

# Cyberwork

## Bridging the gap Sarah Worley-James

One of the most interesting and beneficial aspects of working online, I find, is how we can reach those employees who may otherwise never consider accessing therapy or who find the psychological and physical barriers too great to overcome. It's a way of building bridges to reach wider client groups, who can benefit hugely from working online to address and resolve personal and workplace issues.

Four of these groups of clients include: transgender people; men; international and EU staff/students; and people on the autistic spectrum. Prior to the advent of online therapy, these employees may have chosen to struggle on without accessing psychological support, ended up handing in their notice, or taken extended sick leave.

The overriding benefit of working this way for these clients is online disinhibition. The anonymity of communicating by email or instant messenger allows clients to express thoughts and feelings freely, which they may otherwise fear will be dismissed or judged. As counsellors, we strive to create a neutral environment and to convey our openness and non-judgmental approach to our clients, but inevitably there will be aspects of our appearance, voice, mannerisms and personality that will lead to transference and which inhibit the client's trust to open up their vulnerable self.

Communicating via text removes many of these indications as to our background, religion, culture, political views, disabilities and age. Naturally, a therapist's name and style of writing will offer some clues to their identity; however, it does not intrude so visibly into the room, and this reduces barriers which need to be overcome and helps encourage the fuller exploration of sensitive issues and feelings.

It's well understood that universities are generally liberal places where it is safe to express a broad range of views, identities and lifestyles. Increasingly, where I work, in the Counselling and Wellbeing Service at Cardiff University, we are working with transgender

people, who can find it more comfortable to express their authentic self and gender identity online. This reduces anxiety about the possibility of the counsellor's unconscious biased response to their physical appearance, if it is currently different from their gender identity.

The engagement of men accessing therapy is a concern for many counselling services, and across the generations there is still a dominant assumption that men should not express their emotions. Lad culture communicates the message to 'man up'; while the more traditional, stoical view remains that men 'should be strong' as the providers, rather than receivers, of support. This can result in the bottling up of painful experiences and trauma, potentially leading to mental health problems and prolonged sickness from work. Online counselling creates a safe, anonymous space where the male client can express himself without fear of ridicule, having his feelings normalised and accepted.

While the long-term outcome of Brexit remains far from clear, the many international and EU staff working in UK companies and universities are undoubtedly emotionally affected by the uncertainty surrounding their future. This may well be in addition to existing anxieties staff have about the welfare of their families in their home country, limited support networks in the UK and managing ongoing mental health conditions. While we are working hard in the UK to destigmatise mental health, with campaigns such as 'Time to Talk' and 'Time to Change', we know that prejudice remains. However, attitudes to mental health differ across cultures, and clients from Asian countries, such as China,<sup>1</sup> report that the stigma around mental health remains significant, often inhibiting the seeking of support. Along with the anonymity that working online can give the client, receiving counselling via email can give international staff the space to figure out what English words and phrases best express their feelings, without the pressure of needing to find those words in the moment.

As a society we are becoming more inclusive of difference, developing ever better support for people with learning disabilities to access employment in the workplace. Employees on the autistic spectrum may feel overwhelmed by the sensory stimulation of the waiting area, creating a barrier to accessing face-to-face counselling. It takes courage to attend counselling for the first time. However, for someone on the autistic spectrum, their increased anxiety about unfamiliar settings can affect their ability to engage with the counselling process.<sup>2</sup> Offering online sessions allows autistic clients to attend in a place of familiarity where they can better manage the sensory stimulation of their environment.

By creating a bridge for staff to access therapy online, counselling services are empowering all employees to feel valued and supported, increasing their sense of self-worth and potentially contributing to a more positive relationship with both their role and their organisation.

### References

- <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/may/18/millions-people-mental-illness-china-india-untreated-study-lancet> (accessed 22 February 2017).
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