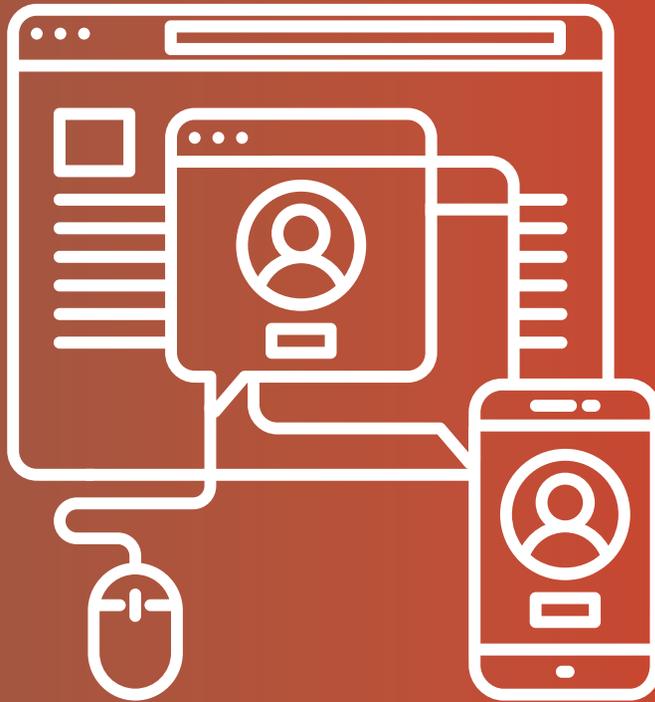


T@LK Handbook

– *Online Support for
Victims of Crime*



Co-financed by the
Justice Programme
of the European Union

ISBN 978-972-8852-90-0
Legal Deposit - 436001/18

Author — Associação Portuguesa de Apoio à Vítima
Publisher — Associação Portuguesa de Apoio à Vítima

T@LK Handbook
Online Support for Victims of Crime

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Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the commitment and partnership of Human Rights Monitoring Institute, Rikosuhrapäivystys, Victim Support Malta, Societat Catalana de Victimologia and Victim Support Europe, partners of Project T@LK. The revisions and feedback on the contents, but also the sharing of experiences, theoretical and practical knowledge was of extreme relevance for the development of this Handbook.

We would also like to thank all the organisations and entities that participated on the survey about support at a distance for victims of crime, carried out under Project T@LK. Their experiences and perspectives about online support for victims of crime were embedded and inspired the contents of this Handbook.

A special acknowledgement to Ana Amorim, Frederico Moyano Marques, João Lázaro, Madalena Conde and Rosa Saavedra (Associação Portuguesa de Apoio à Vítima - APAV) for their valuable inputs during the development and revision of the Handbook. A final word of appreciation to Emma Tengwal, Isabel Dias and Juliana Valqueresma, for the assistance on the organisation of the Handbook during their volunteering and internship experiences at APAV.

Foreword

The T@LK Handbook – Online Support for Victims of Crime was developed under the Project T@LK, promoted by the Portuguese Association for Victim Support/Associação Portuguesa de Apoio à Vítima (APAV) and co-financed by the Justice Programme of the European Union. Project T@LK had the partnership of Human Rights Monitoring Institute (HRMI), Rikosuhrapäivystys/Victim Support Finland (RIKU), Victim Support Malta (VSM), Societat Catalana de Victimologia/Catalan Society of Victimology (SCV) and Victim Support Europe (VSE).

Project T@LK pursued the objectives of: raising the awareness about the possibilities of implementation of online tools and practices for the support and information of victims of crime; adapt the victim support services towards the needs and expectations of victims of crime; and make victim support services more accessible for victims of crime.

Aligned with such purposes, the T@LK Handbook – Online Support for Victims of Crime aims to assist and inform victim support organisations and support services in the implementation of online support tools, services and/or programmes for victims of crime. In order to do so, the Handbook presents, in a simple and practical perspective, some knowledge collected from different studies and publications about the implementation of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in different social and mental health problems. Whenever possible, the Handbook also explores the results and findings from studies and investigations focused on the use of the Internet and ICTs to support and intervene with victims of crime. The desk-research carried out under this project revealed the lack of research and publications about support via the Internet for victims of crime, thus much of the scientific knowledge in this field has its origins in the area of mental health problems and associated health services. This is a shortage that clearly deserves the attention from researchers and academia.

Simultaneously, this Handbook also highlights the empirical knowledge derived from field practice of victim support organisations and victim support services operating support services via the Internet for victims of crime. The survey about support at a distance for victims of crime carried out during the Project, along with the desk-research, provided valuable inputs in what regards the practices and perspectives of victim support organisations and services in Europe in the field of online support for victims of crime. Based on such results, it is appropriate to state that online support practices for victims of crime are relatively spread among victim support organisations and services, although participant entities were referring to “conventional” forms of online support. The same survey also identified some uncertainty of victim support organisations and support services without current/previous experiences in the implementation of online support for victims of crime.

The Handbook aims to help entities (and their professionals) who intend to develop, implement or even improve their online support services and practices for victims of crime. It aims to be a working tool for victim support organisations, entities and their professionals.

Therefore, the Handbook does not define narrowed solutions, rather it presents broad guidelines and recommendations that might be used and adjusted for different forms of support via the Internet, for different objectives and/or varied target groups in what regards online support for victims of crime.

This Handbook is structured in 3 parts: Part 1 - Understanding, Part 2 - Supporting and Part 3 - Preparing.

Even though distinct, these parts are complementary and connected with each other, thus we strongly recommend users to follow the sequence and structure proposed when reading and consulting this Handbook.

Part 1 - Understanding is clearly the theoretical component of this Handbook, addressing the clarification of concepts and forms of support via the Internet, the applicability of online support and the complementarity with other forms of support. This part of the Handbook also explores the benefits and challenges of online support that are referred in the literature. Whenever relevant, some current practices of support via the Internet and some of the Project's results and outputs are briefly presented.

Part 2 - Supporting focus in the provision of support to victims of crime via the Internet. Therefore, it addresses the role and competencies of the professionals (e.g. victim support workers and volunteers) and the online communication strategies for a successful intervention/support with a victim of crime. This part of the Handbook also suggests a structure for an online support session with a victim of crime, presenting some guidance and instructions for professionals on what (and how) such online session should be approached.

Part 3 - Preparing presents some of the operational, technical and ethical domains that should be considered beforehand by organisations developing, implementing or improving online support and/or by professionals providing support to a victim of crime via the Internet. The key stages of the preparation for the implementation/development of online support practices and services for victims of crime are presented in a logical structure, such as the definition of the forms of support via the Internet, the dissemination of information about the existence of such service or practice and the evaluation. This part of the Handbook also explores ethical concerns associated with online support, such as the consent and the victim's identity. Some practical strategies to increase the security, confidentiality and privacy of online support are also proposed at the end of Part 3.

Part 1

— *Understanding*

Nowadays information and communications technologies (ICTs) are a powerful tool for communication.

According to Eurostat¹, more than 80% of the families of the Member States of the European Union have access to the Internet and around 80% of people aged 16 to 74 years old use the Internet at least once every three months. Eurostat data also show that more than half of those aged 16 to 74 years old in the European Union purchase products or services via the Internet.

Also relevant are the statistical indicators on social media usage: according to the agency *We Are Social*², around half of the European population are active users of social networking sites.

The Internet and ICTs are increasingly valuable tools for obtaining/accessing support, intervention and information services.

This also applies to access to support, information and/or intervention in situations of violence/crime. ICTs can be valuable allies of organisations and services that support victims of crime/violence, since:

- they allow to provide information, support and/or intervention at a distance;
- they make it easier for victims of crime/violence to access the information, support and/or intervention they need;
- they make it easier for existing organisations and services to get closer to citizens, populations and/or regions that would otherwise be unable to obtain support and information.

The use of ICTs as a method of obtaining and/or providing support/information and/or enabling intervention is also reflected in their increased application in health, particularly in mental health.

Using ICTs to serve the needs of the population started in telehealth that is via the **use of ICTs to provide access at a distance to assessment, diagnosis, intervention, consultation, supervision and education** (Castelnuovo, Gaggioli, Mantovani, & Riva, 2003).

There is a range of research dedicated to the use and effectiveness of ICTs in mental disorders and/or associated symptoms. Nevertheless, **scientific attention has been scarce regarding the analysis of these technologies' applicability and effectiveness in situations of crime and/or violence.**

This Handbook summarises knowledge and scientific developments from literature reviews and published studies on the different uses of ICTs for providing online services and other

1. Available at http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Digital_economy_and_society_statistics_-_households_and_individuals#Main_statistical_findings

2. Available at <http://wearesocial.com/uk/>

services at a distance addressing a range of mental health problems or needs (e.g. emotional support, psychological intervention, psychotherapy, counselling).

The Handbook includes, whenever possible, scientific and practical knowledge about victimization, support and/or intervention with victims of crime/violence and also about different forms of crime/violence. It also includes examples of practices and experiences from organisations and services offering online support to victims of crime/violence in the European Union, as well as from countries in other areas of the world where this type of support via the Internet appears to be more developed.

Part 1

— *Understanding*

Chapter 1

— *From Support at a Distance to Online Support:
Concept, Typologies and Practices*

By support at a distance we mean **access to support services, information and/or intervention that can be obtained remotely via ICTs**. As previously mentioned, support at a distance has its origin in practices such as telehealth or telemedicine.

Telephone support is seen as the pioneer of more sophisticated forms of support at a distance, given the fact that they currently use more varied methods and tools. These sophisticated forms of support at a distance rely on ICTs and provide access at a distance to support tools, services or programmes. We refer here specifically to support via the Internet (Mallen, Vogel, Rochlen, & Day, 2005; Barak, Klein, & Proudfoot, 2009).

Although there is little research on the effectiveness of using support at distance to provide support, information and/or intervention to victims of crime/violence (e.g. Zaidi, Fernando, & Ammar, 2015), there is some evidence on the use of ICTs in psychological and psychotherapeutic interventions, particularly in the field of mental health, which indicates their potential usefulness and effectiveness (e.g. Mallen et al., 2005).

As support via the Internet is a relatively new area of activity, there are different expressions or terms for naming it. It has been designated as online counselling, online therapy, Internet counselling, Internet therapy, web-based counselling, Internet-based intervention, e-therapy, e-counselling, cyber counselling, virtual therapy, web-counselling, amongst others (Shandro, 2007).

Forms of support via the Internet

Support provided via the Internet covers a wide range of methods, which may or not involve interaction between a user and a professional (Callahan & Inckle, 2012).

We can mention tools, services or programmes both involving and not involving communication with a professional when describing the support provided via the Internet. This can include (non face-to-face) contact/interaction between a user and a professional, and other forms of support which do not require contact/interaction between the user and the professional, such as websites and self-help programmes and tools (Robinson, 2009).

For a better understanding of the complexity around the forms of support via the Internet, they can be grouped into categories (Barak et al., 2009; Dowling & Rickwood, 2013):

- Internet-based intervention/support;
- Online support;
- Internet-operated software;

- Blogs, forums and online peer support groups;
- Other forms of self-administered online support.

Each category will be explored next.

Internet-based intervention/support

This covers education programmes, intervention and therapeutic programmes that are delivered via the Internet.

These programmes vary in their content (with a focus on education or on changing behaviours and/or thought patterns), in the type of multimedia content provided (e.g. audio, video, graphics, images, animations), and in their level of interactivity and orientation/feedback (e.g. whether they include self-assessment and/or feedback/support by a professional).

Internet-based support/intervention includes:

- Educational programmes via the Internet, whose aim is to promote knowledge and awareness about a certain issue.
These programmes are mainly informative, but they can incorporate some interactivity and online feedback (provided by: professionals, via email, chat, videoconference; peers, via forums and chats; or automated, via self-assessment measures such as online quizzes).
- Intervention/therapeutic programmes via the Internet, which seek to modify thought patterns, behaviours and/or attitudes in people/groups presenting certain problems and needs.

These programmes usually consist of structured modules varying in their multimedia content and often including mechanisms for feedback and support. They can also include interaction with a professional (via online communication tools, such as email, chat, and videoconference), which helps provide complementary support, feedback and supervision. These programmes can also be self-administered.

Highlight on current practices:

I-DECIDE: an online intervention for women victims of domestic violence [Australia]. This online platform, whose pilot evaluation occurred during

the production of this Handbook, is accessible via different devices [computers, laptops and smartphones]. It targets women victims of domestic violence, helping them to prepare for action/change, particularly in relation to their decisions regarding the abusive relationship.

The platform has an initial screening survey, which assesses if the woman is eligible for the online intervention. After collecting biographical data, I-DECIDE offers a series of self-administered modules, including a self-assessment of the level of risk, self-definition of priorities and intentions regarding the abusive relationship. I-DECIDE also contains a module on motivational interviewing [motivation for change] and another on action planning.

Based on the woman's responses to each module, automatic feedback is provided at specific points, reflecting the choices of each victim, and making it easier to make more informed decisions regarding the victimization experience.

I-DECIDE is understood as a potentially effective method to help women victims of domestic violence to reflect, evaluate and self-manage their life situation, and it has received positive feedback from users [Tarzia, Murray, Humphreys, Glass, Taft, Valpied, & Hegarty, 2016].

Further information is available at <http://www.idecide.org.au/>

Online support³

Online support refers to the support, information and/or intervention **at a distance provided via the Internet by a professional**, either in a synchronous way or not, with one or more users.

It is, in fact, the form of support via the Internet that is closer/similar to face-to-face support, information and/or intervention.

By using the Internet and ICTs, it is possible to provide/obtain this form of support, even if the user and the professional are in different and distant physical locations (Richards & Viganó, 2013; Mallen et al., 2005; Shandro, 2007).

Online support can use different online communication tools, such as chats, including or not the possibility of video call, video call software, email or online forms. For further information, see the *Communication tools for online support* section of this Handbook.

3. Despite the typology of forms of support via the Internet (briefly presented in this Handbook) that distinguishes online support as a specific form of support via the Internet, in the remaining sections and parts of this Handbook we use, for simplification purposes, the term "online support" as a broad concept that refers to all forms of support via the Internet.

Highlight on current practices:

Victim Support Malta [Malta] has developed an online, anonymous and confidential service for victims of crime: **Victim Support Online** - <http://www.vso.org.mt/>

In addition to providing facts and information about different forms of crime/violence and about the rights of victims of crime, Victim Support Online has a chat room for online support as well as an email support service.

Further information is available at <http://www.vso.org.mt/>

Internet-operated software

This includes therapeutic games, virtual environments and applications that respond to users' emotional and social needs. Robotic simulation of therapeutic conversations, rule-based systems for assessment, treatment selection and progress monitoring are some examples of Internet-operated software.

Highlight on current practices:

Safety Decision Aid, funded by the National Institute of Mental Health [United States of America - USA], is a **computer application** aimed at women victims of intimate partner violence. It seeks to inform the victim about the risk of lethal physical violence and to define an individualized safety plan based on the victim's needs and priorities.

After signing up, the victim can access the application and is invited:

- to respond to a set of questionnaires/measures, such as the *Danger Assessment*⁴;
- to identify the level of relevance of a pre-defined set of priorities related to their safety [and that of the children involved] and to the abusive relationship, as well as their willingness to stay or leave the abusive relationship.

4. *Danger Assessment* is a risk assessment tool for assessing the risk of lethal physical violence of women victims of intimate partner violence. For additional information on this tool, consult <https://www.dangerassessment.org/>

Based on the results of the joint analysis of different variables, the victim receives information about the level of risk of lethal physical violence, and about existing local resources for support and protection. The computer application also defines an individualized safety plan, which assists the victim in deciding which safety measures and behaviours to adopt.

The evaluation of a pilot implementation with a sample of women victims of intimate partner violence demonstrated that the application improved the victims' safety planning process [Glass, Eden, Bloom, & Perrin, 2010].

Further information is available at <http://www.safetydecisionaid.com/application.php#>

Blogs, forums and online peer support groups

These are support methods via the Internet that promote participation, sharing of experiences - often anonymously - and empathy and emotional support among people with similar experiences in a given area. These forms of support via the Internet can be synchronous or asynchronous, and use different online tools, such as chat rooms and email. These blogs, forums and online groups are not usually moderated by professionals.

Highlight on current practices:

Slachtofferhulp Nederland⁵ [Netherlands] has an **Internet forum** where victims of crime/violence can share their experiences of violence/victimization and ask questions to other victims of crime/violence. Participation requires prior registration and is anonymous. A range of thematic forums on different forms of violence is available.

Further information is available at <https://www.slachtofferhulp.nl/Forum/>

5. Netherlands' victim support organisation.

Other forms of self-administered online support

In this group, we can include informative websites and online applications covering information on a particular problem and existing local resources. These forms of support via the Internet seek to promote knowledge and awareness of a particular topic as well as inform about the resources and services that apply to that specific situation. They are also commonly referred to as **self-help tools**.

Highlight on current practices:

The **Portuguese Association for Victim Support - APAV [Portugal]** makes information available to victims of crime [amongst other potential users] about the functioning of the criminal justice system and the rights of victims of crime via the **website <http://infovitimas.pt/>**

Besides the possibility of conducting a virtual visit to a courtroom, the website has a quiz, which can be used as a measure of self-evaluation.

There is also an **informative app** on the rights of victims of crime [<http://infovitimas.pt/pt/app/>], free of charge, which can be downloaded and consulted on mobile devices.

In line with these resources, the Portuguese Association for Victim Support has also developed a **website for children and young people - <http://abcjustica.pt/>** - which explains how the criminal proceedings operates and informs about the rights of victims of crime. On this website, the child or youth has also at their disposal informative videos on a range of topics related to the criminal process and to the rights of victims of crime, as well as an interactive quiz.

