

DR TAMMY FLETCHER (SL: Avalon Birke)
'Mental Health Outreach in Second Life: Past, Present and Future'
Mental Health Symposium June 18th 2016

[2016/06/18 15:56] Carolyn Carillon: Hi everyone.
Today's presentation is being transcribed so those without audio or who require text only can participate in real time.

A little explanation about this service.

Voice-to-text transcriptionists provide a translation of the key ideas discussed, NOT a word for word transcription.

Voice-to-text services provide an in-the-moment snapshot of ideas and concepts, so that those who are unable to hear or to understand the audio program are able to participate in real-time.

You will see the transcription in Nearby Chat.

Transcription is provided by Virtual Ability, Inc.

Your transcriptionists for this session are LoriVonne Lustre and me, Carolyn Carillon.

We will identify the speakers by their names (initials):
TF: Dr. Tammy Fletcher

[2016/06/18 15:58] Carolyn Carillon: <<transcription starts>>
[2016/06/18 16:01] LV (lorivonne.lustre): <<transcription begins>>

[2016/06/18 16:02] Orange Planer: Hello and welcome to the Virtual Ability Mental Health Symposium.
The title of this session is "Mental Health Outreach in Second Life: Past, Present, and Future."
My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed... Oh sorry, wrong skit. My name is Orange Planer. Most of the salient details about me are in my profile. Feel free to read it. The rest of my time is dedicated to saving the IT world at work where I am the netw [sic]

It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you Tammy Fletcher.

Tammy is Avalon Birke in Second Life, founder of Wellness Island (2006-2011), Second Life's first sim devoted entirely to mental health resources for residents.

As one of the first practitioners to bring mental health resources into Second Life in 2006, Dr. Fletcher has worked to help SL residents become educated consumers, and to bridge to RL services when needed.

She founded "Guiding Lights," a formal program of instruction for peer counselors in Second Life, and established gridwide "SOS" kiosks for residents needing RL emergency referrals anywhere in the world.

In her real life, Dr. Fletcher is an author, educator, advocate, and licensed psychotherapist. She maintains an active private practice, where she specializes in treating anxiety and depressive disorders from an integrative perspective.

Dr. Fletcher has been featured twice in programs by SL machinimist Draxtor Despres, discussing mental health and advocacy in a virtual environment. Please hold your questions until the talk is over.

Thank you.

[2016/06/18 16:04] Avalon Birke: Welcome and thank you for being here! In SL my name is Avalon Birke, and I am the Clinical Director of the Virtual Mental Health Center.

In RL, I'm Dr. Tammy Fletcher, a licensed psychotherapist in private practice, an author and educator.

I'm here today to offer what will hopefully be the unique perspective of someone who has been working with mental health services in Second Life for nearly a decade.

Back in 2005, I had heard a little about Second Life, and thought this would be something like The Sims, only better.

In 2006, I created an account, logged on, and expected to be here for about 20 minutes.

I have been here ever since. This is my tenth year in Second Life.

Why am I here today? I was honored when Gentle contacted me to come and present today. The timing was perfect, as we have been busy at the Virtual Mental Health Center and in our Group,

the Mental Health Network. The timing was right to come and talk about not only where we have been with regard to mental health in this virtual environment, but where we can go from here.

So, what will we be talking about today?

A little about the history of mental health in Second Life.

Why mental health resources in a virtual world matter.

What we are up to currently, and some ideas for where we can go from here.

We will have time for Questions and Answers at the end of the presentation.

First, let me start with a little history:

Second Life began in June of 2003. Media attention increased around 2005 – BusinessWeek, Wired magazines.

In 2006, there were 1-2 residents listed as psychologists or counselors. There was also a growing interest in SL as a platform for education.

So I wondered, why not Social Services, as well? In discussions with people I met here, it made sense to see what we could conceivably offer. That's where it began.

In 2006, I launched a Mainland center with mental health resources, like bookshelves with general information, and web browsers set for mental health information sites.

In 2007, I expanded my work and founded Wellness Island – the grid's first sim devoted entirely to mental health education and resources.

