

ONLINE COUNSELLING – OLD SKILLS IN A NEW ENVIRONMENT



Online counselling is receiving “increasingly optimistic” acceptance in the UK (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy official view) but doubts are still expressed about the effectiveness of a relationship based only on text¹. One of the concerns is whether counsellors can work effectively without the cues they might use in a face to face setting. An online relationship which lacks the richness of such cues may be an impoverished therapeutic relationship and “a less ‘alive’ working alliance” (Wright, 2002, p289). Students taking part in an online roleplay on a training course for experienced counsellors did not find impoverishment in their working alliances despite never meeting in person. The two quotations below are taken from students on different courses and reflect their views of this experience.

“I am realising just how powerful online counselling can be when it is undertaken in a careful, well thought out and professional way. Perhaps it is because it is more focused and with less distractions than face2face counselling.” (Student feedback Dec. 2001

“What I am learning ... is that relating qualities are magnified - good become very good and not so good becomes bad. This is curious as it seems people (who I speak to about this course) assume that it will be the opposite - that there will be less emotional content. There is more - more polarised content and therefore harder to read accurately.” (Student, weekly journal, Nov. 2003)

This article explores how missing cues, magnification, polarisation of the content and other factors peculiar to the internet could inhibit an online therapeutic alliance.

Online counsellors work without visual cues (presentation, manner, body language,); oral cues (tone of voice, inflection,); or aural cues which add emphasis (variations in the pace and flow of speech, hesitations and silences). This article proposes that in offering the core conditions developed by Carl Rogers during the early part of the twentieth century of acceptance, congruence and empathy, online counsellors encourage substitutes for the missing cues and improve the effectiveness of the online working alliance. Thorne (1992) states:

“It was Rogers’ contention...that if the therapist proves able to offer a facilitative climate where congruence, acceptance and empathy are all present and the client perceives this to be so at some minimal level, then therapeutic movement will occur.” (p.39).

The first condition considered here is acceptance, sometimes called unconditional positive regard, respect or esteem. Acceptance online is created and maintained through the counsellor’s careful attention and valuing of the words the client uses. Agreement about meaning online is

¹ Online counselling also includes audio and video conferencing as well as synchronous text communication in a chatroom but this paper confines itself to online communication using email as this appears to be the preferred medium (at least initially) by clients.

very important, as changes and magnification of meaning are possible. Asynchronous counselling (time-lapse counselling by email) allows time for the text to be read and re-read by both counsellor and client. This can be both a benefit and a drawback. Both counsellor and client benefit from the opportunity to re-read what is being said, the words are the vehicle for the counselling and can be focused on without other distractions. However, re-reading text also allows for changes in meaning. An online counsellor will try and prepare their client for such changes and could write, for example, "...my first reaction was to wonder why you weren't angry (I was feeling angry on your behalf as I was reading) but when I re-read it I wondered if you were feeling guilty rather than angry. Is it useful to explore this further?" Here, the counsellor is building a working alliance with their client to include different meanings. As well as changes, the meaning can become magnified when read and re-read. This magnification is enhanced because the words are printed text (they remind the reader of the authority of other printed matter such as a book) and the text flows continuously (authoritatively) without the pauses and hesitations of normal speech. Magnification can distort the meaning and undermine the working alliance when client and counsellor do not appear to understand each other. An online counsellor who promotes acceptance can prepare the client for distortions through misunderstanding. For example, the counsellor can write "I hope I've understood you here, please correct me if I'm wrong. It helps our work if you tell me when I have misunderstood something". There is a secondary gain for the client if they take up the counsellor's invitation to correct the meaning. Here is another opportunity to process their story (perhaps re-writing parts of it in their next email). Writing and re-writing tasks are used in other forms of written therapy (Bolton, 1999, White and Epston, 1990) and lends itself usefully to online therapy.

Another (relatively simple) way in which the online counsellor can promote acceptance is by respectfully using the client's words and language, including their mis-spellings if this is helpful and/or appropriate. Online counsellors who rely on a spell checker to check their work before sending, may find this more difficult to accomplish.