Highlight on current practices:

The **Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality [Portugal]** developed a mobile phone application for victims of domestic violence - **App VD**. This application contains information about the support services available in

the different regions of the country, such as victim support organisations, police offices, municipalities, intervention with offenders, justice, protection of children and youth, local health or social security services. The free app allows users to make phone calls and send emails.

Further information is available at <https://www.cig.gov.pt/>

Communication tools for online support

Different forms of support via the Internet can be accessed through a set of tools commonly used in online communication, namely:

Email – an asynchronous online communication tool that allows the exchange of email messages between email accounts; it allows asynchronous communication, since there is a time lag in the interaction between the professional and the user (i.e., reading and replying to a particular email may not occur immediately after it is being written and sent). It is likely the most used tool to provide support, information and/or intervention via the Internet.

Online forms – an asynchronous communication tool that, after completion, allows to send requests for support, information and/or intervention via the Internet. Online forms are considered safer than emails to provide/receive support, information and/or intervention for victims of crime/violence (see further information in the *Measures to increase security, confidentiality and privacy in online support* section of this Handbook).

Highlight on current practices:

Weisser Ring⁶ [Germany] has an **online counselling system via email/online form**.

It is an anonymous and confidential service, accessible throughout the country. This online system has specific security mechanisms, such as encryption and previous user registration, which assures that the support provided is confidential. There is also information about the estimated response time and about situations in which other support services are recommended [e.g. emergency situations].

Further information is available at <http://weisser-ring.de/hilfe/onlineberatung>

6. Germany's victim support organisation.

Chat – an online communication tool that allows the exchange of text messages in real time (synchronous communication) via the Internet. It can include the possibility of video call over the Internet. This synchronous communication can take place using existing software, such as Skype™ and Messenger™, and/or chat services developed by/for a particular organisation to provide support, information and/or intervention via the Internet.

Video call – it is also a synchronous communication tool that allows the interaction between two or more people by using a camera and audio settings; it is possible to share and exchange audio and visual information. It may or not have added the possibility of exchanging text messages.

Website – a page or set of pages with diversified information, which can be accessed via computer and other devices with Internet access. Websites can also make available or have reference to other online communication tools (e.g. email, chat). Access can be free or restricted (i.e., requiring pre-registration or log in).

App – software that can be installed on smartphones and mobile devices, facilitating access to varied information. Like websites, apps can make reference to other online communication tools (e.g. email, chat).

Highlight on current practices:

Rikosuhripäivystys⁷ [Finland] provides online support to victims of crime via the **app Help.some**.

This application can be downloaded for free and is aimed at children and young people. It includes a chat room, which can be used by the child/young person to request support/information on various issues, especially in situations of violence or crime. This online support/information is the result of the collaboration between different entities, namely *Rikosuhripäivystys*, Save the Children Finland and the Finnish Police.

Further information is available at <http://www.netari.fi/ohjaustajaneuvontaa/helpsome/>

The online support provided by *Rikosuhripäivystys* via the **app Help.some** is part of a larger approach to support victims of crime/violence via the Internet. Besides this app, *Rikosuhripäivystys* also has a chat room

7. Finland's victim support organisation.

[accessible on the institutional website - <http://www.riku.fi/fi/etusivu/> - and through a website specifically aimed at children/young people - <http://nuoret.riku.fi/>]. These websites also include relevant information for victims of crime/violence.

Social Networks – virtual social structures of people and/or organisations, connected by one or more types of relationships, who share common values and goals via the Internet. Social networks are communication networks that involve symbolic language, cultural boundaries and power relations.

Highlight on current practices:

The **Portuguese Association for Victim Support - APAV [Portugal]** has a strong digital presence on social networks. With about 100.000 of followers on Facebook™, the Portuguese Association for Victim Support is receiving an increasing number of information and support requests from victims of crime through Messenger™.

Further information is available at <https://www.facebook.com/APAV.Portugal/>

These tools for providing support via the Internet differ on:

- how the communication is conducted (synchronous/asynchronous);
- whether there is interaction between the user and the professional;
- the channel used to communicate (e.g. audio, video, text);
- the complementarity/integration with other forms of support/intervention.

(Robinson, 2009).

These communication tools can be used alone or together to provide support via the Internet. **They may also be used as a complement of a structured intervention and/or education programme**, enabling the access to further information, feedback and/or guidance. They can also constitute **core tools through which support via the Internet is obtained/provided**.

Considering the way communication via the Internet takes place, the following typology is commonly used:

- **Synchronous communication**, regarding real-time communication between a professional and a user via ICTs. This is possible through chat rooms and video call, for example.
- **Asynchronous communication**, where the communication between the professional and the user is characterised by asynchronicity and where there may be a time gap between the request or problems shared by the user and the information provided by the professional, that is, the professional's response does not immediately follow the contact made by the user. Email is an example of an asynchronous form of online communication.

(Castelnuovo et al., 2003; Robinson, 2009).

Synchronous communication ensures more direct and immediate responses, while asynchronous communication, as it is spread over the time, might enable the development of more reflected and focused responses. Asynchronous communication is more task-oriented, while synchronous communication is more typical of social interactions (Trepal, Haerstroh, Duffey, & Evans, 2007).

Thus, considering this typology in the support for victims of crime/violence, synchronous forms of communication via the Internet can be especially useful to victims who are expecting and/or need to get support and/or information quickly. Asynchronous communication via the Internet, such as email, allows elaborating on and exchanging information in a more reflected way, possibly following a support process that has already started.

Regardless of being synchronous/asynchronous, **communication via the Internet develops at a slower pace than face-to-face communication**, a fact that must be taken into account when providing intervention/support via the Internet (Haberstroh, Parr, Bradley, Morgan-Fleming, & Gee, 2008).

When **planning an online support session** (in particular, when defining the objectives for the session), we need to consider the slower pace of communication, in particular when the session is exclusively writing-based, and make the following adjustments:

- to the objectives of the session itself (which will have to be less ambitious than those proposed, for example, for a face-to-face session);

- to the amount of information collected by the professional from the person/victim seeking support, information and/or intervention (the amount of information collected in an online support session/appointment will be less);
- taking into account the victim's ability to share information (fluency, speed, and the amount of information that would be expected in a face-to-face session).

To these concerns, we should add the need to **limit the number of questions made to the user**, which should be smaller compared to the conventional support/intervention, due to the lower pace of communication and exchange of information when using ICTs (Trepal et al., 2007).

For further information, see the chapter *The online support session: preparation and implementation* of this Handbook.

Part 1

— *Understanding*

Chapter 2

— *Approach on the Applicability
of Online Support*

There are studies in the area of online support that indicate positive levels of users' receptivity to accessing/obtaining support, information and/or intervention using the Internet and ICTs (Mallen et al., 2005).

Nevertheless, there is some controversy:

- there are authors who point out that online support is better suited for less serious problems (e.g. Haberstroh et al., 2008 cit. in Richards & Viganó, 2013);
- other researchers defend its appropriateness, regardless of the nature and severity of the problem (Fenichel et al., 2006 cit. in Richards & Viganó, 2013).

The worries about the use of online support arise precisely within the scope of mental health services, with concerns regarding its usage in situations of severe psychopathology and possibility of suicide, thus reinforcing the notion of its greater suitability for less serious problems (Haberstroh et al., 2008; Lovejoy, Demireva, Grayson, & McNamara, 2009 cit. in Callahan & Inckle, 2012).

Other authors posit that online support is appropriate for social/interpersonal and personal development issues (Finn & Barak, 2010 cit. in Richards & Viganó, 2013).

There is less consensus on the use of the Internet and ICTs in situations of greater risk to the users' safety and wellbeing, such as situations of self-inflicted violence and interpersonal violence (Richards & Viganó, 2013).

Despite different opinions and lack of consensus within the scientific community, **online support is indicated as suitable for anyone experiencing problems related to their emotions, thoughts and behaviours** (Barak et al., 2008 cit. in Robinson, 2009).

It is important **to consider how appropriate online forms of support are on a case-by-case basis, considering each person's characteristics, circumstances and request** and assessing whether they can be potential users of an online support tool, service or programme.

Further information is available at the *Analysing the conditions to provide online support* section of this Handbook.

It is possible to list individuals/groups who potentially may be less suited to online support (Robinson, 2009), namely:

- people in crisis/emergency situations;
- people who may put their personal safety and/or the safety of others at risk;
- people with suicidal thoughts;
- people with psychological/mental health problems characterized by distortions of reality;
- people with low levels of technological literacy⁸.

Victims of violence have also been seen as a group for whom intervention or online support may not be advisable (Robinson, 2009). This concern stems from the risks associated with the security, confidentiality and privacy of the support, information and/or intervention provided/obtained via the Internet (explored in the chapter *Ethics in online support: dilemmas and challenges* of this Handbook), in particular in cases of intimate partner violence.

On the other hand, written communication through ICTs is said to be potentially useful for:

- users who feel they lack of control;
- people who are not using their first language in the support process;
- people who feel especially shy/afraid in situations of conventional intervention/support (face-to-face);
- people who have to deal with particularly traumatic topics or are at very specific life situations (e.g. hospitalization).

(Wright & Chung, 2001 cit. in Mallen, Vogel, Rochlen, & Day, 2005).

Research indicates that, since communication (particularly written communication) via ICTs occurs at a slower pace, online support, information and/or intervention tools, services or programmes are especially suitable for users with problems/needs that are not especially complex, serious or that do not require face-to-face assessment. Research also considers that it is feasible to use different forms of support at a distance (e.g. telephone, email and chat) for users with different mental health problems/concerns (Haberstroh et al., 2008).

It is also important to analyse how tools, services and programmes of online support, information and/or intervention fit with the objectives of the support or intervention. According to Mallen and colleagues (2005), support at a distance has already been used in prevention, short-term intervention, and relapse prevention and to promote awareness.

8. The concept of technological literacy refers to the awareness, knowledge and the necessary skills enabling someone to operate and move comfortably in digital [i.e., online] environments.

These data from research can be important in assessing the scope of online tools for support, information and/or intervention for victims of crime/violence. Online support for victims can be focused on specific interventions (not extended over time) that provide information, practical and emotional support, and that are aimed at preventing (re)victimization.

There are also studies that report some evidence that **online support can be particularly useful for population groups that are normally underrepresented in conventional intervention services** such as men, LGBT and minorities (Mallen et al., 2005). According to some authors, the explanation for this is that online tools, services or programmes exclude visual clues associated with stereotypes and discrimination (e.g. race, ethnicity, gender), thereby increasing the potential for users' experiences of equality and diluting the power differential between user and professional (Day, & Schneider, 2000 cit. in Mallen et al., 2005).

This information is also very useful in supporting victims of crime/violence: certain population groups, such as men, the LGBT population and minorities, are underrepresented among the victims of crime/violence seeking support from organisations and services.

The existence of online support tools, services or programmes can promote the access of these groups to existing services and responses in situations of violence/crime, because of the potential anonymous character of online support and the decreased risk of being stigmatized for seeking support.

The use of support via the Internet can also be considered in the light of familiarity with ICTs: people who are more used to navigate and communicate via ICTs and the Internet are more likely to use them as a means of accessing information, support and/or intervention to solve a particular problem; moreover, they are more receptive to online support as an effective method to address the problems they want to solve (Lieber, Archer, Munson, & York, 2006 cit. in Robinson, 2009).

In line with this perspective, the younger population is seen as the preferred user group of forms of support via the Internet, since they use ICTs and the Internet more easily. On the other hand, for older people, online support seems to show lower levels of effectiveness, which can be associated with their lower familiarity with new technologies (Barak et al., 2008 cit. in Robinson, 2009).

Regarding gender, views are not unanimous:

- there are studies that point to the fact that the female population (particularly youths, but also adults) use the tools, services or programmes for online support more frequently (Callahan & Inckle, 2012);
- there are authors who contradict this position, pointing out the possibility that online support may attract the male population and the young male population, particularly (Baughan, 2000 cit. in Wright, 2002).

It should be noted, however, that the existing research in the area of online support has been made about long-term programmes and structured interventions.

A survey with 60 European victim support organisations and services about online support for victims of crime, which was carried out under Project T@LK, explored the profiles of the main users of the online support for victims of crime and violence. Although **about two-thirds (65%) of participant entities reported having online support for victims of crime/violence, none identified the male population as the main users.** On the other hand, **64% mentioned that online support for victims of crime/violence is mainly used by the female population.**

Similarly, contrary to some studies that point to the younger population being the preferred user group of support via the ICTs and the Internet, **67% of the entities that participated in this survey reported that the adult population was the main user** and **15% mentioned that the online support they provide is accessed by children/young people and adults.** Only **10% of the organisations providing online support for victims of crime/violence reported that their online support was used by people of all ages.**

Further information on the results of the survey can be found at <http://www.apav.pt/publiproj/images/yootheme/PDF/TALK.pdf>

Considering the above mentioned, it is important to stress that an initial assessment of the user and/or the problems presented (and of their needs) is fundamental for deciding on the appropriateness of online support.

This assessment should also cover more practical matters concerning the equipment and Internet access and also the user's characteristics/skills (Robinson, 2009). It should also

address the objectives and target groups of the online support tool, service or programme and their ability to respond or satisfy the needs and problems presented.

It should be noted, however, that this initial assessment is easier in cases where there is a previous relationship between the professional and the user and in cases where the online intervention/support is in some way associated with the face-to-face intervention. In cases where the contact between the user and the professional is a one-off and most likely without prior knowledge/contact, then the assessment is more difficult. An example of this scenario is presented by some authors who report how difficult it is to assess the levels of safety and risk of women and children who are victims of violence and who only use support tools, services or programmes via the Internet (Gierman, Liska, & Reimer, 2013).

For more information, see the *Analysing the conditions to provide online support* section of this Handbook.

Part 1

— *Understanding*

Chapter 3

— *Complementarity with
other Forms of Support*

Once again, there is no unanimity or consensus regarding the scope of online support within the existing framework of support and intervention services.

There are authors who view online support as a specific form of support, which is independent from other forms of support/intervention. This perspective is supported by the fact that online support implies a specific theoretical framework, which requires the assimilation and use of specific knowledge, as well as of communication strategies and methodologies specifically associated with communication mediated by ICTs (Richards & Viganó, 2013).

On the other hand, other authors understand that the online intervention or support is a mere transposition of the intervention models, strategies and techniques used in conventional intervention or support to the means of communication mediated by ICTs (Castelnuovo et al., 2003).

Other authors are less extreme and point out that face-to-face support and online support constitute a continuum in the provision of support services: if it is true that a support can take place without using ICTs and the Internet, it is also true that these technologies can complement the support provided face-to-face. However, face-to-face support can also complement the support that is provided via ICTs and the Internet; or online support can be used on its own to deliver a given support (Robinson, 2009; Shandro, 2007).

As a complement to face-to-face intervention strategies, online support is not considered a substitute for conventional support (Mallen et al., 2005; Castelnuovo et al., 2003). It is mainly a new resource or tool that can be put at the disposal of the conventional support or intervention to increase the success of the intervention (Castelnuovo et al., 2003).

Considering this perspective, **online support can be understood as a tool to bring people closer to existing support and intervention services**, making a first contact easier, in particular for the most insecure users (Alleman, 2002 cit. in Shandro, 2007). We reiterate that a large part of the studies on this issue refer to long-term structured programmes and models of intervention via the Internet.

In the mental health field, the concept of **blended interventions** is being increasingly used (Wentzel, Van der Vaart, Bohlmeijer, & Gemert-Pijnen, 2016). It refers to a **combination of face-to-face components with online components**, considering the equal contribution of both for the success of the treatment.

The following criteria apply:

- blended interventions refers to an **integration of online and offline components** in the intervention process and such components are interconnected with each other;
- online and offline components have the same relevance to the intervention and support process;
- the selection of the online component (the form of online support recommended to a specific case) should be carefully decided;
- the integration between the online support and the face-to-face intervention should be wisely pondered, considering, among other aspects, the characteristic of the users.

The survey carried out under Project T@LK about online support for victims of crime explored **the advantages of providing online support to victims of crime/violence**. Out of a number of advantages presented, only **29% of the participant entities that have tools or services for online support to victims of crime/violence identified online support as an alternative to conventional, face-to-face support**. In turn, **43% of these entities understand that online support may, instead, be a complement to conventional support**.

The **participant entities that do not have online support services** for victims of crime/violence present an opposite scenario: **53% understand online support as an alternative to face-to-face support** and only **37% as a complement**.

Further information on the results of the survey can be found at
<http://www.apav.pt/publiproj/images/yootheme/PDF/TALK.pdf>

Part 1

— *Understanding*

Chapter 4

— *Benefits and Challenges
of Online Support*

Main benefits and advantages

The advantages and benefits of online support are varied, although scientific evidence regarding its effectiveness is scarce compared to conventional forms of intervention/support (Robinson, 2009). These advantages are based on the practical experience of professionals, entities and organisations that use support or intervention tools, services or programmes via ICTs and the Internet.

In fact, this scenario is similar to the one we find in online support for victims of crime/violence: **studies and research on the use of ICTs and the Internet to provide online support, information and/or intervention to victims of crime/violence are scarce**. There is also little scientific evidence regarding the effectiveness and benefits of online support for victims of crime/violence.

You can explore the perspectives of victim support organisations and services on the advantages and benefits of online support in the survey developed under Project T@LK.