I purchased the island, and managed its activities. Interest was substantial – both from residents seeking support, and from real life clinicians. Much more than I expected.

Another thing that surprised me was that we had interest from Role Players, too – people who wanted to role play as counselors or doctors, and even those who wanted to role play mental illness.

I have no issue with role playing – to each his own, especially in an environment that fosters freedom and creativity, but we kept this project focused on real life professionals and residents who were genuinely seeking mental health education and resources.

Around this time, Second Life saw the beginning of Nonprofit Commons in April of 2007, and The Heron Sanctuary in June 2007. Social services had officially taken hold, in a big way.

I'd like to tell you a bit about what we offered through the various Wellness Island projects.

[2016/06/18 16:13] Gentle Heron: The Heron Sanctuary -> Virtual Ability

[2016/06/18 16:13] Avalon Birke: We developed an extensive library of resources, from diagnoses to stress reduction to relationships.

My goal was to provide educational materials that residents could take with them to real life practitioners if needed – to provide enough general information to get helpful conversations started.

I'd like to stop and stress that in no way did we present ourselves as a substitute for real life medical or psychological care. We wanted to help residents become educated consumers, and feel confident in reaching out for RL support when needed.

We did public speaking – educational booths at events, slide shows, workshops, and events like this one.

We tried some virtual counseling – a “beta” version. I say “beta” because while I believe people can benefit from talking to a therapist in a virtual environment,

I think the jury is still out on the best way to deliver distance therapy, maintain confidentiality, and be as prepared as possible for RL emergencies and follow-up care.

We published a quarterly magazine, “Wellness”, and we have some old copies available for viewing in our Center on Nonprofit Commons.

When the demand grew, we began a formal training program for Peer Counselors here in Second Life. This was called Guiding Lights, and was housed at Nonprofit Commons starting in 2010.

My friend Kat Klata, who sadly passed away just a few years ago, was instrumental in running Guiding Lights, and was our Lead Peer Counselor.

We developed and distributed “SOS” kiosks with RL emergency service information from around the world – phone numbers and websites.

By request, we experimented with some credential screening for current SL clinicians, to provide a clearinghouse for their RL qualifications and to help assure residents that their SL counselor was RL qualified.

Quite often, in both worlds, those who seek mental health services might not know what the letters behind the names mean...

...what is an LCSW compared to an MFT? What is licensure about? We did a lot of work in consumer education, with the goal of maximizing each person’s chances of finding the right fit when seeking RL help.

What kinds of people came to see us?

Second Life residents from all over the world. They included people who:

- 1) Lacked geographic access to counseling or resources,
- 2) Were not ready in RL to talk to a professional – SL felt safer,
- and 3) who may have had SL-specific issues or concerns, and wanted those understood without labeling them as pathology.

Let me give you an example, let’s say a RL female presented herself as a male furry. I might ask about that,

as there is nearly always a fascinating story behind a resident’s choice of avatar (especially furies!).

But I didn’t see it as a symptom of mental illness, in itself. It was just a way of presenting oneself here.

In other words, a Second Life therapist could be expected to have a certain amount of cultural sensitivity around what it means to be an active member of the SL environment.

Others who utilized our services and materials were real life educators, researchers, clinicians, and counseling students,

Sometimes, people exploring the concept of virtual mental health service delivery, and whether or not it was a viable business option.

Next, what kinds of issues did residents present to us?

Almost without exception, issues were identical to people seeking real life counseling or resources.

These included relationship troubles, depression, anxiety, identity issues, sometimes around gender identity, gender roles, and sexual preference.

Still, there were some very “SL” factors involved, with challenges like: “I found out my SL spouse has an alt who is cheating on me.”

“The woman I am in love with here is actually male.”

“I am in SL nearly all the time. My relationships, family, and work are suffering.”

We occasionally came across some interesting differences between SL and RL. One pattern we noticed, for example had to do with Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID).

A surprising number of people claimed to have Dissociative Identity Disorder (aka Multiple Personality Disorder).

