

## Cyberwork

# A level playing field?

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**From early in our training we become aware of the role of power in the therapy relationship. Inequality and abuse of power are themes that too often bring clients into the counselling room.**

**I**ndeed, in the age of the #metoo and #timesup movements, women in particular are becoming more aware of an increasing openness to acknowledging their experiences of being controlled and abused and of having these experiences witnessed and validated.

As therapists, we must be mindful of the myriad of ways in which the power imbalance can play out in the therapeutic relationship and the impact on the counselling process. We know that from the first contact we make, our clients will begin to form impressions of us, and thus, subconsciously or consciously, place themselves in a power position that they believe is appropriate. Often, this is in a subservient position as we are perceived as the 'professional', the 'expert', the 'one with the answers' and the 'one who will fix them'. This can be uncomfortable, flattering even, and with the potential to entice us down a dangerous path.

I vividly recall clients who have told me that they thought of the counselling sessions as lessons and me as their teacher. While I may inwardly squirm at this expression of me having such overt power, I always seek to understand what this means to the client. Upon discussion with clients, it has emerged that as they were learning so much about

themselves, the reference to 'lessons' and me as their 'teacher' can be understood as an apt description of the process. I have learned to accept this as their words and experience, while reiterating the collaborative and explorative nature of counselling.

Embarking on a journey into the world of online therapy excited me because its potential to lessen this power imbalance is considerable.

How would clients relate to me without the visual cues that can lead to assumptions about our perceived societal positions? Would I notice the difference? How might I be different?

My first indication that the power relationship was levelling out was when clients explicitly told me that they would not have disclosed their vulnerabilities and suicidal thoughts in a face-to-face encounter. The freedom that instant messaging and email gives to clients, helps to enable disclosures that then allow clients to engage with further therapeutic support, sometimes leading to face-to-face work.

The next time I noticed a difference in the power relationship was when a client from a different country and religious background disclosed their struggles, via email sessions, that they had not felt able to do in their previous face-to-face sessions with me. It's the same client but the process by which the therapy happens is different – and it changes something. It's a key reason why I choose to work flexibly across different online media as well as between online and face-to-face therapy, because it helps to level out the power imbalance.

The client chooses which form of communication suits them, whether that's for emotional or practical reasons; whether and when to be seen by me and where to conduct the session from, as long as it is private. Being in a space that is known and feels comfortable for them lessens

the potential for feeling intimidated by a workplace office environment, particularly if the reasons for attending concern work issues.

There is rich potential for research into this area, which could help when planning support services for clients who may traditionally find issues of power imbalance and authority

a barrier to accessing therapy. Given how often these issues crop up in the workplace, it's an ideal context for exploring how a blend of online media and face-to-face therapy could serve these clients well. ●

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