Further information on the results of the survey can be found at <http://www.apav.pt/publiproj/images/yootheme/PDF/TALK.pdf>

Despite the lack of evidence regarding the effectiveness of support/intervention tools, services and programmes via ICTs and the Internet, there is some theoretical and empirical basis to support their practice (Shandro, 2007).

Although the number of studies is small and devoted to the effectiveness of online support in the mental health field, their results are promising. Dowling and Rickwood (2013) refer to different studies to support this view: online synchronous support was found to be equivalent to face-to-face help (Cohen & Kerr, 1998; Murphy et al., 2009) and to phone delivered services (Fukkink & Hermanns, 2009b); another study found that online support was better than a telephone delivered support (Fukkink & Hermanns, 2009a).

Accessibility is considered one of the main advantages of online support. The ease of access to services appears to be **particularly relevant to potential/existing users who do not normally access support services**, bringing them closer to existing services and resources. This is particularly important for certain groups of the population, among which we highlight:

- people with limited mobility (including disability and/or incapacity);

- people living in rural areas, isolated geographically and/or without support/intervention services;
- people who cannot afford to travel to existing face-to-face services;
- people whose working hours are incompatible with the opening hours of available services/resources;
- people with mental health problems that compromise their ability to interact socially, namely agoraphobia, social anxiety and other types of anxiety;
- victims of crime/violence who are unable to leave home, including victims of domestic violence who, due to the offenders' control, need an alternative to traditional services to be able to privately and more easily access safe support;
- people who feel insecure regarding contact with existing services and who are looking for online support as a more comfortable/less intimidating method to access support/intervention;
- children and young people, who are familiar with ICTs and the Internet as everyday tools of interaction and communication.

(Forgan, 2011; Shandro, 2007; Mallen et al., 2005; Robinson, 2009; Wright, 2002).

Thus, the development of online support responses provides users with more choice and, at the same time, offers a **less stigmatizing alternative** to conventional support/intervention options/services (Wright, 2002).

In this regard, it is also important to note the association between easier access provided by online support tools, services or programmes and **convenience**: the existence of tools, services or programmes for online support makes it possible to use them quicker, at a more flexible time (according to the periods of operation of the tool, service or programme), whenever the user needs them and/or when it is more convenient (Shandro, 2017; Mallen et al., 2005; Robinson, 2009).

In more practical terms, the **temporal efficiency** of online support (e.g. the user does not need to travel for obtaining/accessing online support) is pointed out as one of its advantages, due to the fact that online support requires a smaller time investment compared to the participation in face-to-face sessions (Shandro, 2007). Other proposed advantages of online support are the **lower costs** (e.g. the user does not need to travel, thus reducing associated expenses) and the greater ease in providing the user with **fast/easy access to information or additional sources of support** (e.g. sharing a website link to additional information about a certain topic) (Mallen et al., 2005).

Regarding the **costs**, it should be noted that the use of online support tools, services or

programmes could **reduce the costs incurred by the user** (e.g. travel and subsistence), even if, at least initially, there is an increased cost associated with the development, operationalization and implementation of the online tool, service or programme incurred by the responsible entity (Syme, 2004 cit. in Robinson, 2009). However, this can be an investment with a good return as it allows to improve the professionals' and organisation's capacity to be in contact with more users daily, thereby reducing overall costs and the time required for the intervention, which in turn decreases the waiting time (Proudfoot, 2004 cit. in Robinson, 2009).

The **reduction of inhibition** provided by communication via the Internet is pointed out as an important advantage of online support tools, services or programmes.

The absence of face-to-face contact between the professional and the user (and consequent absence of visual and/or verbal cues) may reduce the user's constraint and make them more at ease and comfortable to approach more sensitive matters, to share information and express thoughts and emotions more freely (Barak, 1999 cit. in Shandro, 2007; Callahan & Inckle, 2012).

Some researchers associate the free expression of emotions and the increased ease in sharing information via online communication to the perception of the **online context as less threatening** (Barak, 1999 cit. in Shandro, 2007; Ainsworth, 2006 cit. in Shandro, 2007). The online context may reduce the refrain of users to talk about difficult emotions and thoughts, because they are less inhibited by their fear of social reaction/stigmatization and/or less self-conscious about sharing their personal emotions and vulnerabilities.

The free expression of emotions is indicated in some studies as an aspect especially evident in online support tools, services or programmes, compared to other forms of support/intervention at a distance, such as telephone support. In line with this latter aspect, the positive disinhibition effect when sharing emotions and thoughts about more sensitive, emotionally challenging or personal matters is associated with **greater empowerment** of users choosing online support and to the assurance of greater anonymity (Callahan & Inckle, 2012).

The **privacy and anonymity** of online communication, particularly of online written communication, overrides emotions (such as shame or fear) that often dissuade people from seeking support/intervention to solve a problem (Wright, 2002).

However, a qualitative investigation carried out with professionals who provide online support found an association between anonymity and the ease of sharing information with the development of a false sense of intimacy and trust in the online interaction between the user and the professional (Haberstroh, Parr, Bradley, Morgan-Fleming, & Gee, 2008), which may prove negative for the success of the support.

Regarding empowerment, the **user's greater sense of control** over the online support process is understood as positive because it contributes to the self-perception of being responsible for the recovery itself (Forgan, 2011). Online support therefore seems to promote the **user's more active participation in their recovery process** (Wright, 2002).

On the other hand, other authors also point out that the greater sense of control over the online support process can be a problem, as it creates conditions enabling the user to control/manage the information that is shared (e.g. not disclosing information that may be important to the session) and placing barriers to the effectiveness of online support (Grohol, 1998 cit. in Mallen et al., 2005; Rochlen et al., 2004 cit. in Mallen et al., 2005).

In cases where the support is provided via written communication (synchronous or asynchronous), the users' disinhibition may also be associated with the writing process having an effect in promoting the expression/sharing of emotions and thoughts and **increasing self-reflection** (Forgan, 2011; Mallen et al., 2005; Richards & Viganó, 2013).

The promotion of greater self-reflection is especially achieved in asynchronous communication (email, for example), since it allows the user to revisit the information sent/received (Robinson, 2009). Other authors also mention that greater self-reflection is also due to the fact that the attention focus of the interaction between user and professional is on the written communication process, therefore taking advantage of the absence of visual cues, which are potentially distracting. There are also fewer emotional distractors present (Collie, Mitchell, & Murphy, 2000; Forgan, 2011).

The writing process promotes a greater **externalization of the problems**, as well as of the associated emotions and thoughts. It also fosters **catharsis**. This is achieved by translating these thoughts and emotions into words and by promoting the development of the narrative and the user's recovery process (Shandro, 2007; Richards & Viganó, 2013).

The survey about online support for victims of crime developed under Project T@LK explored **the advantages of providing online support to victims of crime/violence**. Out of a number of advantages presented, **82% of participant entities** (with and without tools to provide online support to victims of crime/violence) indicated that **access to support services** was an advantage. **80% of the participating entities with online support reported that the convenience and flexibility** in access to support services was an advantage, with a smaller proportion (58%) of entities not providing online support to crime/violence victims

also reporting this advantage. **Ease of access, particularly for victims with difficulties in accessing support services**, was pointed out as an advantage by 60% of participating entities with online support services for victims of crime/violence and by 74% of participant entities without online support.

Equally interesting were the differences found in how entities with and without online support seem to perceive some of the potential advantages listed below:

- **To make a victim's first contact with support services and organisations easier** was pointed out as an advantage by 71% of the entities with online support services for victims of crime/violence, but by only 42% of the entities without online services.
- The **increased number of victims who can have access to support** was pointed out as an advantage by 79% of the participant entities without online support services for victims of crime/violence, but to a lesser extent (57%) by entities with online support services.

Further information on the results of the survey can be found at <http://www.apav.pt/publiproj/images/yootheme/PDF/TALK.pdf>

Main challenges and difficulties

The disadvantages of online support tools, services or programmes pointed out on studies and literature reviews should also be noticed. Once again, the identification of these difficulties and disadvantages is based both on theoretical analysis and on the practice of professionals and organisations; it should be noted that there is a general lack of scientific evidence/studies that allow us to deepen the understanding of their real impact and effectiveness on the success of online support (Dowling & Rickwood, 2013).

The **lack of verbal and non-verbal communication cues** (such as body language, eye contact and vocalizations), which are considered essential in an intervention, particularly for psychotherapy, is characteristic of most online support tools, services or programmes (with the exception of online tools, services or programmes that enable, for example, video calls). These communication cues are considered crucial for the success of any intervention and to the promotion of therapeutic alliances, and their absence is perceived as a relevant gap and disadvantage of online support (Shandro, 2007). The absence of visual and verbal cues in the

communication between professional and user can lead to **difficulties in communication and understanding between professional and user** and in the expression of empathy (fundamental for the establishment of the relationship/alliance between the professional and the user). It can also lead to an **inaccurate interpretation** of what is said/written by the professional and/or the user and place obstacles to the intervention (Shandro, 2007; Callahan & Inckle, 2012).

Other authors mention that the absence of communication cues in the interaction forces the professional to use a set of unique and specific skills to provide support, information and/or intervention via ICTs and the Internet (Trepal, 2007).

It is also mentioned that the lack of communication cues in online support can be bridged by using **specific communication techniques** to compensate for the absence of emotional content in online interactions and communications between the user and the professional (Pollock, 2006 cit. in Robinson, 2009). Detailed information on this matter can be found in the *Specific strategies for online communication* section of this Handbook.

It is important to note that there are studies (e.g. Reynolds, Stiles, & Grohol, 2006; Doyle, 2002 cit. in Shandro, 2007) that posit that it is possible to establish therapeutic relationships and alliances when using online support tools, services or programmes, although others indicate that established alliances and relationships do not achieve the same levels of satisfaction as those that are established face-to-face (Leibert, Archer, Munson, & Yorl, 2006 cit. in Shandro, 2007).

There are opposing views that claim that **the absence of verbal and visual cues in the communication between professional and user is an advantage**, since the user is less concerned about the professional's reactions (e.g. disapproval, blame) towards the information shared, and that this promotes a greater disinhibition/expression of thoughts and emotions. In turn, the lack of such visual and verbal cues can promote access to existing services for people who would otherwise not seek conventional support/intervention services or programmes (Richards & Viganó, 2013). This facilitated access is associated with lower levels of intimidation and a greater sense of safety and control felt by the user due to the lack of visual/verbal feedback in the communication with the professional (Callahan & Inckle, 2012; Mallen et al., 2005).

On the other hand, there are also authors who mention the **lack of face-to-face contact between professional and user** in the support process as one of the main challenges of online support. Contrary to the absence of communication cues, whose difficulty can be reduced by using specific communication techniques (detailed information in the *Specific strategies for online communication* section of this Handbook), the absence of physical

presence is more difficult to overcome (Collie et al., 2000).

Another limitation pointed out concerns the **limits of confidentiality** (Barack, 1999 cit. in Shandro, 2007). Fears about confidentiality relate to the possibility that shared information can be viewed or intercepted by others (e.g. family members, friends, co-workers, hackers, perpetrators of crime/violence, etc.) and to the user's location when using the online tool, service or programme (e.g. using Internet from public networks).

This gap clearly points to the need to define/develop procedures and parameters **to safeguard the security of online support tools, services or programmes and the confidentiality and privacy of the information, support and/or intervention delivered through such means**. These concerns, which are important for any intervention via ICTs and the Internet, are absolutely fundamental when focused on the support, information and/or intervention with victims of crime/violence. For further information, see the *Confidentiality and privacy* section of this Handbook.

Another of the disadvantages commonly associated with online support tools, services or programmes is the **response time lag of the communication between the professional and the user** (Mallen et al., 2005). This lag, particularly evident in asynchronous communication, can cause feelings of enhanced anxiety on the user (when waiting for the next communication). This period without communication/interaction can also occur in synchronous communication (for example, if the user writes/types more slowly) (Haberstroh et al., 2008).

However, these time lags can also be viewed as positive in the sense that they provide a space for reflection, which can promote the processing of experiences and emotions and a greater awareness and capacity for self-observation (Richards & Viganó, 2013; Haberstroh et al., 2008). In turn, the desynchronization of the interaction or communication can also be advantageous for the professional, allowing, where appropriate, peer discussion and supervision processes.

Lack of technological literacy and the difficulty of accessing/exclusion of population groups (those with less knowledge about ICTs, with less access to these types of resources and/or those who, for cultural and/or linguistic reasons, do not use them) are also pointed out as disadvantages of tools, services or programmes for online support (Mallen et al. 2005; Shandro, 2007).

Another research study conducted with online counselling professionals identified the (lack of) technological proficiency (writing/typing) of users as a negative effect, which reduces the online interaction/communication time and prevents from addressing all relevant topics

(Haberstroh et al., 2008). As previously mentioned, the fact that online communication takes place at a slower pace should be taken into account when planning online interventions.

Likewise, the possibility of **technical problems in the communication/interaction** between user and professional (e.g. disruption of Internet connectivity) is identified as a potential disadvantage of the development/implementation of online support tools, services or programmes (Mallen et al., 2005; Robinson, 2009).

On the other hand, **management/intervention at a distance in crisis situations** is another of the shortcomings pointed out (Mallen et al., 2005; Robinson, 2009). This is a concern frequently mentioned by the professionals involved in the provision of online support. The **prior collection of information about the user** is referred to as one of the recommended practices to guard against this type of scenario, as well as conducting an **initial assessment of the suitability** of online support (Robinson, 2009).

Furthermore, this difficulty is associated with **the possibility that the users may misrepresent their real identity when accessing the online tools, services or programmes**, as well as **the possibility of access being made anonymously**. This issue adds another stress factor to the professional's intervention in emergency situations. The possibility that users misrepresent their identity can occur especially in cases where online support responses are only available to certain population groups and/or to specific problems, so identity misrepresentation can be a strategy to guarantee access to support (Callahan & Icken, 2012). In the case of online support for victims of crime/violence, misrepresentation can be a strategy used by perpetrators of crime/violence in order to know the organisation's dynamics and procedures and to obtain information about victims receiving support. This is a challenge already faced by other forms of support at a distance for victims of crime/violence, such as appointments via the telephone and support lines.

Other disadvantages are related to the **lack of professional training** and the **lack of procedures/knowledge for an adequate provision of online support**, as well as the lack of **ethical guidelines** for such support – for example, breaching confidentiality in situations where it is required (Robinson, 2009; Finn, 2002 cit. in Shandro, 2007). The specific training of professionals who provide support services, information and/or intervention via ICTs is essential (Robinson, 2009). For further information on the training of professionals and other ethical matters, see the chapters *The online support professional* and *Ethics in online support: dilemmas and challenges* of this Handbook.

Users' expectation that a given support tool, service or programme accessible through the Internet will be **free of charge** is also one of the disadvantages noted in the literature (Robinson, 2009).

The survey about online support for victims of crime carried out under Project T@LK also explored **the disadvantages of providing online support to victims of crime/violence**. Out of a number of disadvantages presented, **44% of participant entities** (with and without services or tools to provide online support to victims of crime/violence) **indicated the lack of communication cues (verbal and visual) in the interaction between professional and victim/user as one of the main disadvantages** of providing online support to victims of crime/violence.

Other disadvantages included the **exclusion of certain victims without access to ICTs** and the limitations of online support **to intervene in situations of crisis**, and which were rated differently by entities with and without online support for victims of crime/violence:

- Half of the participant entities without online support services or tools for victims of crime/violence reported that online support excludes certain victims without access to the Internet/computers; 37% of the entities with online support practices for victims of crime/violence mentioned this disadvantage.
- About half of the participant entities with online support services or tools for victims of crime/violence indicated that online support limitations for intervention in crisis situations is a disadvantage; 33% of entities without online support practices identified the same disadvantage.

The different views held by the respondent entities on the adequacy of ICTs for the provision of long-term support/intervention also stood out: **30% of the entities with online support services or tools for victims of crime/violence reported that online support's inadequacy for a long-term intervention is a disadvantage**, whereas only 11% of entities without online support practices referred to it as a shortcoming.

Half of the entities without online support practices for victims of crime/violence pointed to privacy, security and confidentiality issues as disadvantages, while such limitations were reported by 30% of entities with online support services or tools.

Further information on the results of the survey can be found at <http://www.apav.pt/publiproj/images/yootheme/PDF/TALK.pdf>

The disadvantages reported by the entities that participated in this survey will be as much possible addressed throughout this Handbook. The Handbook presents information

and instructions on specific communication strategies via ICTs. These are important in overcoming the difficulties associated with the lack of verbal/visual cues in online communication and the expression of emotions through communication via the Internet, contributing for the provision of a quality service to victims of crime/violence. The Handbook also systematizes the ethical challenges that organisations should anticipate when developing online support tools, services or programmes.

Part 2

— *Supporting*

In this part of the Handbook we aim at providing recommendations for delivering support to victims of crime/violence via the Internet. In addition to the planning of an online support session, we present recommendations, guidelines and tools that can assist professionals⁹ on the use of online support tools, services or programmes.

This part of the Handbook also analyses the role of the professional in the delivery of online support and the importance of specific personal and technical competencies for support, information and/or intervention for victims of crime/violence via the Internet.

9. Unlike the previous references to the professionals, at this part of the Handbook we specifically refer to the professionals, being those victim support workers, volunteers or others, supporting victims of crime/violence in victim support organisations or victim support services.

Part 2

— *Supporting*

Chapter 1

— *The Online
Support Professional*

In the survey about online support for victims of crime completed under Project T@LK, the organisations that mentioned having online support for victims of crime/violence in place were asked about the **training of professionals** responsible for providing online support.

The results show a **considerable proportion of organisations that do not facilitate specific training for the provision of online support** (particularly for volunteers): nearly half of the organisations indicated that the volunteers do not receive training to provide online support; the proportion of organisations that mentioned that staff does not have specific training in this area is slightly lower (41%).

