

Staying on message

Effective text-based counselling is all in the details,
says **Sarah Worley-James**

With more clients requesting email- or instant messaging (IM)-based counselling - and more therapy platforms and services,

such as student counselling, offering it as an option - you may be wondering whether you really can meet clients at relational depth using messaged words alone. My experience, and that of many other practitioners using these media, has shown me that it is possible to establish a meaningful therapeutic relationship in text-based sessions, whether synchronous or asynchronous, if careful consideration is given to what is expressed, felt and received.

I am going to focus here on synchronous IM (or live chat), rather than asynchronous email, which is a text-based method requiring its own article. As the description implies, synchronous IM involves the real-time exchange of brief messages between counsellor and client, typed on a smartphone or tablet, and lasting the usual 50 minutes. (You should note that the progress of the therapy is likely to be slower, because of the time it takes to type and exchange messages, although the disinhibition effect of online counselling¹ can also accelerate disclosure and exploration.)

In text-based counselling, the words are of course everything, as we have no visual or audible clues and no image of our client to work with. Alongside remaining open to how our cultural values, life experiences and unconscious bias influence our reading of the client's words, we need to bear in mind how the words and phrases we choose in verbal communication may unwittingly be misread. What to us seems neutral may to the recipient come across as overly friendly and intimate, or dismissive, patronising, definitive, even imperious, or coming from an authoritarian 'expert' stance.

In training, I always emphasise the importance of being tentative in phrasing and

explicitly asking for feedback. However, it is also important to reflect on the choice of phrasing you use when inviting feedback, so that it minimises the potential for invoking a people-pleasing response from the client.

For example, let's take the classic feeling of anxiety that is commonly explored in counselling. 'You feel anxious about...', stated verbally, in the room, in a tentative tone, allows the client to correct you. However, in a written format this same phrase could be read and 'heard' in several ways:

Am I supposed to feel anxious?

There's something wrong with me for feeling anxious.

There's something wrong with me for not feeling anxious when it's clear I'm supposed to.

Do I?

I don't know, maybe - I'm confused!

No, I don't, but how can I tell this expert that they've got it wrong?

No, I don't, but maybe I am and don't know it?

They're the professional so they must know best.

Will my counsellor be upset if I tell them they've got it wrong?

Looking at these potential responses from the client to a simple reflection, 'You feel anxious about...', reminds me of the power of the negativity bias - the human brain's inherent lean towards viewing a situation negatively.² This plays a significant role in misunderstandings in text-based communication and consequent damages to the therapeutic relationship, as the client fails

to hear the intended unconditional positive regard (UPR) in the counsellor's words.

Bearing this in mind, let's return to the word 'anxiety' and look at a range of ways to congruently express empathy and convey UPR through text:

I get the sense that you are feeling anxious (please correct me if I am wrong).

I get the impression that you are feeling anxious. Have I understood you?

It sounds like you are feeling anxious.

Perhaps that is not quite what you are feeling?

It feels as if you are anxious, though that may not be quite the most accurate word to describe how you are feeling.

I'm wondering whether you are feeling anxious about this?

It seems as if you are feeling anxious. Help me to understand that more fully.

As I'm reading your words, I'm getting a feeling of anxiety. I'm wondering if that is how you were feeling as you were writing them?

You will find your own 'voice' and language. Remember, the aim is to convey tentativeness, transparency, clarity and openness in that empathic reflection, inviting the client to correct you, if necessary, as well as open up further exploration.

Synchronicity

A benefit of the synchronicity of IM is the opportunity it gives the counsellor to clarify and explain your typed comments and demonstrate your presence and focus on the client. This aids the client's understanding and engagement,

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as well as their sense of the counsellor's presence and UPR. And there is, of course, a high degree of interchange as you respond to one another, so you can repair any ruptures to the relationship there and then and rebuild the therapeutic connection.

Examples in an IM counselling session could look like this:

I'm smiling as I type this because I can hear how proud you are of..

I'm thinking about your comments about how much you are struggling to be heard in your relationship.

I'm wondering whether it would be helpful to explore some different ways of

communicating to see if you can find a fresh way forward?

Thank you for explaining. Let me check if I have understood correctly...