There is increased potential for magnification and polarisation of content through misunderstanding when challenging a client online and is best achieved within an accepting environment. A counsellor working online might want to prepare their client for a challenge: "I would like to challenge something with you here but before I do I hope you will remember that you have choices about what you do with it. You can ignore it completely, or tell me how it makes you feel, or address the challenge." Highlighting the challenge and the client's possible choices helps to minimise distortions the client might read into the challenge.

The second core condition is congruence or genuineness and in some theories is also called countertransference. Offering genuineness online can be done in different ways. Murphy and Mitchell, (1998) suggest that the counsellor's feelings can be put in brackets in the text. They call this emotional bracketing, for example the counsellor might write "...the gap in our emails when you didn't respond (concerned, worried) left me wondering about your silence..." Murphy and Mitchell also suggest counsellors put descriptions of their feelings into a context for example "When I read the last sentence of your email you would have seen my face break into a big smile if you had been sitting opposite me. I was so happy that you had written those words." Other ways in which the counsellor can express their feelings towards their client include the textual graphics known as emoticons. These are popular among internet users and have been described in several papers (Fenichel et al. 2002, Suler 1998). The most frequently used ones look like this :-), (smile) ;-), (wink) :-(, (sad). Not all clients like emoticons however and the online counsellor needs to be aware of this but they can be an effective way of building an online relationship enlivening the text, enhancing meaning and developing a shared language which is personal to the participants.

In "Myths and Realities of Online Clinical Work" Fenichel et al (2002) describe the impact these textual symbols can have:-

“Experienced e-mail users have developed a variety of keyboard techniques to overcome some of the limitations of typed text - techniques that almost lend a vocal and kinesthetic quality to the message. Use of “smileys” and other commonly used symbols can convey not only facial expression but also a variety of emotional nuances.”

A colleague describes her use of emoticons in her work as an online therapist:-

“...with clients, I find that even the basic smiley and winkie go a long way toward preventing misunderstandings and establishing and maintaining a positive therapeutic relationship.” (E. Zelvin, www.lzcybershrink.com personal communication 7/10/03)

Groups of people who meet online can create and use an almost private symbolic language. Suler, J (1998) calls this private language ‘creative keyboarding’. It enlivens the text in the same way as emoticons and acronyms. The example below occurred when a group of counsellors training to work online were in a website conference room waiting for their weekly discussion group to start.

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<M> Hi everyboddy, i've god a cod  
<S> Hi M  
<B> Need a box of tissues M????????????????? Take one from this one [ ]  
<M> vebby clebber B  
<V> aaaaattttiiiisssshhhhhooooooooo
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One factor which is present in online relationships and can interfere with genuineness is online disinhibition. This phenomenon is described by John Suler (Suler, 2001). He describes how the anonymity of the internet, coupled with time-lapse communication, speed of communication and similar variables peculiar to the online environment can contribute to some people changing their personality online. They show a variant of their face to face personalities which is more extreme.

“People with histrionic styles tend to be very open and emotional. Compulsive people are more restrained. The online disinhibition effect will interact with these personality variables, in some cases resulting in a small deviation from the person's baseline (offline) behavior, while in other cases causing dramatic changes.” Suler, J, (2001)

In order to recognise and understand online disinhibition in their clients, online counsellors can examine how online disinhibition affects them. Some experienced counsellors who were newcomers to the online environment found they were dealing with a form of online disinhibition as they began an online training course which took place in their own home, at their own computer. The features of working in this environment which seemed to affect them most are described by Keisler cited in Joinson (2003, p.74) a lack feedback from face to face cues, social anonymity which depersonalised the interactions and lack of status and position cues (“when is it my turn to speak/reply/send an email, etc.”) They experienced a lack of confidence which left them feeling de-skilled and socially isolated. The strong feelings subsided as they accommodated to the environment and became comfortable and familiar communicating through text, making relationships with people whom they did not see or hear and managing internet technology. Familiarity with the environment permits genuineness online and allows counsellors to discover their ‘online voice’.

The third basic condition is empathy. Basic feelings are expressed in the text online or by using emotional bracketing or emoticons or any of the ways described above. But what about the feelings which are an undercurrent to the client’s story and may not be part of the text? Can online counsellors pick these feelings up and respond to them?