Further information on the results of the survey can be found at <http://www.apav.pt/publproj/images/yootheme/PDF/TALK.pdf>

The professional's personal competencies

Support of victims of crime/violence, whether face-to-face or at a distance (by telephone or via the Internet), requires a specific set of conditions, as well of professionals with specific **personal characteristics**, in addition to technical skills.

Personal competencies relate to personal characteristics, conditions and skills and to personality traits that are important to support, inform and/or intervene with victims of crime/violence. The professional also needs to be able to adapt to this area of work and to the specific context in which the support, information and/or intervention with victims of crime/violence is being carried out.

The personal competencies required can be grouped under the following key dimensions:

Human relationships management (relational dimension)

The professional should be able to manage and establish positive interpersonal relationships when delivering support to victims of crime/violence, including not only the relationship with victims but also with their families and/or friends, and with the professionals and partner entities involved in the support, information and/or intervention. If the professional feels/recognizes that he/she is not able or does not meet the necessary conditions to manage and establish a professional interpersonal relationship with victims of crime/violence, he/she should consider not accepting to get involved with online support, information and/or intervention with victims of crime/violence.

Emotional self-management

It is important that professionals are able to identify and manage their emotions in the context of support, information and/or intervention with victims of crime/violence. The work in this field involves high levels of emotional demands, increased by the experiences of violence/crime shared by the people receiving support/intervention, by the way the support provided to each case develops and evolves (and the stress and frustration associated with it) and by the way all this can affect the professionals' emotional adjustment. The professionals' capacity for emotional self-management can also be affected by their own experiences and life situation.

Equally important is the professionals' ability to self-identify situations or moments when they are not in a suitable condition to support, inform and/or carry out interventions with victims of crime/violence.

Tolerance and respect

It is essential that the professional expresses respect and tolerance regarding any characteristic, value, tradition and belief of the victims of crime/violence, as long as these do not conflict with the rules of the organisation and/or legislation. Respect and tolerance for diversity are even more important when the values, traditions or beliefs of the victim of crime/violence differ from those followed by the professional themselves.

Compassion and Empathy

The ability to put oneself in another's place or imagine oneself "in their skin" (i.e., in the situation described by the victim) is critical, particularly for professionals providing support, information and/or developing interventions with victims of crime/violence. The capacity to look at the situation from the perspective of the victim of crime/violence, to be sensitive to the situation experienced by the victim, and to be able to perceive and understand the victim's feelings and meanings in relation to the crime/violence are important to establish a relationship of support and trust between the professional and the victim. Such competencies can contribute substantially to the success of the support and/or intervention.

Empathy does not mean that the professional should cry or be unduly moved by the victim's description of the situation of violence/crime; the professional's ability for emotional self-management is important. This balance is key as it allows the victim of crime/violence to recognise the professional as a figure of reference and trust, who is prepared and qualified.

Vocation

Although not strictly a competency, but rather a personal condition, the professionals' values of social solidarity are very important for the dedication to support, information and/or intervention with victims of crime/violence.

The professional's technical competencies

In addition to personal competencies and qualities, **technical competencies** are crucial to the quality of support, information and/or intervention with victims of crime/violence.

Core training in a particular academic field (such as social sciences, for example, or another area, depending on the type of support, information and/or intervention provided by the organisations) and the acquired **professional experience** are important resources for the intervention with victims of crime/violence.

The organisation should carry out a thorough analysis and selection of the professionals who will be in charge with the support of victims of crime via the online support tool, service or programme.

Among other aspects that the organisation finds relevant, the personal and technical competencies should be assessed.

More information on this issue is available at the *Key stages for organisation preparedness* section of this Handbook.

Such previous knowledge and experience does not exclude, however, the need for **specific training to deliver support, information and conduct interventions with victims of crime/violence**. This should include theoretical and victimological understanding of different forms of violence or crime, the consequences/impact of crime/violence, the needs and rights of victims of crime, the legal framework and existing legal and social responses. It should also include knowledge of ethical issues related to support, information and/or intervention, and of the organisation's ethical codes and rules of conduct.

In addition, online support of victims of crime/violence requires also **specialized training in the use of ICTs and the Internet to provide support, information and/or interventions to**

victims of crime/violence.

Besides covering specific forms of crime/violence and respective interventions with victims of crime/violence within the organisation's area of work, the training programme should also include **theoretical knowledge and equip trainees with specific technical skills to provide support via the Internet** (Bloom, 2007; Poh et al., 2013; Trepal et al., 2007; Mallen, Vogel, & Rochlen, 2005).

Among the **training content** to explore, we can highlight:

- theoretical framework for online support and applicable ethical and legal questions (further information is available in Part 1 of this Handbook and in the chapter *Ethics in online support: dilemmas and challenges*);
- knowledge and training in the use of computers and other devices, and in the use of the Internet and ICTs (technological literacy);
- information about the online tool, service or programme used to provide support, information and/or intervention, including becoming accustomed with its functioning and becoming able to use it;
- knowledge about measures and strategies to adopt to safeguard the privacy and confidentiality of online support (further information is available in the *Confidentiality and privacy* section of this Handbook);
- building the professionals' capacity to transmit information about risks and measures to be adopted by the victims to ensure their privacy and confidentiality;
- knowledge and promotion of competencies for communication via the Internet and specific communication strategies (further information is available in the chapter *Online Communication: strategies and competencies* of this Handbook);
- knowledge, familiarization and training in the application of procedures for the provision of online support to victims of crime/violence.

Besides the above, other training areas should also be covered; for example: **knowledge of the victim's social and cultural context and technical and personal skills** to adjust the language and approach to the characteristics of the victim seeking online support, information and/or intervention.

Project T@LK produced contents for training aiming the preparation of professionals for the provision of online support to victims of crime/violence.

Introducing **feedback and supervision mechanisms** (Mallen, Vogel, & Rochlen, 2005) **during**

the provision of online support, information and/or intervention can be a positive measure:

- to promote improvements of the professional's competencies for the provision of support, information and/or intervention via the Internet;
- to improve the quality of the support services provided to the victims of crime/violence.

It is important to remember that:

The **victim should be informed in advance** when a particular online session of support, information and/or intervention is being supervised by third parties, as this requires their prior permission.

Part 2

— *Supporting*

Chapter 2

— *The Online Support Session:
Preparation and Implementation*

Below we present guidelines to conduct a support session via the Internet with a victim of crime/violence.

In this particular case, we favoured the forms of support via the Internet using online and synchronous communication tools enabling simultaneous interaction between victim and professional. We hope that the proposed structure for an online support session is a solid and useful baseline able to be adjusted for other forms of support via the Internet. We should nonetheless point out that this planning proposal does not consider other forms of support via the Internet (further information is available at the *Forms of support via the Internet* section of this Handbook), such as:

- forms of support in which support, information and/or intervention are not directly provided by a professional;
- forms of support characterised by peer interaction, where victims help and support each other;
- forms of self-administered support.

A support session via the Internet (or even an ongoing support process or follow-up delivered online) should be structured in a coherent way, including different and complementary steps:

Opening <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Welcome• Inform about the conditions of use (Terms and Conditions)• Identify the request made by the victim/reason for contact• Analyze the safety conditions
Development <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Collect information about the crime/violence• Assess the risk of re-victimization• Identify the needs of the victim• Respond to the request of the victim and address the identified needs
Closing <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Referral (if applicable)• Provide contacts of services and support responses• To thank

The structure for each of the steps of an online support session presented below is an indicative guiding proposal. Organisations can adjust its structure and content according to the objectives of the online support tool, service or programme, the type of support provided and the users' characteristics.

Opening an online support session

At the start of a support session via the Internet, it is important that the professional:

- Welcomes the victim of crime/violence and thanks for their contact/request.
- Identifies him/herself (further information on the identity of the professional is available at the *Duty to obtain informed consent* section of this Handbook).

In line with the procedures defined by the organisation, the professional should introduce him/herself by their name, by an alternative name or by a nickname.

Example:

Professional [at the start of the session]:

Good morning _____ [victim's name]. Thank you contacting us.

My name is _____ [name/alternative name/nickname of the professional].

- Informs the victim of crime/violence about issues of confidentiality and privacy related to the support tool, service or programme via the Internet.
- It is important to provide the victim with information on the conditions of use of the online support tool, service or programme (further information is available at the *Duty to obtain informed consent* section of this Handbook).
- Seeks to identify the request of the victim of crime/violence or the motive for contact.
- Be attentive to the emotional state of the victim of crime/violence.
- 'Listen' to the victim of crime/violence, demonstrating empathy and understanding regarding the situation of violence/crime, the feelings and meanings associated with it and valuing the contact and the request for support/help.
- Collects information about the victim of crime/violence, such as the name, contact, and a location (in the case of an emergency situation).
- Analyse the safety conditions of the victim for receiving support via the Internet and the appropriateness of the support via the Internet (further information follows next in this Handbook).

Recommendations for the professional:

- Faced with a victim of crime/violence who resorts to the support tool, service or programme via the Internet in a situation of crisis (e.g. crying, confused in the description of the request, ashamed, hesitant, etc.), the professional should, first, focus on providing emotional support to the victim.

It is important to show understanding towards the emotions and reactions of the victim and reassure the victim, explaining the “normality” of their reactions and appreciating their courage in speaking about the situation, problem or experience and in having sought support.

Only after ensuring that the victim is emotionally prepared to receive and share information, should the professional proceed with the collection of information (as described above).

Example:

Professional [in case the victim refers/shows signs of nervousness/anxiety]:

I would understand if you are feeling nervous with all this...I am here to help you.

Take your time.

- In the initial phase of the support session via the Internet, namely during the collection of data on the motives for the victim to seek support, the professional should choose to ask open questions. Asking open questions helps the professional to obtain/collect information about the request/problem presented.

Example:

Professional:

What happened?

Analysing the conditions to provide online support

It is important to be aware of the advantages and disadvantages associated with the use of ICTs and the Internet on the provision of support, information and/or intervention (further information is available at the chapter *Benefits and challenges of online support* of this Handbook). As with other forms of support, there are always risks associated with providing support, information and/or intervention to victims of crime/violence. Such risks may be outweighed by the benefits of the support or intervention: for example, online support can be especially beneficial for certain victims, since it promotes greater accessibility to support mechanisms, including for victims who, as a rule, do not seek/cannot get support (Childress, 2000).

It is important to seek to understand whether the objectives and characteristics of the online tool, service or programme are adequate to **meet the needs presented by the victim and/or their situation/problem**.

The organisation can set the parameters to be considered, such as those listed below, in the analysis of the appropriateness of the support tools, services or programmes via the Internet to the victim's circumstances/characteristics, the problem/situation they present and the needs that should be satisfied.

Thus, when dealing with a victim of crime/violence seeking support, information and/or intervention via an online tool, service or programme, it is important to understand some aspects, such as the ones presented below:

Regarding the support

- victim's agreement in relation to the conditions of use of the online support, information and/or intervention;
- situation/problem presented by the victim and whether the online tool, service or programme they intend to use is adequate (e.g. Is the problem presented related to a situation of violence or crime? Is the situation presented by the victim of eminent danger for their integrity? Is it a medical emergency?);
- organisation's knowledge of the existing resources/services in the victim's local area, anticipating a possible referral to face-to-face intervention/support services.

Regarding the victim

- victim's preference for the delivery method of support, information and/or intervention (e.g. face-to-face; telephone; email; chat; etc.);

- victim's characteristics that may make difficult/limit the access/use of the online tool, service or programme (e.g. language; culture);
- victim's characteristics that may inhibit the provision of support, information and/or intervention to the victim (e.g. the case of children).

Regarding ICTs

- access to the Internet and to a computer or other device by the victim;
- safety and privacy of the victim in the use of the online tool, service or programme;
- victim's knowledge and experience in the use of computers (or other devices) and of the Internet;
- victim's experience (and skills) in the communication via ICTs.

The **check-list presented above is indicative**, and the organisations can adapt the parameters that should be considered to their needs and to the form of support via the Internet they intend to deliver.

Similarly, **the method of collection of this type of information should be selected according to the organisation's needs:**

- the collection of information can be undertaken informally, as the communication between the professional and the victim develops, and using, whenever adequate, the professional's perception and experience;
- the collection of information can be done in a structured way, through specific questions to the victim covering the points mentioned above (all or some) and/or others seen as relevant by the organisation.

Following this analysis, it may be concluded that the support tool, service or programme via the Internet is not the most appropriate service for a particular victim, either because of the situation/problem, the inadequacy of the tool, service or programme to respond to the problems/needs presented by the victim and/or other condition of the victim that hinders the access to such form of support.

In these cases, the organisation should:

- Try to respond to the request presented by the victim of crime/violence.
- **Inform the victim about alternative support services they can access**, namely those provided by the organisation and other relevant entities, explaining that such alternatives can provide a better response to their situation/problem

and/or needs. The organisation can also consider the implementation of **referral mechanisms** to internal support services (provided by the organisation itself) or to external services (provided by other organisations).

In case of a referral, the victim must agree to it. Further information is available at the chapter *Ethics in online support: dilemmas and challenges* of this Handbook.

At the beginning of the online support session, it is also important to assess **the safety of the victim of crime/violence in the use of the online support tool, service or programme**.

The organisation and the professional should seek to understand whether the victim has adequate **conditions in place to receive the support, information and/or intervention via the Internet safely and privately**, namely:

- the place (public or private) where they are;
- the device (personal or public) being used to access the tool, service or programme via the Internet and the possibility of it being used/accessed by third parties;
- Internet (public or closed network, Wi-Fi) being used to access the online support tool, service or programme;
- possibility/suspicion that the device(s) being used is/are being monitored by third parties, namely by the perpetrator of the crime/violence;
- possibility of being surprised by the arrival of third parties, including the perpetrator of the crime/violence;
- knowledge of the emergency contacts that can be used, in case of need;
- alternative contact made available by the victim to be used in case of need;
- knowledge of safety behaviours to adopt before, during and after the use of the support tool, service or programme via the Internet.

Further information is available at the chapter *Measures to increase security, confidentiality and privacy in online support* of this Handbook.

As part of the victim's safety, it may be important to define with the victim, right at the beginning of the online support session, a **contingency/alternative plan**, that is, a strategy for action to deal with unforeseen circumstances that may put the safety of the victim at risk (e.g. the sudden arrival of the perpetrator of the crime/violence) and/or potential technical/technological failures during online communication.

The professional should:

- Inform the victim of the organisation's **alternative contacts** that they can use if there are **technical/technological failures** or other abnormalities during the use of the online support tool, service or programme.
- Define with the victim **safety strategies** in the case that they are surprised by third parties and/or the perpetrator of the crime/violence during the use of the online support tool, service or programme. Some examples are:
 - Set passwords/code words that alert the professional of the presence/arrival of third parties, the presence/arrival of the perpetrator of the crime/violence, and of other relevant unforeseen circumstances.
 - Knowing (by heart) useful contacts and emergency numbers to use in an emergency situation.
- Inform the victim of crime/violence about **safety behaviours** they should adopt before, during and after the use of the online support tool, service or programme, for example:
 - Erase the history of the conversation with the professional/organisation right after ending the online communication (or as soon as possible, in the case communications have, for some reason, been interrupted).

Developing an online support session

The development of an online support session should focus on **collecting details about the situation, problem or experience** that motivated the contact/request by the victim of crime/violence via the online support tool, service or programme; it should also concentrate on responding to it and on **promoting a trusting relationship** between the victim and the professional.

At this stage of the session, the objectives can be varied, depending on the tool, service of programme used to provide online support, on the purpose of it and the target groups. Some of the objectives might be the following:

- To obtain information about the situation of crime/violence, with details about the circumstances of the crime/violence (e.g. where it happened; how it happened; who was the perpetrator), its severity and frequency, the type of relationship with the perpetrator of the crime/violence, the measures/actions already taken and whether there is an informal support network or not (e.g. family; friends; work colleagues).
- To explore and deepen the understanding of the questions, doubts and/or reasons of the

victim's contact.

- To explain and inform the victim of crime/violence about the dynamics and forms of violence/aggression usually associated with the type of crime/violence endured.
- To assess the risk of re-victimisation, allowing the professional to define and communicate to the victim of crime/violence safety strategies that the victim can use for future protection and safety.
- Identify the needs of the victim of crime /violence.
- Respond to the request made by the victim of crime/violence, or address the reason for the contact.

As **the pace of communication via ICTs is slower**, especially when it occurs through writing, it is important to plan in a balanced manner the amount of information to be collected, aiming at providing appropriate support, information and/or intervention based on the needs of the victim of crime/violence.

This balance includes **reducing the amount of questions to ask the victim of crime/violence** in comparison with a face-to-face session or even a telephone session.

During this communication process, it remains essential to **'listen' attentively to the victim**, demonstrating empathy and understanding for the feelings, reactions and meanings attributed by the victim to the experience of violence or crime.

Example:

Professional [during the session]:

It's good that you are talking with me [...].

It must have been very difficult.

Recommendations for the professional:

- The questions should be direct and focused on the problems presented by the victim.
- After each question, the professional should wait for the victim's reply before moving on to the next question or message.
- The questions should be focused on one subject at a time. The transition from one subject to another must be carried out through a clear indication of the change of topic.

Example:**Professional [during the session]:**

Very well.

Now, let's talk about [...]

