

An Example of Brief Email Therapy  
Client Marcia: Counsellor Chris

**Client Email 1**

Hi,

I don't know anything about this e-counselling but I came across your website so I thought I'd give it a try. I'm not feeling good at the moment. I've had panic attacks for the past two years, my GP put me on an antidepressant which helped to begin with then last November I thought I'd come off them as I was feeling better and hadn't had an attack since August. But I had a big panic attack just before Christmas and I'm very low again. I went back to the GP and he put me back on the pills. It's helped a bit but I'm depressed and really scared I might have another attack. I didn't really enjoy Christmas at all.

Do you think you can help me?

Hoping you can help and thanks for reading this

Marcia

**Counsellor's Response 1**

Dear Marcia,

Thank you for your email. It sounds as if you have had a difficult time over Christmas, and are worried about another panic attack. E-counselling would be a way of helping you to look at the panic attacks, to think about strategies for coping with them if they happen again, and also may be seeing if we could work out possible triggers.

Before we start to work together, it's important that you know something about the process, and whether you feel that I am the right counselor for you. I am going to attach a contract to this email, so you know what is involved, and also perhaps you would like to ask me any questions that occur to you - I know you've looked at my website, so you have some idea about me, but there may be other things.

If you think you might like to start counselling with me, could I ask you to think about these questions - which may seem a little odd to you! However, I hope it will help us to get going.

If you had to put a number on to how you feel at the moment, with 0 being as low as you have ever felt, and 10 being as good as you have ever felt, what would that number be?

Once you have done that, could you think about what would help to make it 0.5 higher?

I look forward to hearing from you again.

Best wishes

Chris

**Contract for Counselling with Chris**

Thank you for contacting me. So that you know a bit about the way our work together might happen, I have put together some information below. Please do ask about anything that either is not clear or which I have omitted to mention.

I am a registered practitioner with the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, and work to their Ethical Framework. You may be interested to know more about this and can find it on their website at [www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk) You can also find out more about my background on [www.....](http://www.....)

I suggest that initially we agree to work together for four weeks. During that time you can send me as many emails as you wish, although I can only guarantee to respond to them within a 72 hour period. That means that if you send several close together, you may find that I reply to them all in one email. I will email you an acknowledgement that I have received them. It would also be useful if you would also acknowledge my emails, then we know that the technology is working. If you wish to extend our contract at the end of four weeks, we can discuss whether you would like to contract for another four weeks, or make it more open ended.

The fees are £xx per email exchange, or £zz per live chat session (up to one hour). You can pay me by cheque, or if you wish by PayPal, which is an internet payment system.

The content of our work together is confidential, within these exceptions. The first is that all counsellors in the UK are in regular confidential supervision, where we discuss our work to ensure that we are working in the most effective way to enable our clients to reach their goals. Secondly, if I believe that you are at risk, or putting others at risk, I might need to break confidentiality.

Working online means that there are occasionally technology problems. If you are unable to get online, you may wish to leave me a telephone message on ..... (This is a UK phonenumber - if you are outside the UK, you will need to use the international code for the UK). You may want to give me a means of contacting you if I cannot get online. If I do not hear from you with 48 hours of sending you an email, I will resend it, in case there has been a problem. If I then do not hear from you, I will assume that you do not wish to continue working with me. However, if at any point during our work together, you decide that you wish to end our contract, I would very much appreciate it if you would let me know this.

As an alternative to email exchanges, we are able to use weekly MSN Messenger to talk in 'real time' if you wish to do so. Sessions would be up to an hour long. This is something we can discuss together in our emails.

When you have read this contract, and clarified any points, please send the form below back to me by email.

I am looking forward to working with you.

## Client Email 2

Hi Chris,

Thanks for getting back to me, you sound as though you know what you're talking about so I'm happy to give it a go. I've looked at the contract and the website and I don't think I've got any questions at the moment.

