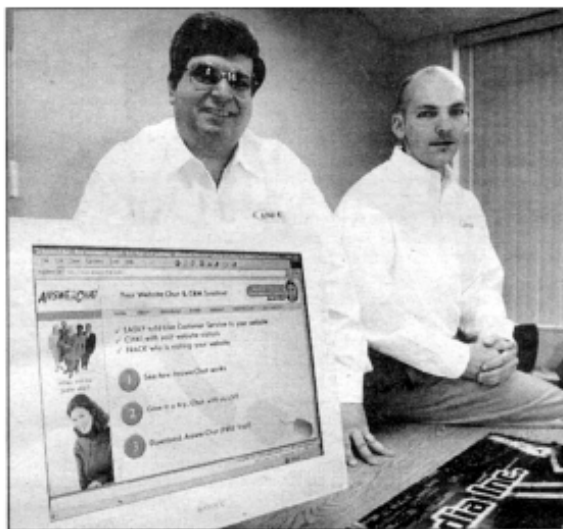


Mark S. Goldberg, left, president of Alpha Media in Farmingdale, and Keith Maurino, the firm's head of product development, with their AnswerChat program. Using this program, three counselors could use three separate channels for conferencing with clients.



Newsday Photo / Daniel Goodrich

Instant Messaging As a Therapy Tool

By Matthew Miller

STAFF WRITER

Teenagers today spend as much time online as their parents did talking on the phone.

And their time online isn't just spent checking e-mail or surfing the Web. More and more, teens are using instant messaging as a way to socialize.

So when they have personal problems and need to confide in someone, it seemed only natural that they would try to do it on a computer, online, in a chat mode.

Later this month, in hopes of merging the problems of adolescence with Internet technology, the Long Island Crisis Center will begin to offer real time online counseling using AnswerChat, a relatively new instant messaging software package developed by Farmingdale-based Alpha Media Inc.

"The beauty of online counseling is that it is very appealing to young people," said Linda Leonard, director of the Long Island Crisis Center, a youth-oriented organization that offers counseling for problems ranging from relationship issues to suicide. "They honestly feel more comfortable chatting online because they believe it is more anonymous than talking on the phone."

The LICC online counseling program takes advantage of the popularity among teenagers for instant messaging services such as AOL Instant Messenger (AIM) and Yahoo Messenger.

And the program also comes as crisis prevention centers nationwide search for new ways to provide anonymous counseling to those in need.

The LICC has offered online counseling since 1999, using AOL Instant Messenger. The program has provided guidance to as many as 80 people a week.

The program was started originally when Leonard noticed a decline in the number of calls received by the center's telephone hotline. She felt the center needed to do something to reach out to the youth of the community.

But the AIM service proved to have several flaws. First, people needing help had to download the AIM program. Additionally, the center would use a single IM address for its services, making multiple sessions difficult.

And, to the detriment of the community, users from all over the world were attempting to receive counseling from the center, which is funded locally by the Nassau County Youth Board and meant only for residents of Long Island.

AnswerChat helped provide the answer to most of these problems.

"AnswerChat offers us several advantages," said Leonard. "It allows us to have multiple counselors available, increases confidentiality and anonymity." With the new program, three counselors could use three separate channels for clients.

Also, unlike AIM, AnswerChat will not require people seeking counseling services to download a special instant messaging software.

AnswerChat was originally designed as a tool for e-commerce businesses to provide live customer service to the users of Web sites.

Wanting to help out the community, Alpha Media president Mark Goldberg donated the license of AnswerChat to the LICC in hopes of helping people who need immediate and confidential help.

"We're a Long Island company," Goldberg said. "We felt it would be a nice thing to make use of our product in the community."

So now, instead of having to download AIM, teens looking for advice will simply click an icon on the LICC's Web site. A chat window will appear, and a counselor will begin to talk them through their problems. The program is expected to start in mid-May.

Experts agree that crisis centers, both online and through telephone, are necessary components of community life.

"Hotlines are a safety net," said Dr. Jay Nagdimon, a clinical psychologist and director of the Didi Hirsch Community Mental Health Center in Los Angeles. "Some people need to use them several times before reaching out for help."

Nagdimon says, however, that certain risks come with the increased anonymity in online crisis prevention, including not being able to locate someone who is seriously considering suicide.

"With suicide, people are not thinking rationally. It is an emotional state of psychological pain," said Nagdimon. "As a result, it is important that professionals be able to trace where the person is in order to intervene."

According to the American Association of Suicidology, 4,100 people between the ages of 15 and 24 commit suicide each year in the United States.

Still, LICC director Leonard says that benefits of online counseling outweigh the risks.

"We're the first cry for help," she said. "Our hope is that people with problems will contact us anonymously, and then allow us to empower them to get more help."

The Long Island Crisis Center can be reached at www.longislandcrisiscenter.org.