- The professional should not interrupt the writing process of the victim, if the victim is typing.
- It is important to ask the victim regularly whether they feel comfortable with the pace at which the interaction is developing.
- Each victim has a certain level of technological mastery and proficiency (including typing skills) that affects the form and speed at which they are able to communicate with the professional. The professional must be sensitive to the victim's way of communication. If the victim indicates that the conversation is, for example, too fast, the professional should adjust the pace accordingly.
- The professional should be able to adapt the language used to the victim's characteristics, and be particularly responsive to the victim's language indicators, adjusting their own language accordingly.
- In situations where the victim has apparently left the conversation, the professional should send a new message to determine if the victim is still online. In case the professional realises the victim has, in fact, left the online support session, he/she should send the victim a message thanking for the contact, and including information about alternative contacts available and safety advice.

Example:**Professional [when the victim seems to have abandoned the conversation]:**

As it seems that you have left the session, we will have to end it.

Thank you very much for your contact.

Please feel free to contact us again.

If you prefer, you can go to our local services.

You can consult our website for information about the location and opening times.

For your safety, please delete, as soon as possible, all messages related to this conversation.

Given the **absence of non-verbal cues in online communication**, it is very important that:

- The professional seeks to **elucidate/clarify** answers and/or questions that may be wrongly interpreted and/or affected by possible communication failures.

Example:

Professional:

You said [a few minutes ago] that you were scared... Do you remember?
The fear you have been feeling ...does it have to do with the complaint?
[...]
Tell me about what you are afraid of...

- Use **specific communication techniques** (further information is available at the chapter *Online communication: strategies and competencies* of this Handbook) to promote a **relationship of support, guided by empathy and trust**.

Assessing the risk of re-victimisation

The assessment of the risk of re-victimisation should focus on three core areas:

- the characteristics of the victim that can contribute to increasing their vulnerability to re-victimisation;
- the characteristics and dynamics of the crime/violence, particularly regarding increased risk when there is some sort of relationship between the victim and the perpetrator of the crime/violence;
- the characteristics of the perpetrator of the crime/violence, that may provide relevant clues in relation to their level of dangerousness.

The professional may consider the following areas and variables to assess the **risk that the victim of crime/violence suffers a new act of violence/crime**:

Characteristics of the victim

- age;
- gender;
- first language and oral and written competencies (particularly, when the victim's first

language is not the language of the country);

- presence of mental and/or cognitive difficulties/disability;
- prior experiences of victimisation;
- existence of and access to informal support (e.g. family; friends; work colleagues);
- whether they have children;
- dependence (physical, emotional, financial) on the perpetrator of the crime/violence (when the victim knows the perpetrator of the crime/violence);

Characteristics and dynamics of the crime/violence

- form(s) of violence experienced by the victim;
- contexts in which the violence/crime takes place (e.g. at home; in a public place; at work; etc.);
- duration and escalation of the violence/crime (e.g. how long has it been happening?; has the violence become more severe?);
- severity and impact of the violence/crime [e.g. has the violence caused physical injuries?; has the violence triggered symptoms of emotional and psychological maladjustment (such as panic attacks, intense fear, flashbacks¹⁰, nightmares, deep sadness or other symptoms/signs)?; are there significant changes in the victim's life because of the violence/crime (e.g. resignation from their job/occupation; loss of income)?];
- whether the victim knows the perpetrator of the crime/violence;
- relationship with the perpetrator of the crime/violence (e.g. intimate; family relationship, professional; other);
- cohabitation with the perpetrator of the crime/violence (e.g. does the victim live/has lived in the same residence as the perpetrator of the crime/violence?);
- whether the victim is afraid of the perpetrator of the crime/violence;
- whether there is a history of violence/crime against the victim by the perpetrator;
- presence of prior (unsuccessful) attempts to end the violence/crime;
- whether the victim has reported the situation before.

Characteristics of the perpetrator of the crime/violence

- access to weapons by the perpetrator of the crime/violence;
- presence of mental health issues and/or drug use by the perpetrator of the crime/violence (that the victim knows about);
- whether the perpetrator of the crime/violence has come into contact with the justice system (that the victim knows about it);
- new aggressions/violence by the perpetrator of the crime/violence;
- whether new intimidation attempts by the perpetrator of the crime/violence took place after the violence/crime episode that motivated the victim to seek support;

10. **Flashbacks** refer to the sensation of reliving a potentially traumatic event.

- whether the perpetrator of the crime/violence has knowledge about the victim's routines and lifestyle;
- whether the perpetrator of the crime/violence has attempted to make contact or become close to the victim after the violence/crime episode that motivated the victim to seek support.

These variables are indicative and generic, and do not take into account the specific dynamics present in certain forms of violence/crime (e.g. violence in intimate relationships) and certain risk factors specifically associated with certain forms of violence/crime and their effects on the increase/reduction of the risk of re-victimization.

If the organisation intends to tailor the risk assessment variables to a specific type of crime/violence, it should develop specific measures/instruments.

Highlight on current practices:

The **Portuguese Association for Victim Support - APAV [Portugal]** has a structured instrument to assess the risk of lethal physical violence against women in their intimate relationships¹¹.

This instrument is used in APAV's local offices and in its Victim Support Helpline - 116 006 to support women victims of violence in their intimate relationships.

Highlight on current practices:

Project EWVI [EVALUATION of VICTIMS] was promoted by the French Ministry of Justice and developed an individual assessment questionnaire on the needs of the victims and a practical guide.

The guide is available at
http://www.justice.gouv.fr/publication/evvi_guide_en.pdf

11. APAV has the rights for the translation and validation in Portugal of the instrument Danger Assessment. Additional information available at <https://www.dangerassessment.org/>

The organisation should **decide and define how it will collect information to assess the risk of re-victimisation:**

- the collection of information can be done indirectly by the professional, using the information the victim shares during their conversation;
- it can also be carried out directly and in a more structured way, by posing concrete questions on each of the variables listed above (or others considered relevant by the organisation) and/or via specific instruments.

It is important to remember that:

- The assessment of the risk of re-victimisation only makes sense if it is accompanied by **measures that can help the victim to manage and handle the situation and the risk in which they are and to increase their safety.**
- When defining parameters and variables to assess the risk and define how the information will be collected, the organisation should consider developing practical information and advice for the victim, taking the risk variables noted into account.

Example:

If the fact that the victim knows the perpetrator of the crime/violence is identified as a risk factor for re-victimisation, the professional should provide the victim with safety strategies, such as, for example:

- memorising emergency contacts, in case they need urgent help;
- avoiding being alone with the perpetrator of the crime/violence.

Identifying the needs of the victim of crime/violence

With the information collected during the online support session, it is important that the professional identifies the support and protection needs of the victim of crime/violence.

Given the evidenced re-victimisation risk level and the information collected:

- *Is it necessary to provide strategies to increase the safety of the victim to deal with potential new episodes of crime/violence?*
- *Is it necessary to recommend that the victim contacts the police/judicial authorities?*
- *Is it necessary to make the victim aware of the need to obtain more specific support,*

information and/or intervention (legal, medical, psychological or other)?

- *It is necessary to make the victim aware of possible referral to other services or entities (e.g. social security benefits)?*

Some of the identified needs may eventually be addressed by the organisation, particularly through its support services and internal resources. However, other needs (e.g. medical and psychotherapeutic support) may require the involvement of other entities or even entities of the criminal justice system and other systems.

Thus, the organisation's responsiveness to the identified needs of the victim of crime/violence will depend on:

- the organisation's competencies and mission;
- whether the organisation has support services or responses to which the victims of crime/violence supported by the online support tool, service or programme can be directed to and whether these services are available;
- whether there are support services or responses in the community (healthcare, social security, justice and safety), including potential institutional collaborations/protocols.

Closing an online support session

The closing of the online support session should, as any other stage of a support session, be prepared.

Therefore, the professional should:

- If applicable, inform the victim or make them aware of the importance of the referral to other support services provided by the organisation (e.g. face-to-face session at the local support offices) and/or to the services of other entities.
- If applicable, obtain the consent or agreement of the victim of crime/violence for the referral mentioned above.
- Determine whether the victim has any questions/doubts that have not been clarified.
- Thank the victim for the contact made.
- Demonstrate availability for future contacts, providing information about alternative contacts of the support services of the organisation (e.g. telephone contact; helpline; address and opening days/times of the local support offices).
- Inform the victim of crime/violence about the safety behaviours that they should

adopt after the online support session such as, for example, deleting the history of the conversation with the professional from the device/account used (further information in *Measures to increase security, confidentiality and privacy in online support* section of this Handbook).

- If applicable, invite the victim of crime/violence to evaluate the online support tool, service or programme (further information is available at the chapter *Evaluation of online support* of this Handbook).

(Gierman et al., 2013).

Part 2

— *Supporting*

Chapter 3

— *Online Communication:
Strategies and Competencies*

With the emergence and evolution of ICTs, new ‘languages’ of online communication have developed, and their characteristic symbols, abbreviations and acronyms are being used with an increased frequency.

These are actually new ‘languages’ which are part of everyday communication and social interactions, including those that take place outside the virtual world.

In light of this, discussing online communication in this Handbook is absolutely necessary because:

- it is likely to affect the communication with the victim, which takes place via the online support tools, services or programmes;
- organisations and their professionals should understand and use online communication adequately when providing support, information and/or interventions, as well follow up on the constant changes in this domain.

It is crucial to make use of **basic rules to guide the communication via the Internet**. It was in this context that the concept of **netiquette**¹² has emerged to describe a set of **behaviour rules to be adopted for online communication**.

The concept of netiquette is reflected in the good use of the Internet, as well as in the appropriate use of different online communication tools, such as email, blogs, websites, social networks and chats.

It is important that the professional considers some courtesy rules in the communication via the Internet:

- **Introduce yourself.** Start the conversation with a greeting and indicating your name/alternative name/nickname.
- When you want to **introduce a new topic**, write a new message with a distinct subject heading that allows the victim of crime/violence to understand that you changed the topic of the conversation.
- **Reply to a message sent by the victim of crime/violence as soon as possible**, always thinking through before writing.
 - The professional should resist the temptation to reply too quickly, thus reducing the risk of sharing imprecise, incorrect or incomplete information.
- **Be concise and use simple and appropriate language.**
 - Maintain the quality of the grammar and orthography (although in online communication it is common to use abbreviations, acronyms and even

12. The concept of netiquette was used for the first time in the memo Netiquette Guidelines (Hambridge, 1995). Further information at <https://www.ietf.org/rfc/rfc1865.txt>

typos). The abbreviations, acronyms and typos can be perceived as a lack of quality and competence of the organisation and/or of the professional providing the online support, information and/or intervention.

- Be very careful with punctuation. In the absence of visual and audio communication cues, the inadequate use of punctuation marks can lead to failures in communication/wrong interpretations.
- Do not use rude or crude words.
- **Use (wisely) emoticons¹³ and “enhancers”** to support conveying (emotional) information. Its use by the professional should take into consideration the characteristics of the victim of the crime/violence with whom they are interacting, but also the victim’s meaning/understanding in relation to the emoticons used.
- **Avoid sentences written in all caps.**
- **Make use of brackets** to add words, sentences or expressions to your speech.
- **Be cautious with the use of humour and avoid sarcasm**, as these can elicit wrong interpretations, namely due to the absence of non-verbal cues during online communication.
- **Control emotions.** In the same way that the professional is expected to control their verbal and non-verbal expression in relation to the information shared by a victim in a face-to-face support session, the professional in an online communication context is also expected to contain expressing (in writing) emotions and opinions that may raise the levels of discomfort of the victim or cause secondary victimisation.

Example:

Professional [using an inadequate approach to address the victim’s fear of making a complaint]:

But, why are you afraid to report the situation?

Professional [using an adequate approach to address the victim’s fear of making a complaint]:

I understand that you are afraid to report...

Tell me about the reasons why you feel that way.

- Be mindful of the **number of characters** and lines used: messages should always be simple, short, and, as mentioned, concise.
- Respect the **response time of the victim of crime/violence**, as well as

13. Emoticons refer to symbols to portray/express a particular emotion or feeling. A famous emoticon is the smiley.

the characteristics of the device and Internet connection being used. Each victim has different skills regarding writing or how easy it is for them to use technological communication (technological literacy): some victims reply quickly and others more slowly.

- **Always end the conversation with a farewell message** and wait for the victim of crime/violence to do the same before ending the session.
- **It may not be advisable for the professional to maintain, simultaneously, more than one support session via the Internet with different victims of crime/violence:** each victim seeking the organisation's support via their online support tools, services or programmes deserves the professional's exclusive attention. However, such scenario may occur, particularly in the case of online support using communication tools such as chat. In this type of situation, close consideration should be given to the professional's experience and competencies, as well as to the response time of each victim of crime/violence.

Some of these considerations and online communication competencies are detailed in the next sections of this Handbook.

These netiquette rules are indicative.

The organisation can adjust them in line with the objectives of the support tool, service or programme offered via the Internet, and their needs and mission.

(Hambridge, 1995; Pierce, 1999; Shea, 1994).

Specific strategies for online communication

The **absence of communication cues (particularly non-verbal)** is considered one of the gaps and limitations of online support. Nonverbal language is seen as critical to the support rapport, allowing the professional to understand better the users' emotions and reactions and detect discrepancies between verbal and non-verbal communication. Another perspective posits that the lack of communication cues can increase/facilitate disinhibition due to the users' greater anonymity and privacy, thus promoting the sharing of information and emotions that otherwise may have not been shared.

Still another approach opposes the view that online communication lacks communication cues: **the behaviours or nonverbal language are present in interactions and communications via ICTs, although assuming a different format.** This approach argues

that the thoughts and emotions present in a support process/session can also be expressed through writing (Trepal et al., 2007).

The **training of professionals** providing support, information and/or intervention via the Internet is critical to enable them to **use the writing process effectively in the expression of thoughts and emotions** and to equally encourage/guide the users doing the same.

It is also crucial to develop specific training: to **promote empathy in the online support relationship**; in the use of emoticons; to raise awareness about the Internet languages (for example, abbreviations used in online communication, the use of smileys, emoticons, emojis¹⁴ and certain characters to express a certain emotional state, the use of acronyms) (Trepal et al., 2007).

Project T@LK developed training in the provision of online support to victims of crime/violence for victim support workers and volunteers.

Among other content, it includes specific online communication strategies.

The **specific communication techniques implemented when using ICTs provide context and reinforce the meaning of the intervention: they address the absence of non-verbal cues in the communication between professional and user** by enhancing what is considered important for the support relationship and for the user, involving him/her emotionally (Collie et al., 2000). This ensures that key information to define the intervention is collected, but also promotes a supportive relationship and an empathic, supportive and safe environment, crucial for the user to feel comfortable sharing information, thoughts and emotions regarding the problem.

Among the **specific techniques for communication via ICTs**, we highlight the following (Murphy & Mitchell, 2009; Collie et al., 2000):

Presence techniques

These are a set of techniques that seek to compensate for the lack of physical presence and non-verbal communication cues in the support relationship between professional and user. The use of these techniques aims to increase the feeling that the professional is “present” in the support relationship and to establish/maintain a supportive relationship that goes beyond the mere transmission/reception of information, by maintaining an implicit warm and caring message.

14. **Emojis** are images that seek to convey a word or phrase. They are very common in social networks, including instant messaging.

The presence techniques are varied:

Emotional bracketing

It is one of the presence techniques that, to make up for the lack of visual cues, refers to the inclusion (in brackets) of the underlying emotional content of the written content, reinforcing it; this technique aims to make it easier to understand/express what the other person is feeling.

During communication via ICTs, the professional may resort to emotional bracketing, as well as promote its use by the users, for important emotional content that would not be noticeable in writing otherwise. This technique allows to establish and strengthen the support relationship as it promotes mutual understanding and helps the professional to show empathy for the problems, needs and concerns presented by the user.

Through emotional bracketing the professional can provide more information to the user and, at the same time, obtain more information from the user (particularly important emotional information). This technique also facilitates sharing/externalising information and emotions by the user and a greater self-awareness of their own emotions and thoughts.

Example:

Professional:

It is very important [I am a bit concerned] that you have the safety plan in place

Descriptive immediacy (textual visualization)

This is one of the presence techniques which deepens the relationship of support between professional and user, providing the user with information about the professional's non-verbal behaviour for enabling a support experience similar to face-to-face support. In addition to its use by the professional, it is important to encourage its application when the user intends to disclose important information.

This is a particularly useful technique to highlight a moment of intense emotion (positive or negative), especially in situations where the verbal information/response is not enough. For this purpose, brackets can also be used. It may also be particularly useful to develop a closer relationship of support and, at a later stage, enabling to address some issues more directly, when relevant information is shared. This technique can also be useful to open or close an online support session.

It is important to be aware that the professional should not use this technique to attribute behaviours to the users.

Example:

Professional [during the session]:

After what you said earlier, I am really delighted by your courage in telling me what you went through [I'm smiling and nodding affirmatively].

Professional [at the close of the session]:

Thank you for your contact.

Imagine I am reaching out your hand to greet you and making myself available to future sessions.

Descriptive Imagery

This presence technique uses descriptive language to help the user create a mental image of the surrounding environment, increasing the feeling of physical presence of the professional, with the aim to create a support experience close to face-to-face support.

Example:

Professional:

I am in the appointment room.

The office is on the 2nd floor of the building.

It is similar to the room we used the last time you were here. Do you remember?

Time presence

This presence technique aims to focus the communication between professional and user in the present, developing a closer relationship and focusing the user on the actual moment of the online support session.

Example:

Professional:

Just now, when you told me that ...

Spacing and pacing

This technique concerns the use of punctuation, spacing and sentence structure to **manage the pace of online communication with the user**, introducing pauses in the process of interaction and thought, in order to enhance the discourse and focus the attention of the user.

Managing the session's rhythm can also be done by sending partial sentences, giving the indication that one's reasoning is not yet complete.

