

## Cyberwork

*Making connections***Sarah Worley-James**

worley-james@cardiff.ac.uk

**Making a meaningful connection is at the heart of the counselling relationship.**

**I**t's at the core of all our relationships, and a lack of connection is often a key reason for a client's difficulties, whether in their work or personal lives. Knowing this often leads counsellors to ask, how can we create an effective and significant therapeutic connection online?

It is well evidenced that the ability to develop a therapeutic alliance and connection is as possible online as it is face to face.<sup>1</sup> Not only is it beneficial, it's also recognised that engaging in counselling online is the only way that some clients feel able to connect to the counsellor and fully disclose their vulnerabilities.<sup>2</sup> The connection we feel with those around us is as individual as we are, and a benefit of conducting counselling online is the control it gives to the client.

If a client wants to disclose something particularly painful, they may need to create a safer distance, and having an audio or instant messaging (IM) session can provide that. Not seeing me can enable the client to focus on themselves and what they wish to share and explore. If clients can't see my facial expression, reactions and body language, they may feel freer, particularly if they are fearful of being judged, or have been judged in the past. When there is safety and trust, the client may want to connect more deeply, and we can switch the camera on. For others, the intimacy of the focus when experiencing the connection through their computer screen, of seeing the counsellor's face more closely than in face-to-face sessions, without the distraction of the surroundings, can also facilitate a closer and deeper connection.

The pace for developing a connection varies from client to client and highlights the importance of honing our ability to be present when working online. It's a skill that needs to be increasingly refined when connecting through the non-visual and asynchronous media (audio, instant messaging, email). American therapists Shari Geller and Leslie Greenberg devised a useful guide to creating presence<sup>3</sup> in our online therapeutic relationships, using the word itself as an acronym:

**Pause** – take a moment to stop what you are doing

**Relax** – into this moment by taking a deep breath

**Empty** – yourself of judgments, thoughts, distractions, agendas, preconceptions

**Sense** – your inner body, bring awareness to your physical and emotional body

**Expand** – sensory awareness outwards (seeing, listening, touching, sensing what is around you)

**Notice** – what is true in this moment, the relationship between what is within you (internal environment) and around you (external environment)

**Centre** – and ground (in yourself and your body)

**Extend** – and make contact (with client, or other).

Growing from this foundation of presence in our therapeutic relationships is the ability to express our empathy online. Developing our online competence with this vital aspect of counselling involves a focus on being explicit and clear in the words we use (both verbally and in writing). Being open in inviting feedback ensures that our clients feel able to challenge us if we have not quite grasped and understood their experience and feelings.

To maintain a meaningful connection online, we also need to know how to

respond to and manage technical breaks to the connection. My advice, to coin a well-known phrase, is to 'keep calm and carry on'. A calm response will help alleviate the client's anxiety, particularly if they are unfamiliar with technology or likely to become stressed. I've found the following can help quickly resolve some of the more common and simpler problems: switch off and reconnect to the wi-fi; move to a different room to get a stronger wi-fi signal; if one of you is not connecting to sound, both leave the online room and re-enter; unplug your headphones and use the computer speakers and microphone, or vice versa; switch off the camera and conduct the session through audio only.

Finally, you might need to rebook the session and address the technical problems. I find clients are usually understanding and patient with technical problems – they don't expect me to be a computer whizz, simply to continue providing a safe, calm space and presence until you are able to connect again.

While different from in-person connections, those we establish online can often surprise us with their depth and closeness. ●

*I would like to dedicate this column to my wonderful father, Michael Worley, who died on 21 January 2022. Our connection remains in my heart.*

**Sarah Worley-James** is a Senior Counsellor and Co-ordinator of the Online Service at Cardiff University.

## REFERENCES

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- 3 <https://psynetapa.org/record/2011-12627-000> (accessed 28 February 2022).