I was relieved that you asked what I had done so far, I did wonder if you'd be just like a lot of other websites about panic attacks, offering me a program to follow or a book or a tape to buy. I've been on the internet a lot in the last couple of years, looking at websites about panic attacks. Some of them just seem to be after money. I've tried most of the things they suggest - like breathing into a paper bag and taking slow breaths in and out. Frankly they don't seem to make a lot of difference to whether I have an attack or not - but they can sometimes help me not to go into a full-blown attack if I catch myself early enough. And to answer your first question no, my doctor didn't tell me anything but she has suggested I could go into the surgery and do a cognitive programme on their computer when it arrives! I

might do that. Do you know about that program? What's it going to do for me that you can't?

Just so you know a bit more about me I'm sending a few details as an attachment to this email. I hope the information is useful. Please ask me anything else you want to know.

Now, to answer your question about how I feel, well on the scale you mention I think I'm about at a 3 at the moment - not quite rock bottom but close to it. I think it's because I've started to do something about it so I feel a bit better than I did last week. I've thought a lot about what would help to get to a 3.5 and I think it would help if I worried less about having another attack. I don't really know how I'm going to do this (I think about panic attacks most of the time really) I'm trying so hard to avoid another attack at the moment I'm not really myself at all. I haven't been out anywhere except to work and back, not swimming or playing squash (said I had a cold when Jean phoned to see where I was) I didn't want to say I'd play and then not be able to. I've always hated supermarkets - I feel trapped when I'm inside so Brian's doing the food shopping. He's very cheerful about it all, tells me it'll soon pass and I'll be myself again soon. I'm very lucky.

Well I think that's about all for now. I liked your idea that I could write to you when I want.

Marcia

#### ABOUT ME - BY MARCIA

**AGE:** 42 Short, petite, slim, weight and health conscious

**MARRIED TO:** BRIAN - works in security. Known each other since school days (in London) going out together since age 17. Marriage is good. Brian's done his job for past 12 years (ever since move to Milton Keynes).

**CHILDREN:** No children - I don't want to go through childbirth - I was difficult delivery (mother says) and I've been told I've got narrow hips and would need a caesarean. Brian is happy with this. We have money to spend on house and holidays which would otherwise be spent on children.

**JOB:** Supervisor, managing web pages for an internet company (like Amazon but selling products). Been here 4 years (2 as supervisor). Work is OK but pressurised from time to time. Dislikes current boss (arrived a year ago) he doesn't know as much as I do and can be very critical.

**BODY IMAGE:** Health conscious - I swim or play squash 2 x week with group of friends, take long walks with dog and occasional cycle rides with another girlfriend. I enjoy swimming, gardening, walking our dog (called Phobe - from Battersea Dog's Home - an abandoned mongrel).

**FRIENDS:** Best friend Barbara - since school days. Barbara lives in London and we only meet occasionally now but when we do it's as if we've never stopped meeting. Another school friend, Angela, has moved to Liverpool and we keep in contact by email and phone now. Some friends (in particular, Jean) in MK but not as close as Barbara and Angela.

**PRESENTING ISSUE:** Has *had panic attacks for the past two years*, most recently last month. Feels trapped by commitments which she doesn't want to fulfil (e.g. last month agreed to join best friend BARBARA on a week's holiday in France next summer, doing a cookery course) - doesn't want to tie herself down to this commitment but feels obliged to go along with developing plans in case it's OK or in case Barbara can't find another person to take along. (second e.g. felt committed to going to girls night out Christmas 'do' from squash group even though it clashed with Brian being at home and she didn't enjoy it.) *Was coming off a/ds last August but bad attack just before Christmas - back on pills but scared of another attack.*

### **Counsellor's Response 2**

Hello again Marcia,

Thank you for your email. I really appreciated the details you sent me as an attachment. That feels useful to have as background - gives me a bit more of an insight.