To aid the flow of conversation in IM, always type in short sentences, and add an ellipsis (three dots: ...) after the end of each fragment if there is more to come. When you have finished all you want to type, press send. Do not put a full stop at the end of the last sentence. Explain to the client that this is what you are doing and that you would like them to do this also. It will help stop them from writing long pieces of text, which then creates long gaps between

exchanges while you read what they have written and decide how to respond. IM is much more of a here-and-now conversation than email is - which is one of its benefits, if that style suits the client.

Dislooping

Using the ellipsis also helps minimise what the online counselling specialist and trainer Pip Weitz³ calls 'dislooping' - when you and your client get out of sync. This is a specific issue in IM sessions that can cause confusion and thus create a barrier to the client feeling heard.

For example, you may be in the middle of typing a response to your client's comments

about their relationship and press send before noticing that your client has sent a further message, this time about their childhood. So your comments about their relationship show in the 'thread' of the conversation after their message about their childhood and not, as you intended, immediately after what they wrote about their relationship.

Client: *I find myself getting so angry with my partner. So angry, out of nowhere and it's just causing so much aggro between us... I just want to figure this out because it's making me so anxious that he'll leave me, just like everyone else does*

Client: *Everyone I've ever loved has left me, and I know it's my fault... even when my dad left when I was five... He told me everything was good between him and my mum before I was born*

Counsellor: *I can hear how scared you are Pat,* and I'm wondering how your early experiences of loss may be feeding in to your anger? Help me to understand about your earliest memory of someone leaving you*

The client not adding the ellipsis at the end of their first message led the counsellor to assume that they had said all they wanted to at that point, and so the counsellor composed and sent her reply, not expecting the client to add more. This is common - the client either wanting to add a further thought or forgetting to use the ellipsis in their haste to express themselves, or because it is an unfamiliar way of communicating.

The following example is of a first session. You will notice that the counsellor does not mention confidentiality at this stage. Assume that this, and the initial risk assessment, were conducted via email before the first IM session.

Counsellor: *Hi Mo,* it's good to meet you today*

Client: *Hi*

Counsellor: *I want you to know that I'm going to do my very best today to get to know and understand you...*

so I'll check out with you as we go along if I am getting what you are saying... because it's really important that you feel heard by me

Client: *Thanks. You lot usually just stick another label on me and tell me what I should do*

Counsellor: *It sounds like you've had a lot of experience of being talked at, and not much in the way of being listened to*

GOOD PRACTICE FOR INSTANT MESSAGING

- Write in short sentences, using plain language.
- At the end of each sentence, add an ellipsis (...) to show there is more to come and press send. It is much more immediate than writing a long screed that takes time for you to write and them to read and respond.
- Don't close your final sentence with a full stop - leave it open to indicate you have finished and the client can reply.
- Use brackets to convey a feeling or thought that would be conveyed through body language, such as (I'm smiling as I read your words), or (thinking).
- If there is a long pause, let your client know you are still there and listening by typing a simple ellipsis, or 'I'm here and listening', 'Do you need some space to think?', 'I just want to check that you are OK, while you may be taking some time to think'.
- Create templates for any techniques, strategies or concepts that you often use and need to explain to clients. This saves you typing them out. But explain to the client why they will get what is clearly pre-prepared text. And make sure you change any pronouns and other details to fit the client - or have a different set for he/she/they.
- You may wish to use emoticons to aid expression, how you are feeling in the moment, and therefore your presence. If you aren't sure about their meaning or whether they would be understood by the client, don't use them.
- After typing a message and before you press send, check that the client has not sent a further message, creating a disloop.
- Consider offering more frequent sessions to IM clients, if possible, as the pace is slower.
- Be mindful of your expectations of the session and process, as the pace is slower than video and audio counselling.
- Be aware that online disinhibition and the non-visual aspect of IM can lead to swifter and deeper disclosures.
- Pay attention to how you end each session. Tell the client that you will wait for them to leave first - the abruptness of ending through the click of a button could feel rejecting if initiated by the counsellor.
- Give the client guidelines on how to communicate effectively via IM before the first session.
- Consider what emotional support the client has access to during and after the session.

