

Cyberwork

The upsides

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Since I began writing this column two years ago, the number of therapists training in online approaches has significantly increased, as evidenced by the number of members in the Association for Counselling and Therapy Online (ACTO) more than doubling in that time period.

We have also seen a growth in the development of websites dedicated to supporting mental health, and platforms designed specifically to create a secure online space from which to conduct therapy.

These help to take away a great deal of stress for the newly qualified online therapist branching out from their face-to-face work. Such platforms set up the secure systems, offer a place for recording and storing notes and ensure that each process is GDPR compliant.

I watch with great delight as the interest and enthusiasm for working online continuously grow; and not only within the traditional counselling and psychotherapy field. ACTO is seeing more members from related fields, such as IAPT (Improving Access to Psychological Therapies) and CBT practitioners.

Working with students, I am always mindful that the role of therapy is to help the student to be able to engage as fully as possible with their studies and gain the best degree that they can, within the context of their life challenges. Indeed, my clients themselves are focused on finding a way to deal 'well enough' with their difficulties to achieve their degree;

with very few looking for deeper, existential work.

Similarly, a workplace client will, more than likely, be wanting to get their life back on track and resume their place at work as, so often, what we do is a key part of our identity. I find that working online enables me to 'meet' clients on terms that enable them to engage in this process as simply as possible.

For example, the client striving to continue in work (because the routine and focus of work helps them to deal with an external situation) may find they struggle to attend regular sessions in the same building each week. If they travel often, then the flexibility of being able to move between face-to-face and online sessions can afford them the continuity that is such a valuable part of the therapy. In the last week alone, I have conducted a voice-only session with a client in Sweden, and a webcam

(moved to IM for technical reasons) with a client in Hong Kong. The latter example shows how important it is to offer therapy through all media, so that you can also be flexible during the session if the connection strength does not allow for video.

Other clients, struggling with intense anxiety and fears of being judged by colleagues as 'weak', can find the anonymity of working online a huge relief, with the online disinhibition effect freeing them up to be able to express their concerns and share their vulnerabilities. I find that these clients are able to open up when given the choice of voice or IM sessions – not seeing me and the related assumptions they will inevitably make from my appearance and facial expressions, can be hugely beneficial to the therapeutic process.

I am reminded of clients who are acutely embarrassed by their tears, and may struggle with the counsellor's response, feeling under the spotlight if the counsellor stays focused on them; or feeling abandoned if the counsellor gazes away. It's likely that these clients may find the option of an online medium, where they are not seen by the counsellor, more freeing to express their tears in a more private way. Giving

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the client choice over how they engage in therapy is such a simple way of allowing them some control and autonomy over the process. So often, a loss of control is a key theme in therapy, and so I am always keen to help the client identify healthy ways to regain it. Allowing the client flexibility and choice in how and 'where' we meet, hands some of the

control of the therapeutic process back to them and goes some way to address the inherent power imbalance that exists. ●

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