

Cyberwork

Beyond words Sarah Worley-James

Have you ever used a smiley face when communicating with your clients? Probably not, if you work face to face with clients. But working predominantly as I do with young people, I've found the sparing and considered use of emoticons can help the development of a therapeutic relationship, particularly in IM sessions. However, it can be fraught with difficulties, and I suspect that many therapists will avoid their use to limit the potential for cultural misunderstandings arising, or offence being taken.¹

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I deliberately choose to use an emoticon rather than an emoji, as I feel that its simplicity is more likely to add, rather than distract from the session. Just to be clear, an emoji, is an image with colour and sometimes animation. It's an intrusion into the text, drawing the eye away from the words and meaning conveyed in them.² It is a crude representation of emotion and within therapy could be seen as diminishing the client's experience. That said, for some young people the use of an emoji can be an easier way to express those emotions that are difficult to access or articulate.

I consciously limit my use to a smile emoticon, as I feel that, as one of the most commonly used, it is most likely to be received in the way I intend:³ to convey warmth at the beginning of the session; in response to a described pleasure at a change or progress; as encouragement; in response to a moment of humour; to convey a more human response; and to say 'good bye'. I am mindful that the client may not like or appreciate the use of

emoticons, or it could be read as dismissive or patronising. I note how the client responds, and cease if they object.⁴

I use an emoticon as an alternative and an enhancement to using brackets to say what I am thinking. For example, I might type: 'I can hear how pleased you are at how you handled that situation (and I'm smiling as I type this)', or I can simply add a ☺. Interestingly, in synchronous IM sessions I tend to use emoticons more freely than in an email, as the immediacy of the relationship enables a readjustment or holding back if it appears that emoticons are not welcome.

Venturing into online work, I was mindful of the range of ways that people communicate via text-based media, as well as style and use of punctuation. Interestingly, my experience of working with young adults in a university is that they rarely abbreviate in a counselling session, have less typos than me, and are very forgiving of mine!

The advent of Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat, with their limited characters, provides another medium where people use ellipsis. And I find that people write in the style of the medium they are using, rather than adopting a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to online communication.

I use the smile emoticon alone, as I am conscious of wanting to communicate the smiles I would naturally use in face-to-face work. In contrast, I choose not to use a sad face (☹) in response to an expressed trauma or painful emotion, because in a face-to-face session, I would be keeping my response as neutral as possible (while still being human), to convey a steadiness and an ability to hold the feelings in the room. The use of a sad emoticon has the potential to convey sympathy rather than empathy, and risks the client believing I am getting overwhelmed. And, of course, my choice to convey sadness may not relate to the predominant emotion the client is feeling in the moment. Perhaps anger, hurt or numbness are more apt, while, of course, an angry emoticon (>:() brings into the

session a strong sentiment that could be misinterpreted as my displeasure or anger.

As IM can be a more focused experience, for both client and counsellor – with a shared sense of time being more precious – emoticons can add to the expression of immediate feelings, just as a fleeting facial expression or body movement can enhance or express a depth or contrasting emotion to the verbalised one, in a face-to-face session.

References

- 1 <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/more-just-text/201705/emojis-tools-emotions>
- 2 <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/feb/06/difference-between-emoji-and-emoticons-explained>
- 3 <http://www.wired.co.uk/article/emoji-2016-swiftkey>
- 4 <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2016/jul/09/text-therapy-actually-work-talkspace-emoji>



Sarah Worley-James is current Chair of the Association for Counselling and Therapy Online (ACTO). She is a senior counsellor and Co-ordinator of the Online Service at Cardiff University. worley-james@cardiff.ac.uk