

Online counselling

– the new kid on the block,
who's here to stay



Online counselling sat on the fringes of therapeutic work until the COVID pandemic forced us to find new ways of working. Few of us were prepared for or were sufficiently trained to adapt to this new way of working. **Rick Hughes** interviews **Sarah Worley-James** about the brave new world of online counselling

Can you explain what online counselling is?

Put simply, online counselling is using any online media to connect to and communicate with clients. Those most used currently are video, audio or telephone, instant messaging or email. All bar email are synchronous, meaning that we are meeting the client in real time, even if we are not seeing them or hearing their voice. Email is asynchronous and as such the most challenging medium to work in, as we are having to understand what the client is expressing, including the underlying themes and meanings without a dialogue and at a later point in time than when they wrote their email.

You will notice that I choose to use the phrase 'instant messaging' rather than 'live chat'. I am passionate about the meaning and impact of the words we use, and so, for me, 'live chat' could lead to boundary issues, with the client taking the word 'chat' to mean something more informal, friendly and spontaneous than the counselling relationship offers.

How well do you think counsellors adapted to online counselling during the pandemic?

That's an interesting question, and from my discussions with many counsellors over the past couple of years, I've noticed a wide range of responses. Some counsellors have embraced working online, discovering new ways of connecting with clients and the creative potential it offers. Others were reluctant, saw it as a poor alternative that they had no choice but to use, and were eager to return to in-person sessions as soon as they were able. As counsellors have developed experience in working online, many have realised how nuanced it is, with much more to

understand beyond simply turning on their camera and counselling as if they were in person. This has led to an increase in counsellors seeking online training, and gaining a depth of knowledge and skills that has encouraged them to branch out from video to the text-based media.

How would you recommend counsellors best prepare for and transition to online work?

Training! There are many aspects to consider and prepare for, from the technical (such as adequate lighting, decent equipment and good Wi-Fi), to relational (including how to be present and communicate unconditional positive regard, empathy and congruence with a limited visual view or through text alone), to the ethical elements (the unique boundary issues that arise, and how to work safely with risk online).

There are many good courses available now, and a good starting point to find one is the Association for Counselling and Therapy Online (ACTO) website (www.acto.org.uk). There are also modular courses, so if you only want to work through video, you do not need to undertake a course that teaches across all the media.

What are some of the ethical issues involved?

There are two key areas that I want to highlight: confidentiality and security, and boundaries. When working online, we need to be very mindful of ensuring that we are communicating through technology that is secure and protects the client's confidentiality. Among other considerations, this means using a platform that does not store and share your client's contact details, as well as having clear data protection processes for where you write and store your notes, and how you safely send confidential information. It is also important to consider your client's side of communication and guide them to understand how to keep the sessions confidential and private, and their communication with the counsellor secure.

There are many unique ways that boundaries can be pushed or crossed when working online, influenced by the online disinhibition effect (the loosening of our inhibitions when meeting online, particularly when we cannot see the other person) and the greater control the client has over their environment; for example, entering the video room and seeing that the client is somewhere public, or that there is someone else in the room with them. It is not uncommon for a child to enter the room unseen by the client, while noticed by the counsellor. Or a client may appear online from their bedroom.

As counsellors, we need to be firm and clear in helping the client to understand the importance and value of ensuring the online counselling space is private and confidential, even when they are in their own space and insist it's OK if their friend is sitting next to them!

We also need to consider the context of the client's life. When working with students, their bedroom is usually the only private space they have, so it is perfectly appropriate for them to be there. If the client is lying in bed, is it because they are struggling to get up due to depression, or a physical health condition, or are there boundaries being crossed?

And how can counsellors manage risk effectively and safely?

This is a huge question that is often the first concern counsellors have about working online. My initial response is that the safety that working online gives the client often enables them to open up and disclose risk which they would not feel able to do in person. This sense of anonymity, combined with online disinhibition, can create the opportunity for the client to try counselling, when the option of in-person therapy is too scary a prospect to try.

Risk is something that counsellors are skilled at identifying, supporting and monitoring. All these are developed from core training onwards, and a key additional skill when working online is to be more explicit in asking questions and requesting clarifications when we are assessing risk online. Remembering that the client may be choosing to access counselling online because they are anxious or scared of the consequences of disclosing risk, means we need to pay close attention to the words and phrases we use. Also important is explicitly encouraging, supporting and validating their disclosures and respecting their need for more emotional and physical distance from the counsellor during this process.

A client fearful of being judged may choose to access counselling via instant messaging, as, without seeing the counsellor's expressions, they free themselves of this fear. This can mean that risk is disclosed more quickly online (the online disinhibition effect), so the counsellor needs to be congruent and open in asking questions about risk, monitoring through mood questionnaires and supporting the client to access additional support.

