# WORKING ONLINE:
## DIVING INTO CYBERSPACE – IS IT FOR US?

In the first of a new four-part series, **Sarah Worley-James**, from Cardiff University, examines the role of technology in providing a timely, accessible and student-friendly counselling service

When I talk to counsellors about why I work online with clients, I'm often met with a positive first response: 'Oh yes, I can see how you can reach out to students who are abroad, or studying degrees which have very full days, or placements.' Swiftly followed by two key questions: 'How can you possibly create relational depth without eye contact or reading body language?' and '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 particularly curious about both these questions.

Now, as a senior counsellor at Cardiff University, creator and co-ordinator of the online counselling service, I work online with clients and supervisees every day. Our service provides email, instant messaging (IM) and webcam sessions, with the flexibility to move between these different media. In this series of articles, I'll be sharing my reflections, insights and experiences about setting up an online therapeutic service within an educational setting, exploring how to transfer existing skills and theoretical approach to working online and discussing the use of websites and phone apps in therapy. In this article I'm going to focus on examining why you might want to consider working online in an educational setting, and address some concerns that you might have. Some of you may already provide online counselling to your students, while others may be curious, ambivalent, or even sceptical.

When I joined the team at Cardiff University, I noticed that while we counselled in a traditional, face-to-face way, the approach within the service (the Cardiff Model) was extremely innovative. Seeing that the service was open to creativity and new ways of working gave me confidence to approach my new boss and suggest we explore ways to work online with our students. My immediate thoughts had centred on recognising that our students are of a generation that has grown up with the internet and mobile phones. In the 21st century young people's preferred means of communication is via a range of ever changing online platforms and phone apps. They have grown up with technology that allows them to instantly, and cheaply, communicate with their peers. As these forms of communication become more mainstream, it is reasonable for them to expect to be able to contact and work with professionals online in a similar way. Indeed, there are new websites and apps continuously being developed, specifically to provide support and help to people struggling with their mental health.

### Barriers to accessing office-based appointments

Following on from these thoughts, I began to consider groups of students who were being left unsupported by the constraints of a service provided from a static building during standard office hours.

The obvious example was language students, studying abroad. I was struck by how isolated they could be, away for months at a time from familiar places and culture, and geographically distanced from their support networks. It felt unethical, in an age where technology is allowing us to connect instantly with anyone in the world (provided they have an internet connection), to not be providing them with support equal to that for students physically present in Cardiff.

I also considered reasons why a student may not have time to attend a face-to-face appointment during office hours. These include having caring responsibilities, particularly relevant for mature students, who may have children and elderly relatives to support. In addition, many students these days have part-time jobs, often involving a significant number of hours, leaving very little time to get to appointments.

Along with geographic distance and lack of time, cultural differences and health issues may create barriers for a student accessing our service. For example, being a white female, I have always been conscious of the cultural differences between myself and Asian male students, and how this can, for some, inhibit disclosure of vulnerable feelings. I've worked with many students over the years and have often found that cultural issues, combined with gender expectations, can inhibit exploration of deeper, more important issues. And I've also had the experience, from time to time, of working online with clients who I had previously met face to face, and seeing those deeper issues emerge quite quickly. The anonymity of communicating by email or instant messenger creates the online disinhibition effect, allowing some clients to explore sensitive topics without those cultural/gender issues intruding and limiting their freedom to do so.[1]

### Benefits of online provision

As the online service at Cardiff University developed over the years, it grew to include an online wellbeing team, and a telephone service (using an online platform to avoid huge bills). Over this period, it has become apparent that other groups of students also benefit from being able to access counselling and wellbeing sessions online. For example, some students on the autistic spectrum find the noisy, bright, intense sensory experience of entering a busy student support centre stressful and difficult to cope with. This may deter them from asking for our support, or if they do, they may come to the session in a heightened state of anxiety. The environmental stressors of a busy building can also negatively affect students with mental health problems such as social anxiety, creating a barrier to them accessing our service.

In addition, creating an online counselling and wellbeing service supports widening access, and students from vulnerable groups, such as students who are care leavers. Due to financial pressures, they may be working alongside studying, and have little time to access the service in office hours.

A lack of male engagement is a concern for many student support services, and I find male students often find it feels safer and more comfortable opening up online. The cultural pressures to 'man up', and 'get on with it' are inhibiting and can often create a high barrier to overcome when seeking support. The anonymity of asking for, and accepting, support online can help overcome this barrier, and there are specific mental health websites aimed at men, offering guidance and support in a language and style that men recognise and relate to, such as thecalmzone.net.