It's important for us to build on what you have already done - looking at what worked and what didn't. It sounds as if you have developed techniques based on information you've acquired for avoiding attacks becoming full blown, but still want/need to find ways of 'catching them before they start'. I wonder if you know the name of the programme your GP is getting in the surgery. It may be worth while you doing it and possibly discussing it here. You asked what it could do that you can't do with me - may be we could turn that on its head. What could the three of us (you, me and the programme) do together? What we can do that the programme may not be able to do by itself, is follow up specific things which come out of it for you.

Thinking about the 3 on the scale, and how to move to 3.5, again, I am going to ask you some questions which may seem unusual! First of all, how come you are managing to be on a 3 - what are you doing, or thinking, or saying which stops you being lower down the scale? Could you do more of those things?

You write that worrying less about having an attack, would help you get to a 3.5. Two things to think about here. Have there been times when you have worried less? How did you manage that, and may be what else were you doing instead? The other thing is may be to be curious about what would happen if you did see Jean and play squash, or go swimming by yourself or with someone. Perhaps conduct an experiment on yourself - it doesn't matter if you succeed or not with doing it, as the data you obtain about what it was like to try it, will be useful to us.

It sounds as if you both appreciate Brian's support, and may be wish he didn't have to give it. Have I read that right, I wonder. Are you able to tell me a bit more about hating supermarkets and feeling trapped?

I realise that I have asked a lot of questions - it may feel like too many. If so, only answer the ones which seem relevant to you and ignore the rest.

I look forward to hearing from you again when you want to write.  
Warm wishes  
Chris

### Client Email 3

Hi Chris,

It's me again. Thanks for your email I really like the idea of trying to work this thing out together. The GP said the program hadn't come to the surgery yet so I don't know what it's called just that I go to the surgery weekly and sit at their computer and do the program.

I'm feeling down today - on a 2. I've gone and done it again committed myself to doing something I don't want to do. It happens time and time again I get all enthusiastic about something and sooner or later I find myself trapped into arrangements I don't want to keep but can't let the other person down. I've agreed to go on a cycling holiday with Jean next month. I can't back out now, she's booked everything up and she's looking forward to it. But I don't want to go - I don't want to be that close to Jean for a week it'd be too much. I don't like people getting too close to me. Is that normal? I've always felt like that. I'm happiest in a group when I can join in or not as I choose. I don't want to be with just one other person for a whole week! Last year we were going to go to Cornwall on a painting holiday and I felt trapped again. I couldn't put her off but in the end my anxiety got so bad we didn't go (I couldn't leave the house and pretended I had flu). I wish there was some way I could stop getting trapped by plans they seem a good idea at the time, then as I think more about them I realise I'm committed to something I don't think is a good idea and I feel trapped. I can't let people down.

Jean's beginning to get on my nerves now, she's phoning me up wanting to come round for a coffee or inviting me to hers. I want some space on my own and I don't always want to be with her (I've put her off so far, said I'm not feeling too good). She knows that I don't like seeing the same person too often (she's known me for a long time) so why is she forcing herself on me now? It's bad enough seeing her twice a week for bike rides (training for this holiday). I've put one of them off this week but I guess I'll have to go with her next week.

I'm worried that I won't be able to enjoy this holiday because I'll be trapped with Jean and our bikes in some strange place with no way out until the holiday ends. That's a very scary thought! Just writing about it is making my breathing go all fast. I'm going to take a break here and do some relaxation.

Sorry this didn't really answer your questions  
Marcia

### Counsellor's Response 3

Dear Marcia,

Thanks for sending me your email. Don't worry about whether you answer the questions or not! This is your time and space, and we can use it as seems best for you. Always feel free to write whatever you need to at any time.

The description of the reasons for going to a two were very clear and useful - well done for being able to get that into the email. (Hope that doesn't sound patronising - it's difficult to know how it will sound when someone else is reading it.) Any sense of what you did which stopped you dropping to a one? If you have - how could you do more of that?

It feels as if there are possibly two different areas to look at this situation - the first is to work out if there are any ways you can make the cycling holiday feel any more possible for you, or find a way of not going. The second is to think about ways of enabling you to avoid getting into this kind of trapped position.