Example:

Professional:

Very well.

Let's go back a bit now ...

And think back on what you said.

Typical language of online communication

The typical language of online communication, which is more informal, is also useful to introduce a more informal tone in the communication between professional and user.

However, it is important to ensure that it is used properly and **to assess the context and how it fits with it** (to prevent failures in understanding, for example, interpretations of lack of competence/quality of the online support tool, service or programme and/or as a sign of lack of respect for the user and/or the problem presented).

Some Examples:

- **All caps**, especially to emphasize something or convey an emotion [e.g. YOU DID IT!].
- **Exclamation marks** to emphasize a particular information or emotion.
- **Vocalized pauses/prolongation of words** [e.g. hmmm].
- **Smileys, emoticons and emojis**, to convey a certain emotion or reaction [including facial expression] associated with the information shared.
- **Abbreviations/initialisms**, corresponding to words formed by the initial letters or syllables of a sequence of words [e.g. SMS, abbreviating short message service].
- **Acronyms**, corresponding to abbreviations/initialisms that are pronounced as a word [e.g. LOL, abbreviating laughing out loud].

(Collie et al., 2000; Wright, 2002; Trepal et al., 2007; Gierman et al., 2013; Murphy & Mitchell, 1998).

Metaphorical language

Its main objective is to deepen the support relationship between the professional and the user, but it also helps the user to understand their own needs. It uses analogies and metaphors to **add richness/content to the transmission of information** via the ICTs used (Collie et al., 2000; Bayne & Thompson, 2000 cit. in Wright, 2002).

Example:

Professional [during a session]:

The shame of talking about this subject, it's like a weight on top of you.

Text-based externalization

This technique is intended to place the users in a writing task and enable them to **experience different positions/outcomes before making a decision**, possibly quite an important one. The underlying purpose of this technique is to enable the users to explore and externalize their internal fight/conflict when facing a decision, creating conditions for them to make a more informed (autonomous) decision.

Example:

Professional [during a session with a victim of domestic violence undecided about leaving the relationship]:

Deciding is not easy.

I know you want to put a stop to it and get your life to a new start ...

On the other hand, you are afraid to leave ...

Let's hear both sides.

Let's start with the side "*I want to leave*". Is that ok?

Please write here what you think and feel about the option "*I want to leave*".

Write what you think it is important to tell him/her.

Other important competencies for online communication

To the specific communication techniques analysed above, we should add other equally important technical competencies:

‘Listening’ – even if, when providing support, information and/or intervention via the Internet, active listening skills may not be literally applied (considering that audio communication cues are absent from most of the online communication tools), it is still fundamental that the professional is able to grasp the information shared by the victim of crime/violence, while demonstrating that they are ‘listening’ and understanding what the victim is sharing.

Example:

Professional [during a session]:

Very good!

I understand...

Rephrasing – professionals repeat, using their own words, the content transmitted by the victim of crime/violence to ensure their understanding of what the victim said.

Example:

Professional [during a session]:

[Just now] you told me you were afraid of reporting the situation because you are not entirely sure about what you need to do.

Did I understand that correctly?

Summarising – in line with the previous skill, the professional should be able to summarise the information shared by the victim, particularly when there is a change in subject and/or at the end of a session. The summary allows the professional to check whether they have collected the necessary information, whether it was well understood, and, if necessary, to fill any gaps.

Example:

Professional [during a session]:

So, you would like to know what to do, from a legal point of view, about the harassment you are experiencing at work?

Questioning – asking the victim questions allows the professional to ensure they understand the information/problem shared by the victim and that they collect essential information for further information and/or intervention.

Informing – providing information to the victim of crime/violence considering their situation, motive for contact/request, or identified support needs and level of risk is a fundamental technical competence.

Example:

Professional [during a session]:

You have the right to receive information about what is happening in the criminal proceedings.

Part 3

— *Preparing*

Organisations intending to develop/adapt and implement (or who are already implementing) online support tools, services or programmes for victims of crime/violence might have to overcome a range of challenges, including operational aspects, technical issues and ethical concerns.

In this part of the Handbook we will reflect and, where possible, respond to some of these challenges, namely:

- Operational, pertaining to operational (development/adaptation of the tool, service or programme) and financial requirements, which affect the development and sustainability of the online tool, service or programme.
- Technical, regarding technical training and capacity building of the organisation and/or of its professionals and the definition of procedures.
- Ethical, concerning the creation and implementation of procedures and measures for delivering online support for victims of crime/violence, and covering issues such as confidentiality and privacy.

Part 3

— *Preparing*

Chapter 1

— *Preparing Organisations for
Implementing Online Support*

As discussed under Part 1, studies and research on the effectiveness of delivering support for victims of crime/violence via the Internet are scarce. In addition, ICTs are evolving constantly, which constitutes a challenge for the entities intending to integrate these technologies into their practices and support responses.

Nevertheless, studies that have been carried out on the use of support services, information and/or intervention via the Internet in other social or health issues (such as mental disorders) found positive results, in comparison to conventional support/intervention approaches. These researches have also reported users' good adhesion to support via the Internet.

Assessing the organisation's capacity and preparedness

It is important that the organisation conducts an internal assessment of its capacity to develop/adapt and implement online support tools, services or programmes aimed at victims of crime/violence.

Some of the aspects that the organisation should consider when assessing its capacity to deliver online support¹⁵ are:

- the appropriateness of the online support in relation to the organisation's mission and activities and how much it can be harmonised/integrated with the other services/resources already provided by the organisation;
- availability of and access to technological resources for the development/adaptation of online support tools, services or programmes for victims of crime/violence;
- financial capacity to leverage the technological development/adaptation, the implementation of online support and to ensure its continuity, considering, for example, whether:
 - it has resources and whether they are available;
 - it has access to external funding;
 - it has access to sponsorship;
- its knowledge about online support;
- its knowledge of the ethical challenges associated with the delivery of online support, such as privacy and confidentiality, and its ability to address these challenges;
- its technical capacity to develop procedures and policies for online support, considering the fitting to the organisation's mission and principles, to the other forms of support/services already being delivered and to the relevant national/international legislation (e.g. laws on data protection);

15. Adapted from the *National Network to End Domestic Violence, Safety Net Project* - <https://www.techsafety.org/resources-agencyuse>

- existence of formal/informal partnerships with other organisations with experience and specialised knowledge in the field of online support for victims of crime/violence;
- opportunities to participate in or promote the sharing/obtaining of knowledge and experiences with other organisations with experience and knowledge of online support;
- availability of qualified (paid and/or voluntary) human resources to deliver this type of support;
- technical and financial capacity to train (paid and/or voluntary) human resources on the delivery of online support;
- the importance and utility of online support in the eyes of (paid and/or voluntary) human resources, victims and other users, and levels of receptivity regarding its use.

In the survey about online support for victims of crime developed under Project T@LK, **(the lack of) financial capacity was identified as one of the main justifications for the non-development/implementation of online support for victims of crime/violence.**

Further information on the results of the survey can be found at <http://www.apav.pt/publiproj/images/yootheme/PDF/TALK.pdf>

Given this scenario, financial capacity is one of the areas that should be analysed by organisations that intend to implement/adapt some form of support for victims of crime/violence via the Internet.

They can also consider access to external funding opportunities.

Highlight on current practices:

Project T@LK – online support for victims of crime, promoted by the Portuguese Association for Victim Support - APAV [Portugal], which enabled the development of this Handbook, is co-funded by the Justice Programme of the European Union. This project will develop/adapt and improve tools and services of online support for victims of crime/violence of victim support organisations in Portugal¹⁶, Malta¹⁷ and Finland¹⁸.

Slachtofferhulp Nederland 2.0 is a *Slachtofferhulp Nederland's*¹⁹ programme, which aims to develop a range of online services

16. Portuguese Association for Victim Support - APAV.

17. Victim Support Malta.

18. Rikosuhripäivystys.

19. Victim Support the Netherlands.

for victims of crime/violence to complement traditional support services. Its ultimate purpose is to provide support services that are customized to the users' needs and preferences. It has a duration of 3 years [starting from 2015] and has obtained direct financial support for this purpose.

Key stages for organisational preparedness

1. **Identifying/defining the forms of support via the Internet** to be developed/adapted, their **objectives** and, when applicable, **the degree of integration with other support services or forms of support already provided by the organisation.**

When defining the forms of support via the Internet, it is important for the organisation to consider their **digital presence goals**.

Victim support organisations and services can, through their digital presence, aim for (Finn, 2001):

Visibility – bringing the organisation closer to the community and to the citizens by informing about its mission and resources and publicising its activities and events.

Education and Awareness – informing and promoting awareness about violence/ crime, victims' issues and related topics in the community and/or certain groups.

Advocacy – contributing to the development of political, legislative and legal changes in matters related to the organisation's intervention/mission.

Resources – the organisation's digital presence may be aimed at raising funds and donations and/or recruiting volunteers.

Service Provision – providing online support tools, services or programmes,

such as online support for victims of crime/violence by email, chat and/or other communication tools via the Internet, as well as other forms of (self-administered) online support, such as websites and informative apps.

The organisation should consider whether the provision of support via the Internet using specific tools, services or programmes is aligned with its objectives and digital strategy.

Regarding the **definition of the form(s) of support via the Internet** that the organisation intends to develop/adapt, there is a wide range of alternatives: online support by email/chat; Internet-based intervention; online peer support groups; among others.

For additional information, see the *Forms of support via the Internet* section of this Handbook.

On this matter, the results of the survey about online support for victims of crime developed under Project T@LK revealed that of the participant entities that reported delivering online support for victims of crime/violence, about **half of them mentioned that the most used tool or service was the entity's email or website**. This was followed by online support via chat (28%) and social networks (13%).

Further information on the results of the survey can be found at <http://www.apav.pt/publiproj/images/yootheme/PDF/TALK.pdf>

When defining procedures, selecting professionals and subsequently disseminating information about the online support tools, services or programmes, it is very important to clarify beforehand:

- a. **The online support objective(s)** - for example, informing/promoting awareness; providing intervention in crisis; providing practical/generic support; or providing more specific support, such as legal information.

It is important to remember that:

Aligning the objectives of the support to victims of crime/violence via the Internet with the objectives of the support via other services already being delivered (e.g.

face-to-face support in local support services) can be advantageous:

- It facilitates the definition/operationalization of procedures and mechanisms for referring victims of crime/violence to other responses/resources (including those that can be made available by the organisation itself), when such referral is necessary to respond to the needs of the victim.
- It can contribute to the integration of online support with other forms of support delivered by the organisation.

b. Who are the users of the online support tool, service or programme – the online support tool, service or programme can be used to facilitate the access to support, information and/or intervention to victims of any type of crime/violence. In addition, the development/adaptation of forms of support via the Internet may be intentionally focused and seeking specifically to increase/facilitate the access to support for victims who do not normally access existing support services or who are underrepresented in commonly received support requests, namely:

- Specific groups of victims;

Example:

children/young people; men;

- Victims of certain types of crime;

Example:

sexual crimes/violence; bullying.

As mentioned at Part 1, support mechanisms and practices via the Internet can be particularly attractive to certain population groups, especially to the younger population.

Highlight on current practices:

Kellimni.com [Malta] provides **online support to young people via email, chat [online form] and smart messaging** [via an App, with free download]. Kellimni.com also delivers support via its Facebook chat.

Support is anonymous, free and confidential, covering different aspects

of young people's lives [e.g. relationships, family, peers, mental and personal well-being]. Bullying, hate speech and violence in the family are some of the topics covered by Kellimni.com's online support.

In addition, the website also provides information and resources for [self-] support and additional help.

Further information is available at <http://kellimni.com/>

- c. What is the **geographical coverage of the online support tool, service or programme** – online support tools have the potential to cross borders at the regional, national and transnational level, facilitating access to services and resources to victims of crime, including those who, due to isolation and lack of local responses, have not been receiving the support they need to overcome the negative effects of the crime/violence experienced.

Nonetheless, it is important to define the geographical coverage of the online support tool, service or programme: the scope may be local, regional, national or other, and this is important when defining the technological development/adaptation process and which procedures to adopt.

Identifying which resources and services are available for a possible referral should be done according to the geographical coverage of the online support tool, service or programme. In turn, where applicable, the area covered by the online support tool, service or programme should be clearly publicised to users, especially to victims of crime/violence who may benefit from the support tool, service or programme via the Internet.

Highlight on current practices:

Victim Support England & Wales [United Kingdom] has an **online chat service for support and information for people affected by crime in some areas of England**. The support is free of charge, anonymous and confidential, and is provided by qualified victim supporters on specific days and times.

The online chat service is available on the organisation's website -

<https://www.victimsupport.org.uk>

They inform explicitly on **the geographical coverage of the online chat service available**, as well as on the type of support provided and the respective days and times of operation.

The use of this service requires prior registration by completing an online form.

- d. The degree of **integration with other forms of support or support services provided by the organisation**, if in place (e.g. local support services, telephone support).

In this case, it is important to reflect on the relationship between the different forms of support:

- *Does the online support tool, service or programme represent a point of contact with the support services of the organisation that will be followed by referral to its other support responses (and/or to other partner organisations)?*
- *Can the online support tool, service or programme be used to provide ongoing support, without necessarily being articulated with the other support responses?*
- *Can the online support tool, service or programme complement other forms of support (e.g. face-to-face support/monitoring can be complemented with online activities/sessions via online support tool, service or programme)?*

It is also important for the entity to define procedures and strategies for articulation and integration with the other forms of support and support services provided, that is, to define the steps and how the information about the victim of crime/violence contacting the online support services (online tool, service or programme) is moved/handled between the different forms of support provided by the entity.

2. Developing/adapting the technology of the tools, services or programmes for the delivery of support via the Internet.

The organisation should consider whether the online support tool, service or programme to be implemented requires the development of a specific technological solution or the adaptation of pre-existing software or solutions.

Both options have benefits and difficulties:

- The **development of specific technological solutions** requires an additional financial effort by the organisation, which may be a burden for the financial resources and human resources, with costs for the development of the solution, but also for possible updating requirements. On top of this, as mentioned previously, the lack of financial resources was reported in the survey held under Project T@LK as one of the main reasons for the lack of development/implementation of online support. On the positive side, these technological solutions can contribute to the development of specific security mechanisms and measures.
- **Existing Internet communication solutions**, such as Skype™, Whatsapp™ or Messenger™, are worth mention as possibilities and resources for the implementation of online support tools, services or programmes. The financial effort required to organisations will be predictably lower than the one it would be necessary for the development of a new technological solution, thus more compatible with the difficulties in funding/financial capacity described before. Moreover, such software is also significantly spread, used and known by the population, which may facilitate its access and use for requesting/obtaining information and support in case of victimization. Alongside with these advantages, it is still important that the organisation: analyses (and mitigates) the potential technical and ethical risks and shortcomings of such solutions; adapts the existing communication solutions to the objectives of the online support tool, service or programme; and defines strategies and procedures that safeguard privacy and confidentiality.

For both scenarios, it is important to work on the development and operationalization of strategies that increase the privacy and confidentiality of the online communication between the victim and the organisation or service providing online support, such as:

- preparing and training professionals to use this type of media and for the risks associated with communication via ICTs and the Internet;
- informing victims of crime/violence about the risks associated with the use of ICTs and the Internet and encouraging the adoption of safety behaviours.

Technical and technological development also seems to be among the central concerns of the victim support organisations and services that participated in the survey about online support for victims of crime developed under Project T@LK: around half of the entities that reported having online support for victims of crime/violence reported that one of the aspects to be improved was the **technical/**

technological changes/improvements in their online support.

Further information on the results of the survey can be found at
<http://www.apav.pt/publiproj/images/yootheme/PDF/TALK.pdf>

3. Developing specific procedures for delivering support via the Internet.

Developing procedures for delivering support, information and/or intervention via the Internet should consider:

- a. The definition of **specific procedures to support victims of crime/violence via the Internet**.
 - This should take into account the form(s) of online support to be implemented, the objectives of this support, the users and the level of integration with other services/ responses provided by the organisation.
 - It can also consider the development of tools to help organisations and their professionals in the collection of information to support victims of crime/violence via the Internet.
 - It can also include the development of a contingency plan/alternative plan addressing the eventuality of technological failure during online communication between the victim and the professional and/or for an emergency situation occurring while online support, information and/or intervention is being provided.

Further information is available at the chapter *The online support session: preparation and implementation* of this Handbook.

- b. The definition of **procedures and ethical guidelines** for providing online support to victims of crime/violence.
 - This should address issues of **confidentiality and privacy**, as well as the **duty to inform and obtain consent**. The definition of ethical guidelines should also consider **data protection**, ensuring that the online support tool, service or programme abides with current legislation on data protection and develops procedures that safeguards all data from victims of crime/violence.
 - It can also consider the development of procedures/strategies to deal with **situations**

outside the entity’s scope of intervention and with requests for support or contacts by children under 18.

Further information is available at the chapter *Ethics in online support: dilemmas and challenges* of this Handbook.

4. Definition and preparation of human resources (paid and/or voluntary) for the delivery of online support.

The selection of the professionals should be based on a **thorough analysis of the personal and technical competencies** that the organisation intending to implement an online support tool, service or program considers relevant for the objectives and target groups of such form of support. Detailed information on the competencies of the professional can be found in the chapter *The online support professional* of this Handbook.

The motivation of the professional to deliver support via the Internet and ICTs is important (Mallen, Vogel, & Rochlen, 2005). It is also important to consider the selection of professionals who feel minimally comfortable²⁰ with these means of communication, even though technological literacy can also be improved through knowledge, training and practice. Alongside with their will, it is also **critical to ensure that professionals are prepared and have specific training for delivering online support.**

Building the capacity of the professionals for the support, information and/or intervention via the Internet:

- ensures the quality of the support services provided to the victims of crime/violence;
- it is an ethical duty for the organisations and their professionals.