I have worked with transgender students who are used to accessing support online in order to seek validation and acceptance through online forums. They may feel safe to be themselves in the virtual world, when face-to-face relationships can be fraught with uncertainty about the other person's hidden opinion and feelings towards the transgender student. Issues of trust are naturally a key theme for many clients, and for transgender clients, this can be experienced as a result of not having their gender identity accepted, or being judged as 'going through a phase'. The anonymity of online sessions enables trust to build more quickly as there is no visual body language to be misinterpreted or scrutinised for hints of judgment. In face-to-face work, and only knowing a transgender client's birth name, I am forced to use that when collecting them from the waiting room for an appointment. Only afterwards am I able to clarify what name and pronoun they would prefer me to use. By contrast, at the beginning of a first IM session with a transgender client, I am immediately able to ask what they would like to be called. Clients often

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express how helpful and respectful they find it to be asked this at the start of the session.

## Online contact: how 'real' can it be?

As you can see, the effects of online disinhibition can be hugely beneficial and therapeutic for many clients. This leads me to ponder a question I mentioned at the beginning of this article, one that often arises when I talk to counsellors who do not, as yet, work online: '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 somehow in denial of their true feelings. As a counsellor, 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. 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.

Being mindful of this, I am struck again and again by how quickly clients open up online, and how effective the online therapeutic relationship can be.[2,3] The fear of seeing an expression, however fleeting, on the counsellor's face that can be interpreted as judgment is reduced when working via IM or email. The distraction of wondering about the counsellor's views, beliefs and life, taken from clues in their dress, physical appearance, accent and body language, fade into the background. This allows the client to remain more focused on their own experience, reactions, feelings and thoughts.

## Working with risk online

This removal of visual aspects with clients can lead to a concern for some counsellors about working with risk online. One of the main reasons for offering an online service to students is to support those who are off campus. I was clear when setting up the service, that if we declined to offer online support to those students who were at risk, we were in fact increasing their risk. I believe that, using my experience and skills, it is possible to effectively support students who disclose risky behaviour or thinking.[4] There is a wide range of supportive websites and apps (which I will explore in detail in a future article) which can offer the student 24-hour support (provided they have an internet connection, of course). The flexibility of providing IM and webcam sessions, as well as email, enables you to encourage the client to move between

these media, so you can get a sense of their risk from different perspectives. If an email or IM client is describing increased risk, we will often invite them to have a webcam session so we can add the visual cues to what we know about them. It's also worth remembering that clients may actually be more open in sharing suicidal thoughts, and exploring them, from the anonymity of an IM or email session.

A written safety plan can be of help to a client struggling to cope with suicidal thoughts, and can easily be completed as part of an online session. The counsellor can send it to them during, or after the session, and it's possible to have fruitful discussions about this plan as part of the online session. Indeed, having written coping strategies as part of an email or IM session, gives the client something to refer back to. While a handout or link to supportive websites can be very helpful, seeing the strategy written as part of an ongoing dialogue, creates a connection to it. The discussion and subsequent tailoring of the strategy to that student's needs leaves a clear account they can return to later for clarification and encouragement. In addition, for a client to see their own words describing resilience, and recognising and acknowledging their coping mechanisms, can help cement these. In the future they can look back and chart their progress, reflecting on the journey they have, and are, undertaking.[5]

> **IF WE DECLINED TO OFFER ONLINE SUPPORT TO THOSE STUDENTS WHO WERE AT RISK, WE WERE IN FACT INCREASING THEIR RISK**

## Preparing for technological problems

A final concern that is important to consider is the inevitable arising of technical difficulties.[6] With a supportive IT department and clear information to clients about what will happen if the technology fails, these can be dealt with. Misunderstandings and problems arise in even the best-run service: staff sickness means appointments have to be rearranged; the wrong appointment time is given, or remembered, and students go to the wrong office. No service is 100 per cent perfect. Students understand that occasionally the internet connection may drop out, or that software has problems. But having guidelines and alternative means of communicating keeps expectations clear and frustration to a minimum.

Flexibility, openness and courage are keys to designing and offering an effective online service. Being flexible to explore and embrace new software and ways of communicating online maintains a creativity and openness to meet the needs of all your students. Being open to move between different media focuses on your client's needs and circumstances, as opposed to focusing on what may be more conveniently managed by a service. I believe that offering therapy online is a step that hugely enhances the ability of university and college counselling and wellbeing services to provide timely and effective support to all their students. It is also a creative and fascinating way to work. ●

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