

Cyberwork

The power of words Sarah Worley-James

When I talk to therapists about how I work online with clients, I'm often asked two questions. The first is: 'How can you possibly create relational depth without eye contact or reading body language?' The second is: 'What if the client uses the computer to "hide" their feelings and isn't open with you?' I must admit, when I first began to consider working online eight years ago, I too was curious.

Now, as a senior counsellor at Cardiff University, and creator and co-ordinator of the online counselling service, I work online with clients and supervises every day. Our service provides email, instant messaging (IM) and webcam sessions, with the flexibility to move between these different media. In Cyberwork, I'll be sharing my reflections and insights with fellow practitioners. Some of you may already provide online counselling to your workplace clients, while others may be curious, ambivalent or sceptical.

Undoubtedly, when we work face to face, our client's choice of language, words and phrases provides valuable information to us – but working online, they take on an even greater significance. Exploring what their words mean and inviting the client to begin to listen to themselves and to consider the impact of their choice of words, can be a powerful process in the client's journey of growth and change. This is also key to creating depth in the relationship online, through shared exploration and mutual understanding of the meaning behind their words. This helps clients to develop greater self-awareness and to recognise their ability to make different choices, even about the words that they use.

Working online and without non-verbal clues, I tune in to the words the client uses and perhaps encourage her to experiment with different words. An obvious example of this, is shifting away from pressuring words, (the 'shoulds' and 'musts', 'I have to' and 'I need to'), focusing instead on words of choice (can, will, want and am). It is worth considering and exploring with the client what they might not

be writing about, and the areas of their life that they are omitting. For example, a client may focus on describing their relationship with one parent, while making no mention of the other. Noticing and reflecting this back, can help invite the client to share this relationship and can open up a myriad of feelings, considerations and themes that would be left unknown if I had simply focused on responding to the words alone.

This leads me to the second question: 'What if the client uses the computer to "hide" their feelings and isn't open with you?' This interests me, as it implies that the client could be trying to outsmart the counsellor, or is 'in denial' about their true feelings. As a therapist, I believe strongly that creating a space, (in the real world or online), where the client feels safe enough to open up about their vulnerabilities and risk being judged or not believed, is a huge responsibility, which I need to work at. If the client feels the need to protect themselves by holding back, then I need to give them emotional space and work harder to help them feel valued and accepted.

It is normal for a client to be wary, and to hold back until they feel safe enough to express themselves fully. However, working online can often lead to the process of opening up occurring far more quickly, due to 'online disinhibition', as the anonymity of working online can remove the fear of being judged. I'm reminded of an international male student, I worked with face to face who appeared uncomfortable working with a white female therapist, and so I sensed that we didn't really get beyond the surface. Some time later, he returned via email sessions and I was struck by how quickly he opened up, and we connected more fully and found a way forward.

Working online and seeing the client's words in black and white, describing difficult emotions and situations, can mean there is a focus on 'the problem', as I hear about their traumas and struggles. So, it's important to recognise and acknowledge the client's resilience and to look for, and specifically ask about, their resilience. For example, while a

client's description may focus exclusively on the abuse they are experiencing at work, I need to find a balance between hearing, validating and accepting their feelings, and also asking: 'How are you coping at work?' and 'What is enabling you to keep going?' For the client, seeing these questions and their answers written down can remind them of, and connect them more fully with, their strengths and positive coping mechanisms. They can return to these words and see how they are feeling now, chart their progress and be reminded of any strategies suggested.

Working predominantly with young adults, I'm aware that they are from a generation who have grown up communicating and relating online. This is how they connect with the world, and often how they feel most comfortable expressing their vulnerabilities. Increasingly, it's how they expect to be able to access their therapy, meeting their counsellor online in a way that feels familiar, safe and where they are confident they can open up and be heard.



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