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## **Abstract and executive summary**

**Federal Office of Public Health**

**Use of decisive factors in email counselling of SafeZone.ch**

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## Abstract

On the basis of email counselling provided in German and Italian<sup>1</sup> by the online addiction counselling platform SafeZone.ch between April 2014 and July 2017, this study looks at the process and content of the email counselling and the decisive factors employed in the email counselling interactions. From a total body of 1,088 email counselling cases, a sample of 100 was taken as a basis on which to analyse the decisive factors. Prior to the study, an international literature review was conducted in order to operationalise the decisive factors in an analysis matrix. The matrix consists of five general decisive factors (based on Klaus Grawe's counselling approach) and six specific decisive factors (that correspond to the specific context of email counselling). The content of the sample was then analysed with regard to these decisive factors. The results of the analysis show that the email counselling provided by SafeZone.ch is characterised by a uniform counselling practice. From an external perspective, this uniformity is remarkable given the way in which the counselling services are organised. The profile of those seeking advice and the content of email counselling interactions indicate that the e-counselling services reach a broad audience. General and specific decisive factors are widely employed by the counselling experts at SafeZone.ch. The use of decisive factors results in client-focused language and an authentic writing style. The email counselling provided by SafeZone.ch employs a resource-based and solution-focused counselling strategy and focuses on co-production between the counsellor and the person seeking advice. The analysis matrix used in this study lends itself to further use in counselling as well as in the relatively new research field of online addiction therapy.

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<sup>1</sup> Email counselling provided by SafeZone.ch in French was launched in September 2017 and was therefore not included in this study.

## Executive Summary

### I. Subject matter and questions

This study analyses email counselling, which the online addiction counselling platform SafeZone.ch has been providing on a free and anonymous basis since 2014 on behalf of the Federal Office of Public Health (FOPH). Requests for advice by email are received centrally via SafeZone.ch and answered by one of a total of 40 experts from cantonal specialist addiction centres. On the basis of 1,088 e-counselling exchanges in German and Italian<sup>2</sup> between April 2014 and July 2017, this study looks at the process and content of the email counselling, as well as the decisive factors employed in email counselling exchanges.<sup>3</sup>

“Decisive factors” is an umbrella term for various interventions by a specialist counsellor which together are assumed to have a specific effect on the person seeking advice. Based on this definition, this study explores the central questions of which decisive factors are of general relevance in the text-based format of email counselling and to what extent these decisive factors are employed in email counselling provided by SafeZone.ch. The question of effectiveness, in other words, the impact achieved in the person seeking advice, is not addressed within the scope of this study.<sup>4</sup> The study provides an evidence-based framework for optimisation of email counselling provided by SafeZone.ch, and contributes to knowledge gain in the relatively new research field of online addiction therapy.

### II. Methodology

A literature review of published studies in English, German and French was conducted and the latest research findings in the field of online addiction therapy were first discussed and operationalised for the purpose of analysing the email counselling provided by SafeZone.ch. This operationalisation formed the basis of the quantitative analysis of the process and content of the full body of 1,088 counselling cases and the qualitative analysis of the use of decisive factors in a sample of 100 email counselling exchanges. The representativeness of the random sample drawn from the full body was tested and confirmed with regard to defined variables. The data were coded and analysed quantitatively and qualitatively using the IT program MAXQDA.

### III. Results of analysis

#### Results of the process and content analysis of email counselling provided by SafeZone.ch

- **Profile of those seeking advice:** The individuals seeking advice are more likely to be female (60%) than male (40%), and predominantly communicate in German (95%), with a small minority communicating in Italian (5%). 87% of those seeking advice are aged between 19 and 55, although email counselling is used by all age groups (from age 13). Of those seeking advice, the proportion of directly affected individuals (48%) is similar to the proportion of friends or family members (46%). Other actors, such as experts and interested parties, also seek advice but account for a smaller percentage. Overall, these results show that the email counselling provided by SafeZone.ch reaches a broad and heterogeneous audience. The results confirm that the low-threshold access to email counselling is a key basic condition.
- **The email counselling process:** The email counselling provided by SafeZone.ch displays a number of specific characteristics with regard to process, which, based on existing research, should be considered as specific to email counselling. These include the high

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<sup>2</sup> Email counselling provided by SafeZone.ch in French was launched in September 2017 and was therefore not included in this study.

<sup>3</sup> According to the SafeZone.ch statistical tool, a total of 1,356 counselling interventions by email took place in the study period. The comparably small number of email counselling cases that were available for inclusion in this study is due to the fact that when the data were provided in July 2017, a number of e-counselling cases had not yet been closed. There were also a number of interventions that had not been archived by counsellors. This study only analysed email counselling interventions that had been archived.

<sup>4</sup> Impact analysis is difficult for a number of reasons, including from a methodological point of view, as email counselling provided by SafeZone.ch presumes client anonymity, so it is not possible to ask clients to complete surveys.

proportion of counselling cases with relatively few exchanges: those seeking advice were most likely to contact a counsellor once (56%) or 2–5 times (33%). The number of exchanges is reflected in the duration of the counselling, which in most cases (73%) lasts a maximum of eight weeks. Another feature that was observed that is specific to email counselling, is the lack of a defined conclusion of the counselling. Only in 15% of the cases a conclusion was explicitly defined between the counsellor and the person seeking advice.. According to the latest research, the relatively small number of interactions and the frequently undefined conclusion should not be seen as failures as we can assume that in recognising the problem and writing it down, the client has taken important steps towards finding a solution. In terms of time, the analysis shows that requests are more likely to be received during the day and at the beginning of the week.