Further information is available at the chapter *The online support professional* of this Handbook.

5. Development and dissemination of information about forms of support via the Internet and about the terms and conditions associated with their use.

The dissemination of information about online support tools, services or programmes for

20. We are referring in particular to technological literacy.

victims of crime/violence is fundamental:

- it allows the users to know that these online support tools, services or programmes are available;
- it promotes the public recognition of the quality of the organisation's online support tool, service or programme.

Regardless of the format and means used to disseminate information about the online support tool, service or programme, it is important to include data on:

- the scope of the online support tool, service or programme (including the type(s) of violence/crime for which it is intended), to whom it is addressed (e.g. all victims of crime/violence; victims of certain types of violence/crime; witnesses) and conditions of use;
- link, page or website on which the online support tool, service or programme is available;
- periods/days and hours of operation and estimated response time.

Highlight on current practices:

As part of the development of the website www.infovitimas.pt, the **Portuguese Association for Victim Support - APAV [Portugal]** launched an informative video about this online self-help tool.

The video is available at <https://youtu.be/qmzgrW-Tsuk> and it was disseminated via the APAV's website and its social networks.

The website was also publicised using other informative materials such as posters and brochures.

Part 3

— *Preparing*

Chapter 2

— *Evaluation of
Online Support*

The evaluation of the support, information and/or intervention is a central stage in the implementation of the online support tool, service or programme.

The evaluation allows, if that is the case, the introduction of changes and improvements to the support provided to the victims of crime/violence.

Thus, it is important to obtain feedback from:

- the end users of the online support tool, service or programme;
- the professionals responsible for the provision of support, information and/or intervention via the Internet.

In the process of evaluating the online support tool, service or programme and the support, information and/or intervention for victims of crime/violence, the organisation should consider different domains (Castelnuovo et al., 2003):

Technical capacity

- security and reliability of the online support tool, service or programme;
- easiness of use of the online support tool, service or programme;
- capacity of the online support tool, service or programme to collect useful information regarding the situation and the victim of crime/violence.

Impact on the intervention

- to what extent does the online support tool, service or programme positively affects the results of the support and the relationship with the victim of crime/violence?

Impact on the end users

- does the online support tool, service or program improve the wellbeing of the victims of crime/violence?

Whatever the domain the organisation intends to evaluate, **the end users' assessment** of the online support tools, services or programmes is a fundamental component of the evaluation (Larsen, Attkisson, Hargreaves, & Nguyen, 1979).

To this end, different instruments can be used:

Client Satisfaction Questionnaire (CSQ), which includes several categories, such as:

- quality, quantity and duration of the service (e.g. *Did the duration of the session seem appropriate to you?*);
- type of service (e.g. *Considering your needs, how appropriate is this type of service for you?*);
- procedures (e.g. *Do you think that the support provided was as fast as required?*);
- staff (e.g. *Did you feel comfortable with the treatment and attention received from the technical team?*);
- results (e.g. *Did the support provided help you dealing better with your problem?*).
- general satisfaction (e.g. *Overall, how happy are you with the service?*);

(Larsen et al., 1979).

Client Satisfaction Survey (Murphy, Parnass, Mitchell, Hallett, Cayley, & Seagram, 2009) can be used to assess users' satisfaction with an online support service and includes a series of statements, such as:

- *the professionals have the right skills;*
- *the professionals helped me feel comfortable during the session;*
- *the intervention of the professionals helped me solve my problem;*
- *my experience with the service corresponded to my expectations;*
- *the services improved my situation and my wellbeing.*

These instruments address distinct and important areas of evaluation: the evaluation of user satisfaction and the evaluation of results.

In that sense, the evaluation of satisfaction allows the user to express their satisfaction with the online support tool, service or programme used, and this does not interfere with the resolution of the problem that led to the use of such online support tool, service or programme.

CQ-index (Consumer Quality Index), developed for the Health sector²¹, covers a range of experiences of the service users and measures their importance for the user. This instrument focuses on the measurement of the needs, which are translated into experiences, and their importance, rather than evaluating the satisfaction of the users.

The ***Project Quality Services for victims of crime***, promoted by APAV, used this model to

21. Sixma, H. J., Kerssens, J. J., Campen, C. V., & Peters, L. (1998). Quality of care from the patients' perspective: from theoretical concept to a new measuring instrument. *Health expectations*, 1 (2): 82-95.

evaluate the experiences of victims of crime/violence in relation to the quality of the support services, informing whether the service provided corresponded to the needs of the victims and which aspects they considered important.

It evaluated different needs - for example (APAV, 2014):

- respectful treatment - **indicators**: politeness; attention received; sufficient time; comprehension; dignity; privacy; etc.;
- information - **indicators**: language easy to understand; information on the rights of victims; referral; information on the development of the case; etc.;
- participation - **indicators**: valuing the victim's perspective; having sufficient information to decide the next steps; etc.;
- protection/safety - **indicators**: advice and safety plans; preventing new episodes; etc.;
- reduction of stress - **indicators**: acknowledgement of damage associated with stress; provision of social, emotional and psychological support; reduction in fear; etc.

Further information is available at

https://www.apav.pt/publiproj/images/yootheme/PDF/Report_RightToQualityServices_EN.pdf

The organisation can use specific instruments, such as those listed above, or, alternatively, establish the areas or parameters they intend to cover in the evaluation of their online support tool, service or programme.

In addition to the domains to be covered in the evaluation of the online support tool, service or programme, the organisation should define the way in which the information will be collected.

Considering that the online support tool, service or programme is provided via the Internet, it would make sense that the evaluation also takes place via the Internet, for example:

- via the instruments already mentioned and/or the organisation's chosen domains, adapted to an online form (so that they can be completed by the victim of crime/violence);
- via question(s) placed directly by the professional at the end of the online support session.

Part 3

— *Preparing*

Chapter 3

— *Ethics in Online Support:
Dilemmas and Challenges*

The delivery of support via the Internet should be regulated by the current laws, applicable codes of ethics and the policies of the organisation intending to implement this form of support at a distance.

Professionals should guide their performance in compliance with the ethical principles outlined by these instruments, even though they do not cover specifically or exclusively the practices of support, information and/or intervention via the Internet (Childress, 2000).

An organisation intending to implement a support tool, service or programme via the Internet should seek **to create (or adapt) specific procedures and codes of conduct for the practice of support via the Internet** (Childress, 2000).

Supporting victims of crime/violence via the Internet poses **various challenges and dilemmas to the professionals and organisations providing online support tools, services or programmes**.

This Handbook presents information regarding some of these ethical challenges and such information should also be included in the **Terms and Conditions associated to the use of a particular support tool, service or programme via the Internet**.

Terms and Conditions can be defined as a set of rules or regulations which users must agree to follow in order to use a service. It can also be named as Terms of Service, Terms of Use or Disclaimer. When the service is being used, it is implied that the user accepts such terms and conditions.

The **Terms and Conditions** should:

- be made available in the online support tools, services or programmes and displayed in a visible and easily accessible location;
- be provided in advance to the victim of crime/violence who may use the online support via the tool, service or programme.

The **Terms and Conditions** should be used to inform the victim about the objectives, scope and characteristics of the online support tool, service or programme, about the (possible) limitations and risks to privacy and confidentiality associated with communication via ICTs, and about the limits of confidentiality that may arise when providing/obtaining support via the Internet.

It is important that victims of crime/violence and/or other users have the necessary information to make informed decisions about the use of the online support tool, service or programme.

Some of the key ethical challenges that entities intending to implement online support tools, services or programmes may face are:

- the duty to obtain **informed consent**;
- **confidentiality and privacy**;
- the **identity** of the victim/user.

Duty to obtain informed consent

Before receiving online support, information and/or intervention, the victim should be informed about (Poh, Jaladin, & Abdullah, 2013; Trepal et al., 2007; Robinson, 2009):

- the **objectives** of the online support tool, service or programme, the type of support, information and/or intervention it provides and how the communication will be carried out (including whether it is synchronous or asynchronous);
- the characteristics of **communication** via the Internet (e.g. whether this communication is done in writing, which can slow down the interaction/communication);
- the **operating rules** (including the days/period and hours of operation of the online support tool, service or programme and estimated response time, particularly for asynchronous online support tools, services or programmes), including limitations on the availability of the professionals (e.g. it may not be guaranteed that the same professional will be the one providing information, support and/or intervention in future interactions via the online support tool, service or programme);
- the **qualifications/training** and, if applicable, the identity of the **professional**;

It is important to remember that:

In order to protect the identity of the professional and to safeguard the safety of those who provide support to the victim of crime/violence, organisations may not share the identity of the professional who provides online support to victims of crime, identifying them via another name or nick name.

- the **limits** of the intervention (the online tool, service or programme will have, depending on its objectives, a certain area of intervention and some requests may not be within the scope of the organisation and/or of the online support tool, service or programme) (e.g. the online support tool, service or programme may aim to provide emotional support to victims of crime/violence, but not psychological intervention);
- the **confidentiality and privacy** aspects associated with providing/receiving support, information and/or intervention via the Internet (explored in the next section of this Handbook);
- the situations in which the organisation is obliged to **breach confidentiality** in the context of the support, information and/or intervention provided online, as in the case of situations that present a risk to the physical integrity of the victim and/or other persons (e.g. situations of suicidal thoughts);
- **alternative contact details from other services of the organisation** (if applicable) that can be used to obtain/seek additional support and to deal with technological difficulties/failures during the online communication (further information about contingency plan for this type of situations is available at the chapter *The online support session: preparation and implementation* of this Handbook);
- the importance of **collecting information** about the victim and alternative contact details;
- how **the information about the communication between professional and the victim is recorded/collected**;
- (if applicable) the possibility that the support, information and/or intervention session is under the **supervision** of third parties;
- the **safety measures and behaviours** that the person using the tools, services or programmes via the Internet should take before, during and after using it.

This type of information must be included in the **Terms and Conditions** that should be provided in advance to the victim who intends to use the support tool, service or programme via the Internet.

The organisation should also seek to define strategies for **obtaining informed consent for the provision of online support, information and/or intervention.**

The consent:

- is a useful instrument to clarify with the victim of crime/violence the limits of confidentiality, the technological and security limitations of the support tool, service or programme delivered via the Internet, as well as contingency/alternative procedures, working times and days (Ross, 2011);
- can allow the collection of information about **the identity and location of the victim**, which may prove to be important in the event of a breach of confidentiality;
- may safeguard the entity's intervention, including in situations leading to a breach of confidentiality where subsequently the information leading to that breach is not confirmed (Mallen, Vogel, & Rochlen, 2005).

Consent must be in accordance with the information contained in the **Terms and Conditions.**

Some **difficulties can be anticipated when seeking consent for the provision of support via the Internet:**

- Obtaining the victim's signed consent²² can **make it more difficult** to access the desired online support, information and/or intervention (by rising the waiting time), thus increasing the victim's deterrence.

Using checkboxes to obtain (directly online) the victim's consent or agreement with the Terms and Conditions established by the organisation responsible for the support tool, service or programme via the Internet is a practice that has been used by some organisations.

Another issue that may arise is that the ticking of checkboxes by the victim/user does

22. By this, we mean express consent.

not ensure that the information in the Terms and Conditions has been understood.

Highlight on current practices:

Online Support Line [United States of America], which results from the partnership between two entities – 1in6 and RAINN, is an online support service for men with experiences of sexual violence in childhood; it is also directed to their relatives and friends.

Using the service requires that the victim/user selects a set of checkboxes, ensuring that they have read, understood and accepted the terms of use of the service.

Further information is available at
<https://hotline.rainn.org/1in6/terms-of-service.jsp>

Aside from express consent, the organisation intending to implement online support tools, services or programmes may decide that the victim's initiative to contact them, in order to benefit from online support, information and/or intervention, is a form of consent. This is designated as **tacit consent**.

For this consent to be valid, the victims must present clear signs that they are seeking support and need it.

- Obtaining the victim's signed consent by may require **the disclosure of their identity and their loss of anonymity in their search for support/help**, thus discouraging the seeking of support.
- Professionals may experience increased difficulties in determining whether or not the victim has **the capacity to provide free and informed consent** (since they are not in direct contact with the victim) (Poh et al., 2013).
- The request for support, information and/or intervention may come from a person who is **lying about their identity** (Childress, 2000).

Example:

Children may impersonate adults, who can provide consent for online support, information and/or intervention.

In the case of **contact by children**, the professional should inform them about the remit of the organisation and/or the scope of action of the online support tool, service or programme and the (possible) limits of their intervention, depending on the need for consent from the legal guardians, on the organisation's code of conduct in this area and the applicable legislation.

The organisation may provide specific instructions for dealing with contacts and requests for support, information and/or intervention from children in its procedures about support via the Internet.

Example:

The request for support may come from the perpetrator of the crime/violence who seeks information about a victim and/or tries to understand the support mechanisms and services provided by a particular entity.

When the **contact is made by the perpetrators of the crime/violence**, the professional can provide information about the mission of the organisation, the objectives and users of the online support tool, service or programme, clarifying that the support, information and/or intervention provided are confidential. Once again, the possibility that the organisation may be contacted by possible perpetrators of crime/violence can be anticipated by defining specific procedures in accordance with the organisation's practices.

Confidentiality and privacy

The confidentiality of the support, information and/or intervention provided via the Internet is a key principle, promoting greater safety and confidence on the victims when they are accessing and using the online support tools, services or programmes available.

As previously mentioned, it is important to be very clear with the victim from the outset about which situations can lead to confidentiality being broken (it is important that such information is included in the Terms and Conditions on the use of the online support tool, service or programme to be provided to the victim).

Measures such as **encryption** and the **use of authenticated passwords/log in** can be useful to increase security in the use of online support tools, services or programmes (Wright, 2002; Trepal et al., 2007). In turn, such measures can contribute to higher levels of confidentiality and privacy in the communication between victims and professionals via the online tool, service or programme.

It is important to recognize that there are always risks in confidentiality and privacy in online communication:

- It is not possible to ensure, remotely, the security of the victim's computer, smartphone, tablet, or other device used to access the online support tool, service or programme. This scenario may arise particularly in cases where there is a relationship of greater intimacy between the victim and the perpetrator of the crime/violence and where the perpetrator has access to the computer and/or other device used by the victim.
- Likewise, the privacy and confidentiality of online communication between the victim and the organisation may be affected by external factors such as others arriving whilst the victim is accessing online support, information and/or intervention.

Nonetheless, **confidentiality and privacy may be promoted through different measures:**

- definition of procedures for the provision of online support, information and/or intervention;
- training the professionals responsible for providing online support, information and/or intervention;
- promoting awareness and providing information to the victim about safety behaviours before, during and after the use of the online support tool, service or programme.

Online communication between the victim and the organisation, particularly when through writing, should also be prepared carefully, promoting the quality of the support provided, the safety of the victim and the recognition/image of the organisation.

There are a number of constraints affecting the confidentiality and privacy of online support, information and/or intervention, particularly when using ICTs and the Internet to seek/obtain support, information and/or intervention in situations of crime/violence. Organisations should prepare for (Poh et al., 2013):

- hackers²³, viruses, and spyware²⁴ (on devices used by the organisation and/or its professionals, but also on devices used by the victim) may compromise the confidentiality and privacy of information shared between victim and professional;
- the risk that information is accessed and communication is monitored by third parties, including by the perpetrator of the crime/violence, if no additional security measures are taken when using the Internet and electronic means of communication.

The organisation should inform in advance victims of crime/violence and other users of the online support tool, service or programme about:

- the **risks to confidentiality and privacy** associated with the use of ICTs and the Internet to communicate and seek/obtain support, information and/or intervention;
- **safety behaviours** that must be taken before, during and after using the online support tool, service or programme to safeguard the privacy and confidentiality.

Example [of safety behaviours that should be transmitted to the victim]:

It is critical to raise awareness about the importance of eliminating all messages sent/received at the end of each support/information session and/or intervention received via the Internet.

It is important that organisations and/or professionals are **adequately informed of the risks to confidentiality and privacy associated with communication via ICTs** and the Internet.

Professionals who provide support, information and/or intervention via the Internet should also adopt safety behaviours and measures that safeguard the confidentiality and privacy of their online support practices.

23. It concerns individuals with knowledge and skills in the field of computer science, who are able to modify devices, networks and computer systems. When the modification is made for the practice of illegal acts, these individuals are designated as crackers.

24. Computer program that collects data about the user and their habits when using the Internet, transmitting them externally without the consent of the user.

At the chapter *Measures to increase security, confidentiality and privacy in online support* of this Handbook we present some recommendations that may help organisations increase the security levels of their digital presence, and in particular of their online support tools, services or programmes for victims of crime/violence. We also present guidelines that may contribute to ensuring greater privacy and confidentiality of the online support, information and/or intervention.

The identity of the victim/user

One of the benefits of providing support, information and/or intervention via the Internet comes from the feeling of privacy and anonymity that it transmits to users, facilitating the disinhibition and sharing of information and emotions about the event relating to the request for support.

In field of support of victims of crime/violence, **the sense of privacy and anonymity obtained through support, information and/or intervention via the Internet can be even more decisive, overcoming some of the obstacles normally associated with seeking support from organisations and services supporting victims of crime/violence** (such as shame and fear), and facilitating access to support for groups of victims who do not normally seek help/support (e.g. men who are victims of crime/violence).