Client: *Yeah. No offence meant but why should I believe you're any different?*

Counsellor: *From what little I know about you and your life, Mo, that's a very natural response...*

Not trusting is a great protective mechanism and I expect it helps to keep you safe...

So, I don't expect you to trust me, until you're ready to

Client: *Yeah. OK yeah. So what do you want to ask me first?*

Counsellor: *Well Mo, what I want to check out first is your safety, as this is incredibly important...*

So, I'm going to talk to you about the score on the form you completed (thanks for doing this)... to see whether there is anything else that may be useful in supporting you to keep safe...

And then I'm going to ask you what your best hopes are from this session, so we can really focus in on making the most of this time together

As you can see, the counsellor aims to develop a connection with the client, Mo, through expressing UPR, empathy and congruence and seeking a balance between hearing Mo, empathising with her wariness from her past experiences of therapy, and moving to the risk assessment. She is gentle in tone, striving to help Mo get a sense of her presence and personality, but clear in describing why she is taking this approach, to help Mo feel engaged with this as a supportive process that is done with her, rather than to her.

Let's now look at how the session developed and see how Mo's counsellor uses her empathy to hear Mo's feelings, and her UPR and congruence to encourage Mo to gently open up.

Client: *I just want to be accepted for me. I know that's not going to happen though. I mean I'm just a freak right?*

Counsellor: *Being accepted is so important... and I'm getting the sense that at the same time it's scary to risk letting anyone accept you... in case you get rejected and hurt again... (please correct me if I am wrong)*

Client: *Yeah, no one accepts me. They all just think I'm a freak*

Counsellor: *I get the impression that being called 'freak' is something that has happened to you a lot Mo*

Client: *Oh yeah, in school every day. And people round here*

Counsellor: *Help me to understand how that has affected you Mo...*

I can only begin to guess how horrific it must be to have been called a freak every day...

Client: *It really hurt at first. I'd get panic attacks, but I've kind of got used to it, and sort of block it out most of the time. But sometimes it still really gets to me*

Counsellor: *You sound resigned, and also so hurt and angry - I guess lots of emotions coming and going...*

I'm wondering about times when someone was kind to you...

I'm asking because you said, 'they all call me a freak' and perhaps there is an exception, even once

This last comment was followed by a long silence, which Mo's counsellor did not intrude into. She simply typed in an ellipsis after a few minutes to let Mo know that she was still there and listening.

Client: *The local shopkeeper and his mum. They don't say much, but they've never been mean...*

I've heard them being called stuff too, cos they're, you know, not from round here so I suppose they get it.

Responding to silence

While Mo was clearly 'vocal' in this session, there was a period of silence. Silences are a common concern among counsellors new to the medium, who often ask how to respond to them. There are no visual cues to help the counsellor sense whether the client wants or needs some emotional or thinking space, is angry and is retreating behind their protective walls of silence, is dissociating, or is perhaps simply waiting for the counsellor to take the lead and ask another question. The style of the client's previous sentences will give you clues - perhaps their words seem carefully chosen, or they write expansively, demonstrating that they may be thinking or reflecting to identify and connect to their feelings.

If your client goes silent, you can show them that you are still present by gently reminding them that you are there, focused and attentive:

I'm here when you are ready, while you seem to need some space right now

Or:

I'm here when you are ready to speak

Or more simply:

I'm listening

Or more simply still:

(listening)

In the last example, the brackets around 'listening' convey a desire not to intrude into the client's space, while showing you are still present.

If you work with the body, you might want to ask:

I'm wondering what is going on in your body right now?

As with all counselling sessions, the counsellor is constantly making choices about what to respond to, and it can seem more glaringly obvious in text-based sessions when the counsellor misses something or chooses to follow one path and so misses another that is more important to the client. This is another reason to be congruent in explaining your thinking and rationale behind your questions and reflections in text-based counselling. ■

**All clients named in this article are fictionalised composites*

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About the author

Sarah Worley-James is a BACP senior accredited counsellor, supervisor and trainer with 25 years' experience in the public, private and third sectors. She is former Chair of the Association for Counselling and Therapy Online (ACTO) and Senior Counsellor at Cardiff University, where she set up the online service in 2011. Her new book, *Online Counselling: an essential guide*, is published by PCCS Books this month (www.pccs-books.co.uk).



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