

Cyberwork

Paying to work online

Sarah Worley-James

worley-james@cardiff.ac.uk



Meeting our clients online has become a familiar experience in the last couple of years.

Yet, there remain some frequently asked questions about how counsellors know which communication platforms are secure to use, and whether there are any free platforms to use that provide the same level of security as the paid-for platforms.

If you are fortunate enough to work for an organisation that pays for or provides its own secure platform, this question is moot. However, not all practitioners have this arrangement and need to find their own platforms to connect with their workplace clients. A quick Google search reveals an extensive list of options when choosing a secure therapy platform, offering a range of functions from appointment scheduling, record keeping, statistic reporting and payment management. I think that the question is less about having a specific website recommended and more about ensuring that whichever platform you choose provides information and connection security and meets General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) requirements.

A second question that is commonly raised is the cost of subscribing to one of these platforms, as they generally require a monthly or annual financial commitment, ranging from between £10 and £80 a month. This may be frustrating for counsellors who only have one or two clients, and who are unable to access a free service beyond 40 minutes. However, it's my view that paying the costs for a secure platform does need to be factored into your business, along

with the compulsory financial outlays for professional body membership and accreditation, DBS, insurance, supervision and CPD. Of course, working online adds further costs for these platform fees, along with ICO (Information Commissioner's Office) membership.

It's a long list, which adds up to what can feel an unacceptably large outlay, particularly when wages within the sector are lower than average for the UK as a whole. Perhaps it's not surprising therefore to learn that some counsellors are choosing to sign up to the free online platforms, even though these only offer 40-minute slots, after which time the session automatically ends. This leaves those counsellors with a dilemma: to offer 40-minute sessions or close the session and open a new one, creating a break in the session.

I confess I find it worrying to know this is happening, and think that both of these scenarios raise considerable ethical issues. The first that springs to my mind is that if the same session were in person, it is the equivalent of the counsellor getting up out of their chair and leaving the room without a word, client mid-flow.

Another concern is that the counsellor may be contracted by the employer or EAP to deliver a 60-minute session, but due to not paying for the platform, is instead offering a shorter session, which is a breach of contract. From a therapeutic perspective, how might a shorter session affect the process and client expectations? Does the client feel the session is rushed or curtailed? Will a shorter session mean that it ends abruptly before the counsellor has had time to summarise and share farewells?

Limiting the session to 40 minutes and being able to hold that time boundary, takes great skill, and I imagine leads the counsellor to feel a degree of stress. Just consider how much there may be to say in a first session, when the counsellor does not know the client, and if there is little time for the counsellor to respond, how both might feel reluctant for the session to end.

I think the above scenarios will struggle to meet BACP's ethical principles of beneficence, non-maleficence, justice (if some counsellors within an organisation are paying for a platform and so having longer sessions, leading to inequality), and self-respect (the pressure on the counsellor to complete a session within a limited timeframe that ends without flexibility).

I think this issue raises a need for counselling courses to devote more time to helping students understand the business elements and administrative requirements of the profession. We practise in the voluntary, public and private sectors, and we can move into a new role and find ourselves being required to provide things ourselves that a previous employer may have arranged and paid for. This can include paying for BACP membership, accreditation, insurance, CPD and training, as well as for an online platform. I know it can be a shock when we move into a job and are expected to provide some or all of these ourselves – but if we are to avoid walking out on a client mid-sentence, it's a cost that as professional practitioners we need to swallow. ●

Sarah Worley-James is a Senior Counsellor and Co-ordinator of the Online Service at Cardiff University.