However, it is important that the organisation bears in mind the following:

- **The more information about the victim, namely contact details and location, the easier it will be to deal with a situation of crisis or danger** for the victim and/or others (including triggering an emergency response).
- **Anonymity may precipitate the development of some challenges:**
 - in the event of an emergency (e.g. the physical integrity of the victim is at risk), where access to information on the victim's identity, contact and location is critical to trigger emergency mechanisms;
 - in the case of contact requests for support from children (for whom the provision of support, information and/or intervention depends on the legislation in use, the organisation's procedures and/or applicable codes of practice);
 - in the event of requests for support, information and/or intervention from perpetrators of crime/violence (in order to obtain information about the organisation's procedures and/or any victims who may have received support).

On the other hand, if the organisation understands that it is important for the use of the online support tools, services or programmes that they know the victim/user's identity, it should also anticipate its implications when the victim/user is searching for online support, information and/or intervention:

Having to identify themselves before having access to support, information and/or intervention via the Internet can lead victims to give up requesting support and/or help from the organisation.

There are intermediate solutions, where access to support tools, services or programmes via the Internet requires prior registration (for example, by completing an online form) via another mean of contact (e.g. secure telephone contact or email).

Regardless of whether or not the victim is required to identify themselves to obtain support, information and/or intervention via online support tools, services or programmes, issues pertaining to **identity and anonymity** must be covered in the **Terms and Conditions** provided to the victim before the beginning of the online support, information and/or intervention. Further information is available at the *Duty to obtain informed consent* section of this Handbook.

Other ethical concerns

Equality of access to online support

The exclusion or difficulty of access by some population groups to online support tools, services or programmes has been reported as one of the disadvantages of the forms of support via the Internet (Ross, 2011). Despite the increasing use of online communication and the Internet, online support tools, services or programmes may exclude older or more deprived people and populations from accessing victim support services (Mallen, Vogel, & Rochlen, 2005).

The risk of **exclusion of certain victims of crime/violence** (in particular those who do not have access to ICTs) is one of the disadvantages frequently reported by the victim support organisations and services that participated in the survey about online support for victims of crime carried out under Project T@LK.

Further information on the results of the survey can be found at <http://www.apav.pt/publiproj/images/yootheme/PDF/TALK.pdf>

It is important that the organisations intending to develop/adapt and implement forms of support, information and/or intervention for victims of crime/violence via the Internet are aware of the **risk of excluding certain victims** (especially those who do not have access to this type of media, are unaware that these services are a vehicle to access information, support and/or intervention, and/or those who do not know how to use them).

Ideally, in order to minimize the risk of exclusion of certain victims/groups of victims, the organisation should complement these services with **other support services and responses at a distance** (such as telephone helplines) and **local services and responses** (face-to-face support).

Referral

If applicable, depending on the objectives and form of support via the Internet provided to victims of crime/violence, the organisation can **refer the victim/user to other services or resources**. This procedure is relevant for **guaranteeing that the victim receives the appropriate support in accordance to his/her needs**, particularly in cases where it is clear that the online support tools, services or programmes have not the ability to respond appropriately to such needs (e.g. if the professional identifies during the online support session that the victim might be suffering from symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder²⁵ it is necessary to refer or encourage the victim to contact Mental health services available).

The organisation can (Finn, 2001):

- **refer the victim to their own additional support services**, such as telephone services and/or face-to-face local offices, as well as to other forms of support via the Internet. By using its own services, the organisation responsible for providing online support ensures the quality of the support and information provided to the victim;

25. **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder** is a disorder that develops in some people who have experienced a shocking, scary, or dangerous event.

- consider the possibility of **referral to other support services and responses, including for online support, information and/or intervention from other organisations or entities**; to proceed with such referral the use of trustworthy organisations and sources (such as partner organisations and key entities in a given area of intervention) is a must. This option safeguards the quality of the information and/or support provided to the victims of crime/violence.

As noted above, referral must be done with the consent or agreement of the victim. For more information, please consult the *Duty to obtain informed consent* section of this Handbook.

Managing different support requests

One of the potential advantages of online support tools, services or programmes is that they increase the organisation's ability to deliver support to more users.

The possibility that the same professional can interact (online) simultaneously with different users should be given careful consideration.

The organisation intending to develop/implement forms of support for victims of crime/violence via the Internet should reflect on whether this possibility is aligned with the principles and methodologies governing its other services or support responses for victims of crime/violence:

If the organisation's local services (if applicable) to support victims of crime/violence involve a professional exclusively devoting their attention to a victim of crime/violence throughout a session, then this same approach is expected when the support, information and/or intervention session is provided via the Internet.

However, the **online support has very particular characteristics, namely in the way the communication between professional and victim is carried out** (especially synchronous communication). Examples of these characteristics are 'active' conversation time between the victim and the professional (i.e., the periods of time during the length of the online support session where victim and professional are actually exchanging messages/information) and the pace of communication. During an online support session there may be temporary periods of inactivity (where the victim does not immediately interact with the professional).

The decision to simultaneously initiate/conduct online support sessions with different victims/users should depend on:

- the professional's experience and skills;
- how sensitive the victim is feeling;
- the degree of involvement of victims in the communication with the professional.

Part 3

— *Preparing*

Chapter 4

— *Measures to Increase Security,
Confidentiality and Privacy in Online Support*

In the present scenario where entities aiming to support victims of crime/violence attempt to consolidate/leverage their digital presence, **it is likely that digital platforms will be used by victims of crime/violence to seek/obtain support and/or information.**

It is essential to recognize that, given the constant evolution of ICTs and the Internet, **ensuring the security of these digital platforms and the confidentiality and privacy of users and victims of crime/violence are major challenges.** In fact, the development of increasingly sophisticated strategies, mechanisms and technologies that enable the monitoring and the illicit collection of personal/confidential information about third parties is constantly increasing the risks of online communication.

Next we present some measures to promote the security of the online support tools, services or programmes and the confidentiality and privacy of online support²⁶.

1. Computers/mobile devices and Internet access to provide online support, information and/or intervention for victims of crime/violence

The **devices** on which online tools, services or programmes for victims of crime/violence operate should:

- be **used exclusively for providing support, information and/or an intervention** to victims of crime/violence; the professionals' personal computers and other personal devices should not be used for that purpose;
- only be used by **those responsible** for the online support, information and/or intervention for victims of crime/violence;
- be protected by **passwords restricted** to the professionals responsible for the online tool, service or programme for support, information and/or intervention; the passwords should be changed regularly;
- have **security software installed** that includes automatic verification tools;
- be **regularly updated**, regarding security, browser and operating system software;
- be linked to **private and secure Internet networks**, preferably only used by the organisation's professionals; the organisation should also consider the creation of Internet alternative networks for guests, if this fits with their activity and practice;
- **avoid the use of Wi-Fi from public places/areas to provide online support, information and/or interventions to victims of crime/violence**, since they are liable to be intercepted by third parties, including the information shared about and/or with the victims of crime/violence.

26. Adapted from the *National Network to End Domestic Violence, Safety Net Project* - <https://www.techsafety.org/resources-agencyuse>

It is important that these recommendations (on the use of electronic devices and Internet access) are also shared with the victims of crime/violence who will use the online tools, services or programmes of support, information and/or intervention.

The organisation should develop/make available information about safety in the use of ICTs for victims of crime/violence intending to use the online support tools, services or programmes. Making this information available is fundamental for the victims/users to be able to evaluate their situation, namely, their safety in the use of online means of communication, and decide on the most appropriate services to access information, support and/or intervention (e.g. the victim may suspect that the perpetrator of crime/violence installed monitoring software on their personal laptop, thus choosing to use a telephone helpline for support and/or information).

2. Websites for information and/or support

The organisation's website(s) dedicated to the support and/or the provision of information to victims of crime/violence should:

- include **warnings/reminders** that the searches and other online activities carried out by the victim/user could be monitored by third parties (namely the perpetrator of the crime/violence) and/or unduly accessed;
- include information about the **risks associated with the use of the website and/or of the online support tools, services or programmes available within** (e.g. online form, chat system);
- inform the victim/user that they should use this resource in a **private and secure** location. The use of public computers and/or open Internet networks is not recommended, as it is not the use of work devices either at the workplace or in another location;

It is important to alert the victim for the fact that there is a risk of increasing violence, if the perpetrator of the crime/violence becomes aware that the victim sought online support, information and/or intervention.

- inform the victim/user of the **geographical coverage of the information/support provided on the website and its applicability** (e.g. if the contacts made available on the website – e.g. helplines, support phone numbers and/or online services – are only accessible to a particular region, that information should appear on the corresponding website/menu/page);
- promote the victim/user’s awareness for the importance of **clearing the browsing data/history after each search** (particularly browsing data related to the search of information and/or support available for situations of crime/violence; and informing that clearing all the browsing history may be considered suspect and inadvertently alert the perpetrator of the crime/violence); the organisation can also inform that clearing the data on the searched information and/or support is not enough to mitigate risks to confidentiality and privacy;
- have an **escape button** that can be used by the victim/user in case they are surprised by the arrival of third parties (namely the perpetrator of the crime/violence) when searching and/or obtaining support and/or information;

Highlight on current practices:

The **Victim Support Europe**²⁷ website - <http://victimsupport.eu/> - offers an Exit button on its lower right corner. The button is available regardless of the page/sub-page being accessed by the victim/user. By clicking the button or the ESC key, the victim/user is automatically redirected to another page/website.

It is important to note that this type of button does not remove the viewed page/website from the browsing history.

- if the organisation is intending to set up an email contact for the support to victims of crime/violence on its website, then it is worthwhile considering online forms instead: **online forms are safer than emails**, since its use does not leave traces/evidence in the email account of the victim/user; online forms can also be more convenient for the organisation’s professionals, since the email addresses are not listed for sending requests of support/information;
- reflect about the use of victim testimonials in the organisation’s website(s): how relevant this is must be weighted in line with the organisation’s mission and principles, and the use of any testimony requires the **consent or agreement of the victim**.

27. European non-profit organisation, founded in 1990, which has as mission to encourage, support, promote and develop the support to victims and other people affected by crime in Europe. Victim Support Europe has several members from more than 20 different countries. Additional information at <http://victimsupport.eu/>

There are also **technological developments and applications that help organisations improving the online confidentiality and privacy** for victims of crime/violence using their websites for support and/or information.

Highlight on current practices:

The Shielded Site [New Zealand]:

It is a tool that can be used by organisations on their websites to help the victims of crime/violence, particularly victims of domestic violence, use/access online information more safely. Websites using this tool can be accessed by the victims of crime/violence without this information being visible in their browsing data/history, increasing confidentiality and privacy in its use, particularly for victims of crime/violence who suspect that their online movements are being monitored by the perpetrator of the crime/violence.

Further information is available at <https://www.shielded.co.nz>

3. Email

Besides applying security measures to computers, devices, and Internet access to safeguard confidentiality and privacy of the support, information and/or intervention provided by email, the organisation should also:

- define **specific procedures for providing support, information and/or interventions via the Internet**, defining instructions on how to deal with contacts made by individuals outside the organisation's scope of action, fraudulent contacts, and other relevant situations;
- follow the **current legislation and the organisation's procedures and policies** on the collection/registration of email addresses of the victims of crime/violence;
- consider the possibility of developing and implementing online forms, as an alternative to email;
- **avoid using/publicising the professionals' personal email addresses** when providing online support, information and/or intervention;
- determine with the victim of crime/violence:
 - whether email is a **safe method to communicate and provide alternative contacts**

for support, information and/or intervention (so that the victim can choose the method that best fits their skills, needs and preferences);

- whether the **devices used by the victim to access their email account** are secure, are used only by the victim and if there is a possibility/risk of these devices being accessed/monitored by third parties (particularly the perpetrator of the crime/violence);
- whether it is likely that the **email account** used to search/access support is also used/viewed by third parties and/or that third parties could have access to it (and/or to its password).
- advise the victim to **clear the history of the conversation with the organisation** from their email account by erasing the emails sent and received (also from the folder of deleted emails) as soon as they are sent and read, respectively;
- **inform the victim about safety behaviours that can be adopted before, during and after the use of email to obtain online support and/or information** (e.g. advise changing regularly the password of the email account);
- consider setting up and using **code words between the victim and the professional** (so that the professional can ensure they are actually communicating with the victim and that the victim can let the professional know when they are in a situation where privacy and confidentiality may have been compromised); further information on this can be found in the *Opening an online support session* of this Handbook.

4. Chat

In addition to security instructions for computers, devices and Internet connections listed above, when using chat to provide support, information and/or intervention to victims of crime/violence, the organisation should also:

- **inform the victim of crime/violence about the risks to confidentiality and privacy** associated with the use of chat (namely the fact that the communication can be monitored by third parties) and ensure that the victim is able to use this means of communication safely;
- inform the victim of crime/violence about the organisation's **alternative contacts**;
- adopt **security measures**, such as encryption and automatic clearing of conversation immediately after the end of each interaction between victim and professional;
- establish guidelines **about the registration/record of conversations**, and ensure they comply with current legislation and the organisation's policies in that area;
- **set/foresee specific procedures for cases such as:**

- fraudulent/fake requests of support/information;
- emergency/crisis situations (e.g. suicidal ideation);
- requests outside the scope of the organisation;
- anonymous requests;
- **promote the victim’s awareness for the need to adopt safety behaviours before, during and after the use of chat**, such as clearing the conversation from their computer/device and deleting its history;
- consider setting up and using **code words between victim and professional** (so that the professional can ensure that they are actually communicating with the victim and that the victim can inform the professional when privacy and confidentiality may have been compromised); further information on this can be found in the *Opening an online support session* section of this Handbook.

5. Social networks

There is an unavoidable **need for entities, organisations and services supporting victims of crime/violence to be able to deal with requests for support, information and/or intervention received in their social networks**, ensuring their confidentiality and privacy.

To this end, it is important that:

- the social network pages from such organisations have **information clearly displayed about their Terms and Conditions, the risks to confidentiality and privacy when sharing information about situations of crime/violence online, as well as alternative contacts to obtain support and/or information** (e.g. phone contacts, email/online form, helpline);
- the organisations develop **procedure guidelines for social media**, including:
 - how to manage situations of violence/crime shared on the organisation’s social networks;
 - how to manage and respond to requests of support/information from victims of crime/violence received via those platforms.

When **defining operating procedures for social networks**, it is important that the organisation:

- considers and includes their **social mission and objectives** in their digital presence;
- aligns their social networks conduct with the **objectives of its digital presence** (further information can be found in the *Key stages for organisational preparedness*

section of this Handbook);

- sets **Terms and Conditions** for the use of social networks, covering also behaviours, content and comments considered abusive/not acceptable and/or contrary to the values and mission of the organisation; and defines operational procedures on how to act in these situations (e.g. removing content; blocking that person);
- reflects on whether to share information/testimonials of victims of crime/violence in the social networks of the organisation; if that is considered important/necessary for the mission and activity of the organisation, it must be done with the **consent or agreement of the victim of crime/violence**;
- reflects and defines its position on what information **about the professionals of the organisation in charge of the support to victims of crime/violence can be shared**, whilst ensuring their privacy;
- sets **operational procedures to respond to public and/or private messages**:
 - from victims of crime/violence being supported by the organisation;
 - from victims of crime/violence seeking support, information and/or intervention.

To this end, it is important the organisation reflects on how to respond to requests for support, information and/or intervention received via their social networks (publicly or through private message):

- *Whether to respond to the victim of crime/violence (using the same channel used by the victim) starting the support via that social network?*
- *Whether to respond to the victim of crime/violence, informing of the (alternative) contacts and other support services of the organisation the victim can contact?*
- *Whether to respond to the victim of crime/violence, asking them for other contact details (e.g. landline; mobile number; email) that the organisation can use to contact them?*

Regardless of what position the organisation takes on how victims use the organisation's social networks (whether to share their testimonial and/or seek/obtain support, information and/or intervention), it is important to include information on:

- the **risks to confidentiality and privacy** associated with the use of social networks;
- the **organisation's scope of support, information and/or intervention via social networks** and the situations in which such channel is not appropriate for obtaining/seeking support and/or information (e.g. emergency situations);

- the **organisation's alternative contacts/resources** (e.g. email/online form; telephone numbers; victim's helpline; addresses for local support services), in case the victim of crime/violence wishes to obtain information and/or support.

Highlight on current practices:

www.facebook.com/safety makes available **several resources and tools to increase the safety of Facebook users**.

This also includes a **guide on privacy and safety on Facebook for victims of domestic violence**.

A guide for survivors of abuse. Privacy & safety on Facebook²⁸ was developed in partnership between Facebook and the National Network to End Domestic Violence²⁹.

The National Network to End Domestic Violence, in partnership with Twitter, has also developed a **guide on safety and privacy on Twitter: Safety & Privacy on Twitter. A guide for survivors of harassment and abuse³⁰**.

28. Available at http://nnedv.org/downloads/SafetyNet/NNEDV_FB_Privacy_and_Safety_Guide_2014.pdf

29. From United States of America.

30. Available at <https://www.techsafety.org/blog/2016/7/26/safety-privacy-on-twitter-a-guide-for-victims-of-harassment-and-abuse>

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Project developed with the partnership of:



Associação Portuguesa de Apoio à Vítima (APAV) | Portugal
Human Rights Monitoring Institute (HRMI) | Lithuania
Rikosuhrripäivystys (RIKU) | Finland
Victim Support Malta (VSM) | Malta
Societat Catalana de Victimologia (SCV) | Spain
Victim Support Europe (VSE) | Belgium

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This publication has been produced with the financial support of the Justice Programme of the European Union. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of the authors and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Commission.



Co-financed by the
Justice Programme
of the European Union

ISBN: 978-972-8852-90-0