- **Content of email counselling:** The email counselling provided by SafeZone.ch addresses a broad range of addictions. The counselling is much more likely to involve substance-related addictions than non-substance-related addictions. In terms of substance-related addictions, people are most likely to seek advice due to alcohol (33%), followed by cannabis (21%) and cocaine (13%). In terms of non-substance-related addictions, the most common requests are for pathological gambling and gaming addictions. The addiction issues are often associated with other problems, most commonly with physical or mental health issues (40%) and relationship problems (37%). It is relatively common for experts to refer clients to other bodies and resources; however, triage in the sense of directly referring clients to another body was only observed in isolated cases, in line with existing research into email counselling.

**Results on the use of decisive factors in email counselling by SafeZone.ch**

- **Operationalisation of decisive factors:** The reviewed research discusses decisive factors in email counselling as a conceptual question without providing a comprehensive model for operationalising the decisive factors for the purpose of analysing email counselling. Drawing on conceptual research bases, the following analysis matrix with general and specific decisive factors was developed. The general decisive factors refer to Klaus Grawe’s counselling approach, which is frequently cited in the research literature for use in text-based online counselling and on which the email counselling services of Safe-Zone.ch are based. The specific decisive factors concern the specific parameters that characterise email counselling as opposed to face-to-face counselling. In the detailed analysis matrix which is derived from the study, each decisive factor is also operationalised by means of linguistic and content-related text elements, which the experts employ in their counselling.

General decisive factors	Specific decisive factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Therapeutic relationship</li> <li>▪ Resource activation</li> <li>▪ Problem activation</li> <li>▪ Motivational clarification</li> <li>▪ Problem solving</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Psychological anonymity</li> <li>▪ Asynchronous communication</li> <li>▪ Voluntary and low-threshold nature of interaction</li> <li>▪ Storable and intangible advice</li> <li>▪ Counselling as co-production</li> <li>▪ Psychological decoupling from imagination and projection</li> </ul>

- **Technical use of decisive factors:** In the analysed sample of 100 SafeZone.ch email counselling exchanges, all the decisive factors were employed in most email exchanges. This suggests that the decisive factors are valid, irrespective of the process and content of an email exchange. The use of the general decisive factors implies that Klaus Grawe’s counselling approach is effectively implemented in the email counselling provided by Safe-Zone.ch. The use of the specific decisive factors implies that the specificities of email counselling are reflected in the counselling email texts. The analysis illustrates that in principle general decisive factors are used much more frequently than specific decisive factors, where the latter are primarily structural framework conditions that counsellors only sometimes emphasise in their texts. One exception to this trend is the specific decisive factor of co-production, which is frequently used.

The overall finding regarding the use of decisive factors validates the system used to operationalise decisive factors which was developed for this study and which lends itself to further use in counselling and research.

- **How the decisive factors are used:** Based on the analysed use of decisive factors, the study reveals the following linguistic and content-related findings:
  - When providing email counselling, experts from SafeZone.ch consistently use a range of more or less standardised linguistic elements (e.g. salutation, personal introduction, closing greeting, correct grammar, client-centric language), which serve as a basis and framework on which to build and develop the therapeutic relationship between the counsellor and the person seeking advice. This qualifies research findings that describe the therapeutic relationship in text-based counselling as an elusive dimension.
  - The email counselling provided by SafeZone.ch adopts an overriding resource-based and solution-focused counselling approach that focuses on co-production. Linguistic elements that focus on solutions, resources and co-production are applied across all decisive factors and indicate that email counselling is a process that the counsellor and the person seeking advice explicitly shape together. The forms of practical application show that linguistic elements can often be assigned to decisive factors, and that, as a result, when conceptualising decisive factors, it is important to understand their interconnectedness and close links.
  - Despite the diversity of linguistic elements used, the particular relevance of paraphrasing and questions is striking. These stylistic devices are used individually and in combination in relation to numerous decisive factors in order to establish and enhance the effectiveness of the counsellor's intervention. The key function of paraphrasing and questions in text-based counselling is a finding from the analysis of the email counselling provided by SafeZone.ch that supplements the existing research literature.

#### IV. Conclusions and recommendations

The email counselling provided by SafeZone.ch follows a uniform counselling practice, which, from an external perspective is remarkable given the way in which the counselling services are organised. The profile of those seeking advice and the content of the counselling indicate that the email counselling reaches a broad audience. General and specific decisive factors that are relevant on the basis of research into text-based online addiction therapy are widely used by the experts from SafeZone.ch when they provide email counselling services. The use of decisive factors results in client-centric language and an authentic writing style, which is what characterises the email counselling provided by SafeZone.ch on the basis of expert interventions.

Based on the results of the analysis, the overall recommendation would be for SafeZone.ch to continue to provide email counselling services using the existing system. In terms of the process and content of email counselling, it would be a good idea to review to what extent the figures analysed as part of this study could be collected using the in-house statistical tool on an ongoing basis and evaluated within the framework of systematic monitoring. With regard to the use of decisive factors, the study offers a basis on which to discuss the methodological orientation of the email counselling provided by SafeZone.ch with experts and to ensure a common understanding of the organisation's counselling mandate. Continuously sharing experience of decisive factors that have been used effectively is paramount. In the interests of knowledge management, the SafeZone.ch training and counselling documentation should be updated with methodological guidelines on an ongoing basis. From an external perspective, it is important to understand the relative freedom of counsellors to bring a personal touch to their email exchanges as a key foundation of the person-centred counselling services and to continue to grant them this freedom.