In addition, working online gives the client access to a wide range of 24/7 support, so it is important to guide them to trustworthy websites, such as the NHS or Orcha (<https://orchahealth.com/>) – a website that reviews and rates weekly mental health apps. This is important to remember, as working online can

lead to a greater sense of anxiety and responsibility for the client's wellbeing.

How does a therapeutic relationship develop via online work?

This is a huge question, so I'll try to give a few pointers. Developing a relationship where we can meet the client at relational depth is, of course, key to the counselling process. When working online, we need to fine-tune our senses and pick up on the subtle cues that enable us to understand our client's worldview, develop empathy and recognise underlying meanings and unspoken feelings.

When working via video, we need to tune in more to the client's tone of voice, because of the limited view of their body language available to us. We do have a degree of visual cues, however, such as a shift or tenseness in their jaw or shoulders.

With audio or telephone counselling, we are attending closely to the client's voice, learning how they express themselves, and listening for nuanced changes in tone and style of speaking. As we are more closely attuned to the voice, it is important to consider how our unconscious biases may come into play. For example, our prejudices towards a certain accent or style of speaking will be heightened when this is the sole way we are communicating, and this can create barriers to developing a therapeutic relationship.

In the text-based media (instant messaging and email), we focus on being congruent, clear and transparent in our choice of words and phrases. We are expressing our personality through these words, and our attuned presence and focus on the client, as well as ensuring that the client feels heard, understood and supported. It is natural to express ourselves differently through text, even between instant messaging and email, as in the former there is a necessity to be briefer in our sentences.

Being open in asking for feedback and checking understanding is vital, as written words can lead to a starkness or more intensity of feeling than spoken words. This can lead to greater depth of connection (online disinhibition again) and work.

Do you miss client nuances and unspoken body cues with online work?

This is a fascinating question, and my answer is that counselling online is different, and so has its advantages as well as challenges. I love working through the text-based media as it opens up the process and creates a relationship that is different from in person. Some people express themselves more easily and comfortably through text, freed from the pressure to find a way to articulate themselves verbally when under the gaze of the counsellor.



Clients describe eloquently through the written word how they feel, and changes they notice in their body. I have worked with clients in instant messaging sessions, asking them to explore changing their body position, and describe what they notice, undertaking grounding exercises, or asking the client to reflect on what they notice in different situations in an email session.

When working through audio, the intense focus on the voice alone means that nuances overlooked when you can see the client, and are attending more to their body language, get noticed and can be responded to.

Another aspect of counselling online is the creativity it provides. The client may choose to share a poem, a music video or a picture they have drawn; or they may choose to draw in the session, using online tools and screen share, or work with the counsellor using an online sand tray. All these enable the counsellor to get to know the client in a variety of ways, often experiencing aspects, or sides, of the client that they don't express during in-person connections.

Is supervision any different with online counselling?

Absolutely. An online-trained supervisor will be able to conduct supervision through the media in which the counsellor is working. This enables the supervisor to get a sense of how the counsellor communicates in this medium, as well as understanding how to pick up on the underlying feelings, meanings and themes, potential boundary issues and how to support the counsellor to assess, monitor and work with risk online.

Are there self-care issues that counsellors should consider compared with face-to-face work?

Certainly. I am passionate about the importance of self-care, especially when working online, as the focus

on the screen, attending closely to the limited visual cues, the voice or written words alone, takes more energy. So, it is vital to ensure that you give yourself enough time in between clients to take a screen break as well as to write notes and answer emails.

Everyone will have a medium that they find takes more energy than others (for me, this is audio, as I am a visual person and it takes more effort for me to use just my hearing), so ensure that you plan ahead to give yourself a rest after these sessions. One advantage of working online is that you can support yourself during a stressful or challenging session, such as having a grounding object on your lap or in front you. With the limited view of video, or no view in text-based sessions, the client will not see any of this, while it can offer support or even a sense of protection when intense emotions are being expressed. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Sarah Worley-James is a BACP senior accredited counsellor, supervisor and trainer with 25 years' experience in the public, private and third sectors. She is former Chair of ACTO and is Interim Counselling Service Manager at Cardiff University. Sarah is also a senior tutor at the Academy for Online Therapy, and author of *Online Counselling – an essential guide*.¹

➔ www.sarahworleyjames.life

➔ Sarah can be contacted by email at worleys71@gmail.com

REFERENCE

1. Worley-James S. *Online counselling – an essential guide*. Monmouth: PCCS Books; 2022.