

Cyberwork

Building relationships Sarah Worley-James

Relationships are fundamental to our wellbeing. We consciously and unconsciously reach out to others for a sense of connection, belonging and safety. Quite naturally our clients will want this from us, while bringing their themes of fear, rejection and trust into the therapy room. But working online, as I do, the one question I'm asked time and again is: can you really build a 'proper' relationship? Surely something is missing when you can't see your client's facial expressions, hear their tone of voice and observe the subtle differences between their spoken words and body language?

These subtleties are at the core of what we tune into when we're building a relationship and striving to understand the client's problems. When a client feels isolated and invisible at work, overloaded, taken for granted, bullied or overlooked for a promotion, it's a risk

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to talk to a counsellor, a stranger, and it takes much courage. The client wants to be heard, 'seen' and understood. However, before I can help them to find a way through their problems to a place where they can either address them, or return to work, feeling confident that they have resolved, or found a more effective way to weather the issues, I need to build trust.

I've written before about the positive impact of online disinhibition in freeing up a client to share their vulnerabilities and less visible aspects of themselves. Research suggests that it takes just one-tenth of a second for us to judge someone and make a first impression.¹ We all know the phrase, 'first impressions count' and relate it to meeting people face to face: their clothes, whether they

make eye contact, how firm their handshake is, the openness of their body language, whether their expression is guarded, warm or open. So many questions are subconsciously asked in those first few moments of meeting. Our first impressions are also based on our values, beliefs and experience, and as counsellors we strive to bracket these off as much as possible, but of course, we are still human.

Even in the world of online counselling, I attend to making a positive first impression on my client, thinking carefully about my initial contact, prior to the first counselling session. My client may be used to receiving work emails that are formal, and possibly directive, or even bullying, in tone. So, even though my first contact is about the business of setting up an appointment, I take the opportunity to convey a human warmth in my phrasing, and an openness to inviting questions.

Workplace clients are often experiencing working relationships where they feel dismissed, devalued, ignored or bullied. This may have led to long-term anxiety, depression and periods off work. Naturally they may be wary when 'meeting' me, especially if they associate me with work, if the referral was through work. Congruence, transparency and humility are essential qualities in building the therapeutic relationship, and I express these by explaining the reason behind my interventions, inviting feedback, and openly admitting if I have misunderstood the client.

Communicating this online involves clear language and phrasing, and I am a big fan of plain English. When working via email, I explain that my questions are designed as prompts for the client to reflect on, with no expectation of an answer to them all. In a synchronous instant messaging session, I will minimise factual questions in the first session, as experience tells me I do not need to understand every detail of a work project, or what everyone's role is, in order to understand the emotional impact on my client. Indeed, in text, factual questions can be read as blunt or dismissive of the client's feelings.

Building a safe relationship is especially crucial when a client has experienced long-term

bullying. They will naturally be more sensitive to reading comments as dismissive or a put down, so I am at pains to be transparent in the language I use, and regularly invite feedback.

Encouraging a client to step back and look at things from a different perspective takes subtlety and finesse. In text, I need to ensure my tone of curiosity, openness and tentativeness is explicit. Phrases such as; 'I wonder', 'I'm curious', and 'I get the sense or impression that...', convey this sincerity. Following these with the bracketed words '(though I may be wrong)', or '(correct me if I have misunderstood)' are vital in expressing my congruence and invitation for feedback or correction.

Being open and transparent in my communication is a foundation principle of my counselling relationships, and working online increases my consciousness of the power of even one word to alter the meaning perceived by the client. Positively, this focus on the written word has had a beneficial influence on my face-to-face work, leading to more consideration of and reflection on the words I speak in the moment.

Reference

- 1 Willis J, Todorov A. First impressions: making up your mind after 100 ms exposure to a face. *Psychological Science* 2006; 17: 592–598.



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