Underlying (hidden) feelings can be expressed in different ways online some of which are familiar in face to face settings as well. For example, the tone of the writing may seem unrelated

to the content. Indeed, because the text is read and re-read these differences are easier to discover online than in the face to face environment and the counsellor may tentatively feed back to the client what they noticed. "I offer the following comment in case it is useful to you, please ignore it if you prefer. When I read your account of the death of your mother, I found myself thinking that it seemed rather distant and factual, like a report for a newspaper." Another way an online counsellor might explore underlying feelings is by considering how the client is presenting their email. Using capital letters LIKE THIS suggests the client is angry or shouting. Or trailer dots like this can suggest hesitation, difficulty finding the words, pause for thought or, when followed by a change in subject, it can suggest that the writer is uncomfortable focusing on the previous subject. Such differences are similar to noticing how a face to face client's appearance or body language may offer clues to the counsellor. Other clues contained in the text might be a sudden change of style in an otherwise carefully structured text. For example, a client might include a group of sentences where the words are mis-spelled, punctuation is missing or over-emphasised with !!! or ??? and the text doesn't flow in the usual way. The client could be in tears whilst they typed and an online counsellor may notice this and wish to respond empathically.

When responding to underlying feelings in the text however, it is important the online counsellor remains tentative about what they have noticed. The counsellor may not be accurate in their interpretation of the client's feelings (the client may have been interrupted whilst writing their email and finished it hurriedly, or they may have failed to notice that they had locked the shift key down if the text suddenly used capital letters). There is an even more important reason for remaining tentative if the online counsellor is working asynchronously. The time lapse between emails has to be taken into account. By the time the client reads the counsellor's response they will not necessarily be feeling as they did when they wrote and their mood may swing even further on reading an inappropriately worded empathic response from the counsellor. In order to avoid polarisation of meaning an online counsellor might construct a response to underlying feelings as follows "I noticed when I was reading your email that something seemed to be happening for you as you wrote it. Your writing style appeared to change when you reached the part about your father and I wondered if it was difficult for you to type the words? I may be quite wrong here (I'm sure you will tell me if I am) but if it is helpful, you might want to share your feelings about this in your next email." Here empathy is offered tentatively and again reminds the client they have a choice about whether they take it further or not.

There are other ways empathy can be expressed online, suggesting they include a picture or a link to a piece of music or a poem can encourage a client to express their feelings. A colleague who works for an online youth counselling service also mentions the use of song titles or titles for emails as useful ways of developing empathy online.

"Titles/headings of emails can be vital clues to clients' feelings and thus encourage empathy. I have a client who uses song titles to describe his moods which is a very powerful message and helps me get behind the words to the feelings. This is a selection from the last few weeks: Lonely This Christmas; The Fool on the Hill; You Can't Hurry Love; Self Doubt; Dreams Can Come True; Don't Worry Be Happy; Something Changed; Nowhere Man " Dilys Morgan, online counsellor, personal communication 07/01/2004

Online counsellors minimise distortions in meaning which threaten the working alliance by reading a client's email several times before replying. Before sending their reply counsellors can re-read the client's email again to see if their reply is still accurate and they can also check to see if they have been tentative in their understanding and reflections and reminded the client of their choices when replying. There is another benefit for the counsellor who is working online. If they feel uncertain about an email, Murphy and Mitchell suggest it is possible to consult with a supervisor or colleague before sending a reply. Careful reading and re-reading maximises the opportunity for a good working alliance, minimises the possibility of a misunderstanding and maximises the potential for the client to feel heard at a deep level.

This article has explored some of the benefits and drawbacks of working in a text-only environment. It has considered how online counsellors can minimise distortions to the online relationship and how they can utilise the benefits of working with text. It has also tried to show that in building the core conditions of acceptance, congruence and empathy not only is the online counsellor providing the necessary facilitating climate of unconditional positive regard and an effective online therapeutic alliance but they are also finding ways to substitute online variations of the non-verbal cues used in a face to face setting.

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