Between 2006 and 2013, we were contacted by more than a dozen Second Life residents who reported that they had been diagnosed with DID.

Some of these were undoubtedly alts, but not all.

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), Dissociative Identity Disorder occurs in only .01% to 1% of the general population.

We were unable to confirm or disprove the reported diagnoses. But, that was true for ANY reported diagnosis.

We were not here to diagnosis, but to provide information and refer. Our standard procedure was to take any claim at face value, offer some support, and refer to RL resources.

As I mentioned, we also had a significant number of residents who openly stated they did not have a mental health disorder, but wanted to role play as if they did. We declined requests to role play.

So...where have we been all this time??

I've been here all along, but not as engaged in mental health outreach. I had a dissertation to write, a daughter to send off to college, and just the average activities of daily life.

Wellness Island was sold in 2011. It was just not financially feasible to continue to spend hundreds of dollars a month in tier and other costs.

We have always maintained a mainland presence ever since, still present, just on a smaller scale.

We've been on the Drax Files Radio hour, done videotaped lectures for RL university classes, etc.

We are now housed on Plush, at Nonprofit Commons – I invite you to come and visit! There is a landmark to Virtual Mental Health in my profile.

What's Next for Mental Health Outreach in SL?

There are still a number of legitimate clinicians, educators, nurses, social workers, and researchers in Second Life.

Events like this one help us network as a community, so I am very appreciative of Virtual Ability, Gentle Heron, and iSkye Silverweb for bringing us all together.

Our goals include developing new educational materials for our libraries, offering peer-led support groups, and continuing to speak about the value of this virtual space,

and the ways it can be used to share mental health information with anyone who needs it, in an ethical and responsible manner.

Finally, we are updating and republishing our Wellness Directory, listing as many in-world resources as we can gather.

If you have an in-world resource connected with mental health, such as a service, a place to visit, a class, a group, send me a notecard and I will get some information to you.

In closing, Second Life is a wonderful environment for many things. I include mental health outreach as one of the many ways Second Life can enrich people's lives.

We've kept a lower profile in recent years, but we will continue to offer education and resources for any resident who needs them for hopefully many more years to come.

Thank you all for listening. Are there any questions?

[2016/06/18 16:34] Carolyn Carillon: QUESTION: Dr. Fletcher, will Virtual Ability be posting your slides, or will you make them available on SlideShare?

[2016/06/18 16:34] Carolyn Carillon: TF: I signed a release so I'm assuming my slides will be posted by Virtual Ability

[2016/06/18 16:34] Gentle Heron: Yes, on our website with the transcript from the session

[2016/06/18 16:35] Gentle Heron: Avalon, an idea to consider. While there has been no research on occurrence of disability in SL, there was research on users of "casual online games" that showed a higher percentage of people with disabilities there than in the RL population. And the population of people with disabilities in these games was heavily skewed toward more severe disabilities. It's likely the same in SL. So perhaps you would in fact see a higher than expected percentage of folks with DID here than in RL populations. Comment?

[2016/06/18 16:35] Carolyn Carillon: TF: Absolutely

That would make sense

Although I don't see DID as a disability

It's a mental health diagnosis

but we could extrapolate out to all kinds of things

about why this kind of environment is conducive to providing support or services

to folks with all kinds of diagnoses

mental health, emotional health or physical health

[2016/06/18 16:36] Gentle Heron: This is a supportive environment for sure

[2016/06/18 16:36] MSheetsDPCMA: QUESTION: How did you get people to come to your island and utilized your services before you sold it?

[2016/06/18 16:37] Carolyn Carillon: TF: I didn't do much to get people to come to our island

it was puzzling to me

there was a need

people were looking

as much as I like to shop for shoes

I also like to go to some of the more beautiful sims and just sit and look at the water

[2016/06/18 16:37] Roxie Marten: I am happy to see someone who sees the power of SL is more than fashion shows and selling shoes

[2016/06/18 16:37] Carolyn Carillon: TF: I have a disability as well I have MS

and I take advantage of SL just like anyone else so I can go and dance and be peaceful

Wellness Island was user friendly for a lot of people news spread by word of mouth

we had more social services and academic people in SL

I went to more events like this one

we had more traffic

I couldn't keep up with it

[2016/06/18 16:38] Tredi Felisimo: QUESTION: There are legal challenges to practicing therapeutic services in SL yes? Is it still illegal, in the US, at least?

