

Creating a connection

In the third of her articles exploring online work, **Sarah Worley-James** discusses transferring face-to-face skills online and how a therapeutic relationship can most effectively be established through the written word



Relationships are fundamental to our wellbeing. We consciously and unconsciously reach out to others for a sense of connection, belonging and safety. Often, it is damaged relationships that cause clients to seek therapy, bringing with them themes of loss, betrayal, hurt, helplessness, isolation, hopelessness and anger. These themes naturally come into the counselling room with the client, influencing how the therapeutic relationship is formed.

Awareness of these themes form the foundation of how we begin to build relationships with our client, in which they can feel safe and understood. The most common question, that I am asked time and again, is how is it possible to build a 'proper' relationship with someone online? Surely there is something fundamentally missing when you cannot see their facial expressions, hear their tone of voice, and observe the subtle differences between their spoken words and body language? These are at the core of what counsellors tune into when building a relationship

and striving to understand their client's problems. And when a client feels isolated, invisible and scared, it is a risk and can take a huge amount of courage to open up to a counsellor.

Our clients desperately want to be heard, seen and understood. Before I can help them find a way through their problems to a place where they can reconnect to their motivation for their studies, resolve, or find a more effective way to weather their difficulties, I need to build trust and a sense of safety with them, all within a brief model of therapy. Quite a challenge.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

I've talked about the positive impact of online disinhibition in freeing a client to share their vulnerabilities and aspects of themselves that they may feel scared to reveal in person. But before we even reach that point, we need to connect. Research says that it takes just one-tenth of a second for us to judge someone and, conversely, to make a first impression.¹ We all know the phrase, 'first impressions count',

and relate it to meeting people face to face. Many factors affect our impression: what a person is wearing, whether they make eye contact, how firm their handshake is, how open their body language is, whether their expression is guarded, warm or open. Many questions subconsciously arise in those first few moments. Of course, our first impressions are also based on our values, beliefs and experience, and although as counsellors we strive to bracket these off as much as possible, we are still human.

BUILDING THE RELATIONSHIP

So how do I make a positive first impression on my client online?² I think carefully about my initial contact, even before the first counselling session. Even though the initial email contact is through the administrative team, with standardised email templates, we have considered carefully the wording so that it conveys a sense of warmth along with describing how we work and what to expect. We want to ensure that there is humanness in the phrasing, and

openness to inviting questions if anything is unclear.

Doing this online involves clear language and phrasing, and I am a big fan of plain English.³ When working via email, my questions are designed as prompts for the client to reflect upon, as well as aids to understanding their problem. I explain this, so they do not feel a pressure to answer every question I pose. In a synchronous instant messaging (IM) session, I hold back from too many factual questions, particularly in the first session, as my experience tells me that I do not need to understand every detail of their problem or exactly what role everyone in their life has, in order to understand the emotional impact of the situation. Too many factual questions can hinder the development of the relationship, and in text can be read as blunt or dismissive of the feelings and impact on the individual, in favour of too early a focus on problem solving. This can be truer in a brief approach, where the temptation for swiftly finding solutions can be heightened.

Building the relationship is especially crucial when a client has experienced long-term abuse or not had the opportunity to express and process feelings around loss that have led to prolonged anxiety or depression. This may have taken the form of bullying, which will naturally mean they are more sensitive to any sign of a put-down, or dismissive comment. So I am at pains to be transparent in the language I use, and to regularly invite feedback about my understanding of the situation and the client's feelings.

BEING CLEAR AND OPEN

Encouraging a client to step back and look at things from a different perspective as we begin to explore what has led to their anxiety, depression and struggles, is a skill that takes subtlety and finesse. In text, I need to ensure my tone of curiosity, openness and tentativeness is explicit, as I do not have my facial

expression and body language to convey these. And so I use phrases such as 'I wonder', 'I'm curious', 'I get the sense or impression that...'; followed by, in brackets '(though I may be wrong)', or '(correct me if I have misunderstood)', or '(please help me to understand more fully)'. The phrases in brackets are vital in expressing my desire to be congruent and to be open to be corrected as well as encouraging the client to feel safe to consider alternative perspectives.

