



Artificial intelligence raises new questions for counselors

Question: I teach in a graduate counseling program and also have a small private practice. For both my students and myself, I like to anticipate new risk management issues that are on the horizon. What do you anticipate will be an important concern in 2018 and beyond?

Answer: The rapidly growing field of artificial intelligence (AI) looms large for counselors and other mental health professionals and presents myriad risk management, ethics and legal concerns. What exactly is AI? The Merriam-Webster.com dictionary site defines it as follows:

1) A branch of computer science dealing with the simulation of intelligent behavior in computers.

2) The capability of a machine to imitate intelligent human behavior.

Whether or not we realize it, we are already living in a world filled with many applications of AI that make our lives safer, easier and more enjoyable. I, for one, need to replace an old automobile and am looking for one with lane-departure warning and assist features that so my spouse will not label me a back-seat driver when he is at the steering wheel. That is one important use of AI.

Many of us enjoy asking Alexa, the personal voice assistant from Amazon, to play our favorite Motown tunes or to give us the current local temperature. We are increasingly relying on smartphone apps such as Uber and Waze to get us where we want to go. We are also turning to mobile apps to do our banking or receive notifications of potentially fraudulent activity on our credit card accounts. All of these programs utilize some form of AI that gathers data from us and employs algorithms to provide the

services we have come to want or need in the modern world.

But how does AI translate to the counseling profession and affect the future of counseling risk management and ethics? For school counselors, AI may help identify students who are at risk so that intervention and resources can be offered in a timely way. For counselor educators, AI might be used to make grading a quicker process, allowing them to spend more time on true interaction and pedagogy with students. For practicing counselors, new apps may assist in tracking client status and treatment progress.

One example of a new program launched in 2017 is called Woebot. This “chatbot” is essentially an AI entity that provides conversation between the app and its user, offering self-help guidance, monitoring and assistance in changing negative thinking. It is based on techniques used in cognitive behavior therapy, although it is not specifically labeled as therapy or treatment. The service runs through Facebook Messenger. For further explanation, see tinyurl.com/y7ye2oqd and tinyurl.com/y7vto93g.

Chatbots might offer assistance to people who have limited resources for traditional mental health therapy or who would otherwise forgo counseling because of the perceived stigma associated with mental health treatment. Predictably, however, use of such AI applications is not without potential problems. Both counselors and clients should carefully consider the following issues:

❖ Are the responses from a chatbot truly designed to help each individual user, or are they programmed on a cookie-cutter basis?

❖ Is the information provided based on reliable evidence?

❖ Are the conversations and platform secure? What about stored information? Because the chatbot may not be considered a “covered entity” under the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), does the user understand that there may be limits to the confidentiality and privacy of any information shared through the app? Is the platform updated regularly to avoid compromise of this information?

❖ Could the conversation mislead the user into thinking that he or she does not need traditional mental health treatment?

❖ Does the company providing the chatbot sell the information to third parties?

On a wider scale, I would encourage counselors to converse with colleagues and become involved in developing new ethics rules governing the growing use of AI. It would also be wise to keep abreast of possible new laws and regulations that may shape the future of AI in the mental health arena. ❖

Anne Marie “Nancy” Wheeler is an attorney licensed in Maryland and the District of Columbia. The information presented here is for educational purposes only. For specific legal advice, please consult your own local health care attorney.

Letters to the editor:
ct@counseling.org