Can I begin with the second one? You write that you get all enthusiastic about things, then find that you are trapped into something that you don't want to do. Just wondering whether it would be helpful if you could get into the habit of 'buying yourself time' when something is suggested. If I suggest one way of doing that, may be when you write back you could add some more ideas, then you can evaluate them all and decide which ones would work for you - we are all different and there is no one right way.

Some people find it helpful to avoid saying yes or no immediately when they are asked to do something. They use expressions like 'I'm not sure at the moment about my commitments; let me get back to you'. Or 'I'd like some time to think this over and decide whether it's something I want to do/take on. ' Then they reflect on what *they* would like to do, perhaps making a list of pros and cons, and then give an answer, taking all the time they need.

Thinking about the cycling holiday next month, you say Jean has booked it all up. What would happen if it was cancelled both financially, and inside you... what would you feel? If we find out first what the worst thing that could happen is, then you can think about how to manage the time if it is not possible to get out of it. I don't want to give you suggestions or advice, as if something is going to work it has to come from you, so again, could you add to this first idea when you reply, then they can all be evaluated. The thought that came into my head was perhaps to include other people as you say that you are happiest in a group. Looking forward to reading the ideas you add on here!

What really struck me as I read your email was that sense of being trapped. It sounds suffocating for you, and quite scary. And it is absolutely OK to want time to yourself, or to be with other people than Jean. I am sure you know that but it can perhaps be easy to lose sight of that when feeling trapped? Are you able to tell me more about 'trapped'? May be give the sensation a kind of personality - what would it look like? What would it be saying to you? What would it want from you or from someone else? These may sound like bonkers questions but sometimes thinking outside our normal ways can be helpful.

I'm looking forward to hearing back from you when you are ready. As always, just respond to what feels helpful to you.

With warm wishes  
Chris

**Client Email 4**

Hi Chris,

Thanks for your email. I've only just now got round to reading it - been very busy at work. I think I can answer some of your questions this time so I'll start with what stops me going even lower to a number 1 - well that's easy - it's the pills that stop me, they sort of take over and don't let me get too low now. It's hard to describe but I get so far and then I feel the pills kicking in and I sort of even out. I can't really explain it. But they don't stop me getting trapped into plans I don't want and you're right, it is scary when it keeps on happening to me. Why do I say Yes - I ask myself over and over but I never find the answer. But thanks for your idea of delaying until I've had time to think it over more carefully. I think that might have worked with Jean - although I'd have to think of a way of saying I didn't want to go on a bike holiday with her EVER or she'd just suggest another date or leave it for a while, then try again. That's the bit I can't seem to get across - when I say No, it means NEVER, not just that the dates are wrong. What am I getting wrong?

When I think about being trapped my worst fear is that I'll lose that person (say, Jean) as my friend but also there's another fear inside me which I think comes from my mother (she never went outside on her own all my childhood and probably before as well). She always hated anyone coming to the door and would send me to answer it if I was around. Sometimes I knew she was stood quietly in the kitchen, pretending she wasn't in and she'd wait there without moving until the person went away. I do something like that, too, especially when I'm at home of an evening. If Brian's out (he works away a lot, did I say?) and I'm not expecting anyone I don't want to answer the door so I'll hide behind the kitchen door out of sight until the person goes away. My firends all know they should phone me before coming round. I don't like anyone dropping in casually. Does that make sense?

Anyway, I'm going to think about not agreeing to a plan immediately from now on. I could say 'give me a week to think about it' or something like that, then I'd have time to think up a way of refusing. I think I'll just have to go on the bike holiday, I can't see a way round it at the moment, we would both lose money if we cancelled now and Jean is looking forward to it (she's not in a relationship at the moment, so I know this trip means a lot to her). I might suggest we try and find someone else to come along as well (that would help me not to feel I'm on my own with Jean for a week) but it's probably too late for this holiday but I could try and build it into future plans.

