

Cyberwork

Take time to press pause

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A year ago, I'd never have imagined that my world would have reduced to such an extent, that for days, weeks and months, I rarely left my immediate community.

I know I'm not alone. The restrictions due to lockdown and social distancing mean that our face-to-face contact is much reduced and many are reporting feeling more disconnected and isolated from friends, colleagues and support networks. While online therapists familiar with this way of working may not have had such a dramatic shift to their professional lives, it remains the case that we are likely to be experiencing a parallel process with our workplace clients.

Work is now home and home is now work. It's midwinter and our energy is naturally lower. However, the demand on us and our services may be intensifying, particularly in the field of mental health. Our systems and people have maintained an intense focus during a difficult year, and anecdotally I hear of patterns of overworking and not taking breaks either during the day or as annual leave. Working online, there is an additional strain on our eyes and brains from intently focusing our attention on the computer screen for long periods and reading non-verbal communication. And, we have all had a year where we have had a reduced capacity to make our own choices, which can in itself lead to stress.

I am conscious that during this pandemic, we are *all* experiencing a range of fluctuating responses. At

one moment we may feel grounded, and able to give to others. At the next, we are overwhelmed, anxious, and unsure of how to keep coping as we try and balance supporting children, partners, older relatives and friends, with the demands of work, and all within the confines of often confusing and frequently changing guidelines, rules and restrictions.

Our responses naturally mirror those of our clients; and right now, we will find ourselves more frequently and closely identifying with our clients' experiences and the challenges they are facing. This can bring another layer of potential stress, as our fluctuating responses are highlighted as we see them mirrored in our clients' stories.

A significant element to my approach to counselling (and to life), is to focus on what choices I, and my clients and supervisees, can make in each moment. Focusing on the choice we can make gives us a degree of control. By giving attention to this, we feel calmer and better able to cope with the uncertainties which can otherwise leave us feeling out of control.

We can do this by bringing our awareness and attention to the small decisions we can make right now, in this moment. So, if you recommend that your clients remember to take a minute to look out of the window, to take a few deep breaths, to choose to take time to eat lunch away from their desk, to open the door and step outside for a lunchtime walk, remember to join them in pressing the pause button.

We can always choose where we put the focus of our energy, whether it's on what we know and what is certain, or on the worrying unknowns. The focus of our attention creates a

very different mental state and this has been an important discovery for so many during 2020. It's an approach I have used myself for many years, and more consciously in my counselling work this year. I keep my focus on what is happening now, today, or this week, aware that the future is so uncertain.

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I ask myself, what do I want to do with my time? How can I nurture myself? Are there opportunities that the pandemic presents that I can use to help me learn new ways to look after myself? I find that there are. I have slowed down enough to relearn the names of trees that I knew as a child, but had since forgotten. I now remember to put bird seed on the bird table, and am rewarded by visits from my feathered friends. I enjoy their daily chorus and squabbles over my offerings. These are precious moments of connection each day which ground me in this uncertain world, giving my eyes a different and welcome focus and my brain a gentle soothing. ●

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