

# *A Day in the Life of an Online Therapist*

Nelson, B. C. is a community of about 10,000 souls, nestled in the Selkirk Mountains, within the great range of Rocky Mountains. Although we're in southern B.C. and only 2-½ hours' drive from Spokane, Washington, we're not exactly easy to get to. The nearest airport frequently cancels flights because of low cloud ceilings. The pass connecting us to cities to the east is the highest in this part of the province, with frighteningly steep drop-offs. In winter, heavy snowfalls can make the roads difficult and dangerous, or altogether impassible. Two winters ago when the power went out for several hours, my wife and I went to the neighbours to gather around their wood stove for warmth.



*RALPH FRIESEN*

Our remoteness is also part of our mystique. It is said that this area holds a special healing energy. The veins of silver that lay embedded in the earth since time immemorial have been all but exhausted by mining beginning in the late 19th century, but now a new breed of prospectors speaks of crystal caves in the mountains. And local shops sell the crystal, valued for its healing energy. A large number of alternative healers practice their arts here—acupuncturists (my daughter is one), massage therapists, Roling practitioners, homeopaths, shamans, medicine men, time travellers.

And three e-counsellors, of whom I am one, all of us affiliates with EAP provider Shepell•fji. We don't necessarily see our work as "alternative." And yet we can appreciate why others might: our clients can be on the other end of the continent from ourselves; we neither see nor hear them; isn't there something magical about this?

My supervisor with Shepell•fji, Cedric Speyer, teaches bilocation, the simultaneous presence of a person in two places. And he exemplifies this principle. While fully occupying the corporate world, with the demands of efficient and short-term counselling that are part of it, he encourages what I would call a soul-connection with each person I work with via e-counselling. A quote he's shared with me goes as follows:

*"A total restructuring of our knowledge is required once you accept this new definition of a person: A person is a relationship of which the other is infinite. What will the Psychology Department make of that?"*  
(Sebastian Moore)

And so it is, when I awaken each weekday at 6, in the darkness and cold of my bedroom, easing

out of bed with care so as not to disturb my still-sleeping spouse, when I bestir myself to switch on my laptop, make a cup of green tea, and settle into my home office chair, I first offer a short prayer. That I may know the presence of my client, the person, through his or her written words, and that he or she may in turn recognize my presence in my written words, and in this experience of mutual presence—which sometime seems to create a Presence with a capital "p"—solutions may be found, or even a measure of healing.

As I offer myself to my counselling task in this way, I am mindful, at the same time, of the exigencies of everyday life. Although I may spend as much as an hour-and-a-half or, rarely, two hours on any given reply, my standard is actually to keep the reply within the usual bounds of a therapy hour. I may find myself writing in a way that is plain old garden variety employee assistance counselling, and needing to decide whether that's okay, or whether I need to go deeper.

The clients come with their range of issues, presenting anything from psychiatric issues to requests for advice on what to do with acting out children. Each morning I endeavour to pitch my work at the proper level. Generally it feels very intense, more so than face-to-face counselling, or in a different way. E-counselling doesn't allow me to sit back while the client speaks; I must stay continuously focused, continuously attuned. Some practitioners can get into "the zone," and sail along with ease, and sometimes I can, too, but I also have my times of sitting, thinking, writing, deleting, writing again . . . a sort of stumbling toward the precious goal of caring connection. >

As I come to the conclusion of my first reply of the day, I hear my wife getting ready for the day downstairs; I wrap up my work and we go for

our customary morning walk, down the hill and to Kootenay Lake Park. We chat as we walk along the lake shore, watching the ever-present Canada geese, or the cute little black coots paddling in groups. Part of each walk is held in silent meditation, and my mind rushes around to different problems and worries, and I watch that happening, letting go, letting go. Then we sing a morning song in German, in the tradition of our ancestors, walk up the hill back to the house, have a shower and breakfast—and I resume e-counselling. Another reply and it's coffee time. After that break, still another reply or sometimes two, making three or four for the day, and that will be all. In the afternoon I have face-to-face clients, or I go to pick up my granddaughter—she's in Grade One—at her school, and come home and play stuffies or dolls with her.

The days are full. A bit of TV or reading in the evening, and then my wife and I do our gratitude practice—naming three things for which we're thankful that day—and it's off to bed. Often, I speak of my gratitude for the privilege of e-counselling, being able to practice this challenging, deeply rewarding science.

**"Surviving is important.  
Thriving is elegant."  
Maya Angelou**



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