

## Cyberwork

# Working online – a lower-worth skill?

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Due to COVID-19, working online has suddenly, and unexpectedly, become the only way that therapy is being conducted.

From being a small part of an agency's counselling provision, with a few therapists trained and providing counselling online, all work has moved online as the norm, almost overnight.

### Adapting online

For some therapists, there has been a great deal of adjustment and an exciting journey to develop new skills, while for those therapists who are seasoned to online work, it's been a chance to affirm and fully demonstrate the value of our skills and knowledge. Inevitably, adjusting to a new way of working affects us all in different ways, but I'm conscious of the higher needs the profession has had as we continue to adapt. Not only did we have to set up a private space and ensure our equipment was suitable, we have also been grappling with the emotional and practical impact of all aspects of our lives having changed, alongside supporting our families and friends, as well as our clients.

### Valuing online skills

At this time, a focus on our self-care is vital. How we feel and cope with change and uncertainty are also linked to our sense of being respected and valued. It's concerned me to hear accounts of some trained online therapists being offered a lower pay scale than therapists who were working face to face. This simply does not make sense to me. An online therapist is a specialist, with

additional training, qualifications and skills that a therapist trained only in face-to-face counselling or psychotherapy does not have.

I can't think of a single profession where a member of staff's pay is reduced as they develop their skills and gain further training and qualifications, particularly when the additional training is in a specialist area. Do we reduce the pay of a doctor once they have completed their specialised training? Do we reduce the pay of the police officer when they complete their training to join the CID? Do we reduce the pay of a teacher when they complete their training to become a safeguarding officer?

### Specialist training

Becoming an online therapist requires completing core therapy training, consolidating and developing those skills with post-training experience and then undertaking further specialist training in online therapy. Training to become an online therapist is not a two-day CPD course but a full educational course, often at diploma level, taught over many weeks. It includes a great deal of reading, research, coursework, real client practice, self-reflection, online supervision, and the creation of a portfolio of work to be passed before achieving the qualification. It will be written to BACP or ACTO competences for online training, covering a multitude of aspects of working online, including learning how to communicate effectively through the diverse media available.

### Complexities online

Until you conduct a therapy session via instant messaging (IM) or chat, it's hard to have any real sense of how differently you have to express

yourself to work within the constraints of what can be explored at the slower pace which IM necessitates. Even those therapists now working with their clients via webcam will be realising that this is not a simple transition and there are many things to consider, some of which will take them by surprise. How does it feel to see just your client's face, up close to you on the screen? How does your client respond and behave, to be now talking about their vulnerabilities and difficulties in their own home, rather than the neutrality of your therapy room?

There is so much to learn – and in order to work safely in a legal and technological sense, and without such knowledge and skills, a therapist could find themselves in legal difficulty. There is much talk of online disinhibition, yet, in the climate of clients living in lockdown with family members they may not usually live with, there is instead a growth of 'inhibition', a reluctance to 'talk' openly, for fear of being overheard. This naturally impacts on the therapeutic process and requires awareness, understanding and flexibility to work effectively with these clients.

To work online is a specialism, as is working with children and young people, or with abuse and trauma, where additional training and qualifications are gained. Any such further training and development of a new range of skills and knowledge should be remunerated at an appropriate level, acknowledging and valuing that specialist skillset. ●

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