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As I mentioned earlier, working to a brief model, and using a solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT) approach leads to careful consideration of the words and phrases I use, so as not to make the client feel pressured into steps and action they are not ready for. Indeed, an SFBT approach is far more subtle than that, with the emphasis on helping the client to shift their focus onto what they want, and recognising the resources and resilience they have that create the conditions for change, as opposed to an explicit focus on action and 'solutions'.⁴

THE CARDIFF MODEL

Working online within this approach highlights how the counsellor communicates and builds the relationship in a way that is more profound than in face-to-face work. The structure of The Cardiff Model, used at the institution where I work, is an initial one-and-a-half-hour SFBT

therapeutic consultation, followed by a 'watchful' or 'purposeful' four-week period for the client to reflect on the session and experiment with any ideas, strategies and techniques discussed. For around half of all clients, this is sufficient, with the rest having up to four ongoing sessions. So for 50 per cent of our students, the work is carried out in one session with the relationship building, exploration and shifting of focus onto what the client wants, *rather* than their problem, and discussing possible new approaches to help them move forward. All of this occurring within an hour and a half could feel like quite a pressure, but for me, holding in mind how vital and powerful the relationship is in the change process, keeps me grounded. No matter how limited the physical time spent with a client, it is the *quality* of how that time is used that makes the difference. When a client is open and ready to take steps to alter patterns of responding, or consider new perspectives, an open, encouraging, valuing and accepting voice accompanying them is incredibly motivating and affirming.

THE POWER OF WORDS

Those of you who know me, will be familiar with my interest in words and how we use them to create meaning and how we often fail to pay attention to the choice of familiar words and phrases we use on a daily basis. Also, how the (often subconscious) choice of words we say to ourselves differs markedly from those we use for others. The advantage of text-based counselling is that seeing our words and phrases in black and white, with a counsellor's reflection and gentle challenge, can bring into stark relief and awareness how damaging certain commonly used words and phrases may be for that client. Encouraging them to consider new ways of talking to themselves, offering the words and phrases they use with others to themselves, can be life altering.

Having those words and phrases forever spelled out on the page brings a reality and clarity that speaking alone may not provide. The client can refer back to these written words, pin them up and be reminded on a daily basis: this is how I want to speak to myself.⁵

Even within an SFBT approach, I find that working creatively can be a powerful way for the client to view themselves in a new light and challenge default responses and ways of relating.⁶ I've noticed that online clients are more likely to use creative means to bring different aspects of themselves into the therapy room. For example, attaching links to poetry, or a YouTube clip of music, or a scene from a film, to an email; or sending these during an IM session. Watching the clip or music together enables a more real connection, exploration and discussion of what that film or character means in relation to the client, than if obliquely referred to in a face-to-face session. Working with students in this way, often from a different generation and with different ways of relating, aids my understanding of their worldview.

I have spoken a great deal about the power of words, and indeed my opening words in this sentence remind me that when responding to an email session, I use the phrase 'I hear', rather than 'I read', as this feels more connected and more immediate. In face-to-face counselling we aim to create an authentic connection to the client.⁷ One way we do this is to look for incongruences between what they are saying and their body language, using immediacy to help the client recognise and explore what this may mean. Online, we do not have this ability, so we look for incongruences in what is written, and are open and curious about what is not said, or how the style in which a situation or feeling is expressed may differ from others, inviting the client to tell us about these areas or relationships.

TRAINING

Training is vital in learning how to build relationships through text-based communication. It gives us the space and support to explore how we relate through the written word, how we convey a sense of ourselves and meet our clients in cyberspace. Training with real clients enables us to experience how online disinhibition feels and impacts on the relationship, and to consider how we express our presence differently in email compared to IM and how that affects our sense of ourselves as a counsellor. We are given the support to explore and understand the importance of online security and the choices of software and platforms that we work with, and to understand and consider how to ensure we are complying with the various legal aspects that enable us to work ethically and competently. There are many excellent training courses available, run by highly experienced online therapists. A good starting point for deciding which course is appropriate for you is to go to the Association for Counselling and Therapy (ACTO)'s website where many are listed with links to the training providers' websites.⁸

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Being open and transparent in my communication is a foundational principle of all my counselling, and working online has given me a greater awareness of the power of even one word to alter the meaning perceived by the client. This can have the potential, unwittingly, to either damage the relationship, or to open up insight and the possibility for change and growth.

Over the years, I have realised how this focus on the written word has had a positive influence on my face-to-face work, making me more considerate and reflective of my choice of spoken words from moment to moment. ●



About the Author

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