

Mental health services in SL

By BAX CALHOUN
Staff writer

Mental health work is an expanding interest and industry within the second world, the groups and individuals who work in the field in Second Life range from paid experts to volunteer non-professionals. Their reasons for working within Second Life may be varied, but their end goal is united: to assist those in need.

Craig Kamenev, known as Dr. D. Craig Kerley in the real world, is a professional with a practice in Norcross, Georgia and a corresponding one in Kkot-sam sim, The Center for Positive Mental Health. Services include both therapy and regular group discussions.

Such group discussion is at the heart of another mental health service within SL, Support For Healing. Support For Healing is run by Zafu Diamond, a concerned non-professional with experience in coordinating online support for people with depression and other mental illnesses.

While these are but two of the many people involved in mental health services within SL, they represent the two central parties which everyone the *Messenger* spoke with agreed were essential: professional care and a positive social network to carry on where medicine leaves off.

Dr. Kerley has embraced the world of Second Life fully into his practice, offering in-world therapy sessions for those with severe physical disabilities, suffering from agoraphobia and/or social phobia, or simply at a physical location that doesn't offer such services.

More information about Dr. Kerley's services, as well as rates, is available at www.drkerley.com/avatatherapy.html. He feels that the nature of the Second Life interface allows people to be more open about themselves in a cyber-therapeutic relationship as compared to RL psychotherapy.

It may be due to anonymity afforded by SL, or even the reduced pressure of not having eye contact with the person they're talking to. While this lack of

body language can be comforting, it is also one of the largest barriers to communication, as Dr. Kerley stated: "When we consider that communication between people is about 10 percent verbal (e.g., word choice) and 90 percent nonverbal (e.g., facial expression, tone of voice, body posture, etc.), one can see how a large amount of the message is lost in SL. For example, it is very difficult to be sarcastic in an environment such as SL."

Zafu Diamond had originally begun the Support For Healing website two and a half years ago to provide peer support for people with depression or other mental illness, and brought those services to Second Life just over a year ago.

Support For Healing is built on three ideas: that everyone is equal and deserves the same compassion, that professional help for mental illness is vital, and that emotional support is a major component of the healing process, and not always something the professional health industry can provide. Support For Healing hosts a number of discussion groups, Live2give, a project for Cerebral Palsy support, Brigadoon, for people with Asperger's syndrome, and Shockwave, for support of people who have had a stroke, to name a few. They will also help with the seeking of professional support for those in need of such, researching the options available and encouraging action.

Many people have a lot of appreciation for the services provided within SL. One such is kristine Debs. Having suffered through a staggering series of events in her real life, kristine knew to seek out professional help, but feels that Second Life adds an important layer to her support network.

On some of her darkest days, members of her depression support group have lent assistance, and attendance at group sessions has helped with her marital and intensely personal issues.

This is not to say however that all mental health work within Second Life has been greeted warmly. Diamond related to the *Messenger* that even areas like Support For Healing must deal

with occasional griefers, and one man, Eros Shore, found Second Life simply too inhospitable for his work in mental health. Shore began to explore the idea that while much of Second Life is a user generated fantasy, these fantasies act as a reflection of the mental state of the people who live them out.

While this may seem intuitive, many of his RL colleagues felt his online therapy and research were nothing more than a waste of time.

Having also met resistance in the Second World from users who felt that SL is simply a game signifying nothing, or at the least, not carrying the weight it might in the real world, Shore decided it was not worth the effort and possible damage to his reputation, so he closed down his services.

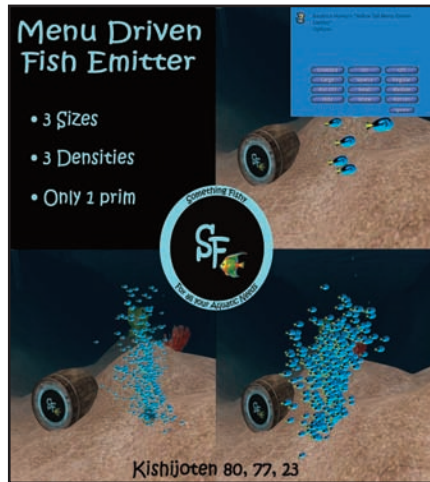
Lack of gravitas, at many different degrees and usually stemming from those not in need, was a common concert of other mental health workers that the *Messenger* spoke with.

Dr. Kerley seemed to summarize the feelings of many when saying: "If someone is interested in having the equivalent of a personal trainer to encourage and cheer for them as they work toward their personal goals, a life coach may be a good approach."

"If a person is interested in uncovering and dismantling their roadblocks to personal motivation, or is looking for symptom relief and long-term changes in the ways they approach their lives, psychotherapy is probably a better option." While this issue may not present as serious a roadblock as those encountered by Shore, it brings to the fore one of the central issues at hand.

As Second Life continues to grow, both in size and relevancy, and the mental health community within it expands, the contrast between those who feel it is a game and those who feel it is a world becomes more apparent.

While people argue about the weight of events within SL, there are mental health workers, both professional and non, bringing needed help to people on a daily basis, and it seems impossible to argue that their contribution is a real and concrete one.



The Metaverse Messenger

A real newspaper for a virtual world.

Best of Second Life kicks off

By GEORGE BACKBITE
Staff writer

The 2006 Best of Second Life starts this week. Sponsored by the Metaverse Messenger, it's a yearly poll of the best of everything in Second Life.

This week, the M2 will accept suggestions of categories for the poll. Last year's categories included: Best designer of men's clothing, best designer of women's clothing, best shoes, best boots, best hair, best tattoos, best jewelry, best female avatar skins, best male avatar skins, best fur skins, best gothic skins, best vampire skins, best museum, best night club, best place to relax, best musical venue and

best casino.

Others categories included: best sports venue, favorite store, favorite wedding chapel, favorite restaurant, best rental property, best free items, best place to shop out-world, best pose balls, best genitalia, best builder, best scripter, best animator, best auto maker, best boats, best planes, favorite Linden, best live musician, radio station, movie theater, SL fan site, newspaper, best photographer, best in-world game, best place to play Slingo, best place to play Tringo, best new game, best DJ and best group.

In addition to these categories, M2 readers will have the opportunity to submit the cate-

gories they would like to see in this week's poll by e-mailing their suggestions to katt.kongo@gmail.com. The deadline for submissions is 5pm SLT on Sept. 10.

Starting Sept. 12, the M2 will start taking nominations in all categories. The nomination process will end Sept. 17, and voting will begin on Sept. 19.

Voting will close on Sept. 26, and the winners will be announced on October 1, with a special "Best of Second Life" edition tentatively scheduled for mid-October. This special edition will contain articles and pictures of those selected the best in SL, and hopefully, will become the definitive travel guide for Second Life residents.

The Metaverse Messenger is seeking cartoon strips to appear on the entertainment pages. To submit your strip for consideration, e-mail it to katt.kongo@gmail.com, along with your avatar name.