Thanks for listening

Marcia

### **Counsellor's Holding Response**

**Dear Marcia,**

**Thank you for your email. It sounds as if you are really pleased with what you have been achieving recently - well done! I will reply more fully within 48 hours, but just wanted you to know that I am sitting here beaming as I read your email.**

**Warm wishes**

**Chris**

### **Counsellor's Response 4**

**Dear Marcia,**

As I said in my 'acknowledgment' email, it felt really good to read that you had got to a six or seven. It sounds as if you have been practising taking control of parts of your life and your responses, which is brilliant. Has anyone around you noticed the difference yet? It may be that because your husband works away a lot, you are the only one at the moment (apart from me!) who knows that you are operating differently.

I hope this next bit doesn't sound like a 'downer' - it's not meant to be that. Sometimes when we are doing very well, we can then have a blip, when things seem to slide back to where they were. This may not happen to you, but I thought I'd just mention it, in case it does, so that you know that this is perfectly normal, and doesn't mean that you have somehow failed. All it is, is a temporary dip, and what you need to do then is to remind yourself that you have been operating from a higher place on the scale and you can reach that again. You would need to think about the things which had got you to a six or seven before and do more of them. Hope that hasn't made you feel gloomy!

It sounds great that you have given your mum back her fears, so to speak. It is a pity for her that she was not able to do the same in understanding that they probably came from her mum to her. I wonder how many generations they go back over? And you have broken the chain - wonderful news.

It's absolutely fine to keep in touch for longer. I sense that you will know when it is time to stop, and it seems wise to give the idea of checking the scale a bit of time to bed in. It's possible that you are developing some techniques of your own now for moving even further forward. If you are, I'd be really interested to hear about them.

With warm wishes

Chris

### Client Email 5

Hi Chris,

Thanks for your email. Sorry I took so long replying, had a bit of a time with my computer connection. Hope you get this OK. I do feel better and in spite of what you say, I haven't had a blip yet - been very clear about lots of things now. I am beginning to say No to things at work as well as 'I'll think about it and let you know' - that's really helped.

Thanks, for when you said I had taken on my mother's worries, that was one of the best things about this counselling for me. Too right, I had! I realise that now and every time I catch myself thinking about hiding away I say 'that's what Mum would have done' and it's magic - I snap out of it straight away and act like a grown up instead of a scared child. And guess what, Brian said I was different yesterday - said I looked different but he couldn't quite work out what it was. I told him I was feeling good inside and told him about you and the counselling. He thought it was a good idea. I think it was, too.

There's nothing new to report this time, so I guess I'd like to leave it until I get a blip, then come back to you - is that OK?

Thanks for all the help,

Marcia

### Counsellor's Response 5

Dear Marcia,

I was delighted to get your email and hear that things are going well for you. It sounds as if you have really taken hold of the strategies and are making them work for you. Brilliant! It is also really affirming when someone else notices as well, isn't it? Glad Brian thought that things seemed different too.

It is fine to leave our contact there. I have enjoyed working with you, and as you say, you know how to contact me in the future, both if you want to celebrate how well things are going or if you decide that a bit more work is needed on something.

I wonder if I could ask you to do one more thing? I like to get some feedback on the work I've done with people, so I wonder if you would be kind enough to fill in the attached form and email it back to me. It helps me to continue to learn from clients' experience. Thanks

With best wishes

Chris

*It would help my work with you to know how you feel our work together has gone. I have asked you 3 questions below and ask you to hit the reply button and answer them*

1. a) Put an X by the number which best describes your mood when we first started work

☹ 2 x 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 ☺

- b) Put an X by the number which best describes your mood at this moment

☹ 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 x 9 ☺

2. Please describe what has made the difference either upwards or downwards

realising I had burdened myself with my mother's worries  
learning to delay committing myself

3. What did I write that encouraged or discouraged this?

Suggesting I could say I would think about something and give them an answer later  
Also that I could give my mother back her anxieties - that really struck home, I hadn't thought I had a choice in the matter before.

Thank you

Chris