[2016/06/18 16:39] Carolyn Carillon: TF: that's a question that's always at the forefront of my mind

and should be on the mind of anyone who's connected with physical or mental health in SL

I don't know if legal is the word

we're still working with our licensing bodies in the US

it varies from country to country

sometimes it doesn't matter where the practitioner practices

for them to call themselves a licensed practitioner

I practice in California

I can provide therapy for a list of countries and states

but I usually stick to California

we're all supposed to follow those guidelines

people don't

and it's just a matter of time before there are repercussions

what I think is important

is to try to be a voice for the need for distance mental health

support services

but to try to set up guidelines to provide that ethically

I hope that answered your question

[2016/06/18 16:41] Gentle Heron: The military now does tele-mental health services. And there is an insurance code for it already.

[2016/06/18 16:40] Roxie Marten: QUESTION: what has been the reaction from your colleagues in the real world ?

[2016/06/18 16:41] Carolyn Carillon: TF: Roxie, I love you! Thank you!

I don't hide that I do this

I've tried to educate people

I've taken people on tours

I don't think I've ever had anything but a polite "Jee Tammy, that's special"

kind of reaction

and I don't care

I'm too old

and I like it here too much to care
I do care about the ethics and all of you guys
but there are people who still can't do their own email
I wish they'd come on board
because I think this is the future
I wish there was one person who got it in my RL
people who are clinicians here are very connected
but we usually don't live in the same city

[2016/06/18 16:42] Gentle Heron: QUESTION: Avalon, I still have a copy of (and even found it!) an article you wrote called "There's No 'K' in Psychology." Do you remember that article? Is what you wrote still valid? Any solutions to the problem?

[2016/06/18 16:43] Carolyn Carillon: TF: Hmm
Oh my gosh, yes
the reason for the title
is if you look up counselling or psychologist
you'd see a K or a P
it was so blatant that people were pretending to be counsellors
if someone said they were role playing
that's ok
that's honest
but someone who says they're a licensed psychologist
running a private practice in SL
I think that's criminal
just like it was someone pretending to be a physician
that was the idea behind that article
I don't see the same prevalence
that existed even 4 or 5 years ago
where people are pretending
but I still see some
I don't think I could plug every hole in that dam
but we can educate consumers
and say 'here are some questions to ask to see if this is the right person for you'
because you are a consumer
whether you're buying a car or seeing a therapist
it's a different kind of product
but you have the same rights
and you should have the same expectations

[2016/06/18 16:45] MatildaMoontree: QUESTION: Do you provide a list of inworld clinicians/therapists that are verified, or that you approve of?

[2016/06/18 16:46] Carolyn Carillon: TF: Matilda, that goes back to the wellness directory I mentioned
we weren't endorsing those people
but we had a directory we distributed
we're in the process of resurrecting that

[2016/06/18 16:46] MatildaMoontree: Oh good :)

[2016/06/18 16:46] Lucia TopHat: QUESTION: Do you remember the date or title of your interview with the Drax Files?

[2016/06/18 16:46] Carolyn Carillon: TF: Lucia not off the top of my head but I have them somewhere

one was on the Drax Files Radio Hour
the other one was on Draxter Second Life Adoptions

[2016/06/18 16:47] MatildaMoontree:

<https://draxfiles.com/2014/09/19/show-37-virtual-therapy/>

[2016/06/18 16:47] Carolyn Carillon: TF: those are googlable searches

I can put a link to get to them from the center

ah there you go

there's one

thank you Matilda

[2016/06/18 16:51] MatildaMoontree: a later vid:

<https://draxfiles.com/2015/05/29/show-70-all-about-vw-therapy-rerun/>

[2016/06/18 16:47] Carolyn Carillon: TF: Any other questions?

