

Cyberwork

Maintaining boundaries online

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With the shift to delivering therapy online, I'm conscious that we need to renew our focus to creating and maintaining robust boundaries with our clients.

Before COVID-19, we could take for granted the control that we have over our counselling environment. Whether we work in therapy rooms or in a dedicated therapy space at home, we choose what the space looks like and the 'feel' that we wish to convey to help our clients feel safe. We control who and when someone enters the space and when the session ends.

Technological glitches

However, meeting our clients online means that we now conduct sessions in *their* space and in *their* homes, with no control over which room they choose to be in and with reduced influence over the potential for interruptions. We have limited control over the technological glitches that may interrupt or prematurely end the session. Inevitably, they will arise and it's vital to have clearly set out in your contracting what you will do to try and reconnect, and if this is not possible, what alternative communication you will use to continue the session or rearrange it.

Knowing this process and maintaining a calm response in the moment, will help the client feel confident and safe with you. They will know that you are maintaining the boundaries through the clarity with which you deal with the situation and your firmness with time boundaries. It can be tempting to go over time to compensate for a technological problem that has arisen, but this pushes a boundary and sets a

precedent that may not always be possible to repeat in the future. Of course, we do have control over the online communication platform that is used to hold the sessions and this can also help us to maintain boundaries regarding the client's data security and online confidentiality.

Interruptions

When the client is in *their* home, there are a range of possible interruptions that can occur, which are out of the ordinary: from a child or partner entering and staying in the room, to a parent wanting to 'meet' the counsellor, uninvited. Whatever the client says in terms of them being OK with the child or partner staying in the room, it is important to explain the reason for, and role of, confidentiality. I know there are counsellors who struggle to convey this firmly when the client is in *their* home as they feel that it is the client's choice who is in the room. However, explained clearly, the client will understand, and is often relieved at having a professional state on their behalf what the boundaries are.

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Self-care message

When we set up our physical counselling rooms, we create a therapy space that conveys a sense of safety, calm, professionalism and security. It's a space where clients can metaphorically leave their stories, traumas and feelings when they leave the session. This creates a safety

boundary to support the client to disclose and explore painful experiences and feelings. I often tell my clients that there is a bottomless pit in the space between us, for everything to go into. It's a double message: that they can leave behind what they have disclosed and shared in the room, and a self-care message to myself, that I do not have to hold all of my client's feelings and traumatic experiences.

I think this self-care message is even more vital when we are working from home, given that we may be doing so for some time. If you are now working from a room previously delegated as a social or family space, you will have had to consider how to maintain physical boundaries, prevent interruptions and manage the emotional boundaries; for example, by working out how to step out of your counsellor persona and into your private self as you walk out of the room.

This heightens the importance of discussing with your client what *they* will do immediately after the session to create a boundary between their counselling and the rest of their lives. Will they need time to process and shift their emotions before being able to rejoin their family, and is this time available?

Working online exposes boundary considerations for both the client and counsellor that do not arise when working within your own therapy space. By taking time to consider what they are and discussing them in your contracting, you can help ensure that you both have clarity when responding to the challenges that emerge. This will help to create a safe, secure space for your clients, and support you with your self-care when working from home. ●

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