needs.

Build your reputation for innovation

By offering this new kind of service, you will build your reputation as a progressive organization not only aware of modern technology but active in applying it to the universal human need for connection with others.

Make news locally or nationally

The media are always interested in covering innovative programs which use new technology in a new way—especially when there is a strong human-interest element in the story.

Comments from participants

The comments below are from individuals who have used the system I have created.

“Your voice mail support group last spring helped me look deeply into myself and come to know myself better.”

“... this [voice-messaging] exchange ... has been very helpful. All of it has been a very supportive experience....”

“Most importantly this [voice-messaging] telephone support group has helped me face and think through and talk through a variety of personal issues and concerns.... I have a better feeling of where I've come from and where I am today. This sharing has been a very powerful and therapeutic experience....”

"This voice support group was so great for me. People listening to me in a non-judgmental way, and infusing me with new ideas and perspectives ... something for me to look forward to...."

“Another highlight of the [voice-messaging] telephone support group has been the real high I have felt in allowing myself to be vulnerable....”

“I ... was extremely moved [during the voice-messaging exchange]. Not particularly by any one word or thing, but I realized as time went on, as I relaxed and got into this ... and heard one person after another with their questions and their issues and their testimonials and their upbeat and their downbeat—it almost brought tears to my eyes.”

“Normal daily activities are such distractions, and we don't get to talk as we do in this telephone group, with others, on a daily basis.... The voice mail is a way of putting distractions aside. I gain with each participation.”

"This has truly been uplifting, these conversations ... this is truly a great idea...."

“A positive thing that has emerged from this telephone support group: the sense of reinforcement. That was one of the things that I think I was looking for ... reinforcement. And the camaraderie that came out of this is was just a huge plus.”

“Without ... the telephone group none of these positive things [now occurring in my life] would be happening.”

Important points concerning these new concepts

A focus on small, structured groups

My concepts do not involve creating huge electronic bulletin boards of the kind often found on the Internet. Rather, their focus is on the creation of relatively small, focused groups of six to twelve participants. The dialogue created in such groups is usually focused and productive, in contrast to the idle chat of many on-line groups.

A major telecommunications trend

In telecommunications, it is often difficult to see the difference between insignificant fads and major trends. Ten years ago most Americans saw e-mail as a relatively insignificant innovation, a communications vehicle for computer hobbyists. Their perception was "in a box"—they did not see the bigger picture. Now, most Americans are aware that e-mail is a major trend (one that is even threatening to put the U.S. Postal Service out of business).

Today, voice messaging is also perceived "in a box." It is generally seen as a medium whose only significant use is to simulate a telephone answering machine. But voice messaging is much more than that. It is a format as powerful and flexible as e-mail. Voice-mail messages, like e-mail messages, are capable of creating group interactions.

A "next-generation" Internet application

Though my concepts have been developed for use off the Internet, they are forerunners of trends fast coming to the Internet. In the near future, programs like Netscape will allow anyone who wants to send an e-mail message to send a voice-mail message instead, simply by clicking an icon. The message will be received on the addressee's computer, available to be played on that computer at any time. Thus Internet group discussions, which are now based on an exchange of e-mail messages, will soon turn into voice-messaging groups—whenever those participating so desire.

The concepts I have developed sprang from the telephone revolution: the advent of voice messaging and fax machines, the coming of cellular and digital phones, the dramatic and continuing decline of long-distance rates, etc. But the telephone and Internet revolutions are merging. Still, voice-messaging is the only electronic forum universally available today.

A "democratic" medium, universally available

Unfortunately, 75% of American households are not on line today. Thus, no electronic forum for group communication is available to them. And minority groups have been shown to disproportionately left out of the Internet loop. However, voice-messaging—universally available—is a much more "democratic" or egalitarian forum.

Conducting a simple pilot with your clients

If you believe your agency would benefit from using these new concepts, you might want to consider conducting a simple voice-messaging group with some of your clients. A preliminary test could be conducted at relatively low cost—and without the purchase of any equipment. Your clients and staff member(s) would be provided with complete printed instructions and the telephone number(s) to call. (Even in the long run, no equipment purchase is necessary, as all services can be leased.)

Such a test would give your agency experience with an important emerging telecommunications technology. Further details can be sent to you upon request.

How voice-messaging won Harvard/Ford Foundation funding

In the early '90s, a Seattle agency for the homeless began providing its clients with voice mailboxes. Homeless individuals are usually also phoneless, and potential employers were unable to contact them. But with voice mailboxes, employers could call the clients and leave messages—without even being aware the clients were homeless. Clients would later retrieve messages from a borrowed or pay phone, and statistics showed that their chances of getting a job rose dramatically.

The agency won an award for innovations in the human services from Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, and funding from the Ford Foundation. Community Voice Mail is now in operation in major cities across the United States. The success of this project shows clearly that voice-messaging can be a powerful communications tool for low-income, disenfranchised, or marginalized populations.

An advantage in the search for funding

Many funding organizations realize that innovative uses of new communications technologies may hold great potential in social service delivery. They are eager to fund cutting-edge projects. Involvement in a pilot project using a universally accessible electronic medium could boost an agency's reputation for innovation and help it secure financial backing.

Cassette tape available

A cassette tape of some of the sessions of the Cancer Care support group is available to you upon request. Those involved in the Cancer Care group gave their written permission for sessions to be taped and shared with others important to advancing these concepts. If you are interested in this project, listening to one or more of these tapes may be of help.