[2016/06/18 16:48] Carolyn Carillon: Orange Planer: QUESTION: Some years ago, I participated in a group therapy or coached session

[2016/06/18 16:48] Carolyn Carillon: OP: and one of the other residents decided I was to be harrassed

followed me around SL

doing annoying things

how do you deal with that?

[2016/06/18 16:48] Carolyn Carillon: TF: let me make sure I understand

how do you personally move forward feeling safe after being harrassed?

[2016/06/18 16:49] Carolyn Carillon: OP: No. I informed the coach this was going on

and I asked how they'd deal with it

if I go to a session where I'm supposed to be getting help

and someone wants to do me harm

I wanted to know how the coach would prevent that

[2016/06/18 16:49] Carolyn Carillon: TF: And what kind of answer did you get?

[2016/06/18 16:49] Carolyn Carillon: OP: I didn't get one

[2016/06/18 16:49] Carolyn Carillon: TF: And this was allowed to continue?

[2016/06/18 16:50] Carolyn Carillon: OP: I let them know I was not going to participate in the activity if there wasn't some assurance that I wasn't going to be harrassed

[2016/06/18 16:50] Carolyn Carillon: TF: I'd feel the same way

Most of us would

That's terrible

SL has its own special flavour of harrassment

but I've seen that happen in RL

We're trained to manage it

and we need to do that

so I'm sorry that happened to you
and it sounds like your concerns weren't really addressed
Any other questions including "ask a therapist" kinds of questions?

[2016/06/18 16:51] Aurora Grace (skylirstarz): QUESTION: Is there a place or group to support group therapy here?

[2016/06/18 16:52] Carolyn Carillon: TF: We're beginning at the Virtual Mental Health Center at Nonprofit Commons

we're starting a group

we have a few others in the works

we announce it on the Mental Health Network

it's a free group

you're welcome to join

or visit the center

we'll have posters or notecards as we're able to add classes

there may be more

Virtual Ability does a fantastic job

Gentle, would you call yours support groups?

[2016/06/18 16:53] Carolyn Carillon: GH: On Health Info Island there are 120 posters for peer support groups in SL

[2016/06/18 16:53] Carolyn Carillon: TF: I'd recommend it
I'd vouch for them

[2016/06/18 16:53] Lucia TopHat: Rienna Rieko, who spoke earlier, is starting up a DBT group soon.

[2016/06/18 16:54] iSkye Silverweb: I've always told people we are a 'cross-disability community of support for people with real world disabilities who want to thrive in virtual worlds' so we're not exactly a support group but more a community of people who 'get' what it is like to have a disability

[2016/06/18 16:53] LV (lorivonne.lustre): [16:52] MatildaMoontree: QUESTION: Do you have one planned that focuses on PTSD?

[2016/06/18 16:54] Carolyn Carillon: TF: No but we could

We will add groups in response to what groups people want

PTSD is something I work with every day in RL

If we had enough interest, we'd add it

that's a great idea

[2016/06/18 16:54] Amora Anthony: Rienna's DBT group can help PTSD

[2016/06/18 16:54] Carolyn Carillon: TF: for sure
definitely

Rienna's group is one of many

we can talk about ways to help yourself & help each other

[2016/06/18 16:55] Gentle Heron: Thank you Avalon. It's always so important to know our history. What you have shared surely shows that this environment is "real." You certainly are real. I'm sure our audience agrees.

[2016/06/18 16:55] Carolyn Carillon: TF: thank you all so much

I'll continue to advocate in both worlds

look at what we've all done

so thank you all for being here

[2016/06/18 16:56] MatildaMoontree: thank you so much, Avalon.

[2016/06/18 16:56] Ruby Vandyke: yes, thanks for such an interesting presentation!

[2016/06/18 16:56] LV (lorivonne.lustre): <<transcription ends>>

[2016/06/18 16:56] Carolyn Carillon: <<transcription ends>>