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Counselling Online In A Pandemic World – Emma West

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[September 28, 2020 < https://www.acto.org.uk/counselling-online-in-a-pandemic-world-emma-west/>](https://www.acto.org.uk/counselling-online-in-a-pandemic-world-emma-west/)



Emma West

Counselling Online In A Pandemic World



We are proud to present the blog post that won the blog competition.

There's no doubt that those trained in online counselling were ahead of the curve when we entered the eerie world of Covid-19 lockdown.

Suddenly face to face counsellors were struggling with the practicalities of working online – “What's Zoom?”, “How will my clients pay?”, “What's online disinhibition?”....

On top of sorting the practicalities they were also having to embrace the possibility that online counselling is actually just as

valid, and effective, as face to face work, if not more so for some people.

But there was no time for prolonged smugness on my part because when lockdown kicked in the private online practice I'd been building up took off and I had clients coming at me via ACTO, E-therapy, Psychology Today, and word of mouth too.

Whilst previously I'd always had space for new clients I was now in the new territory of working out how many clients I could feasibly 'see' each week.

It was actually quite a tricky conundrum because initially I found that a lot of people just wanted one session – they wanted to know that it wasn't just them that was struggling, they wanted to hear that other people were finding things difficult too. The issues of control, loss of routine, uncertainty, unpredictability abounded, but once their experience had been normalised they were happy to go it alone once more.

Some turned into OAAT [one at a time] clients, with weeks and sometimes months between sessions. They seemed to appreciate the ability to be able to reach out whenever they needed to.

There were also a number of people who grasped the opportunity of being at home and the flexibility of their working arrangements to give counselling a go – with threats of a mental health 'epidemic' hitting the headlines counselling was becoming even more acceptable, and online counselling was their only option.

Many were new to the idea of counselling so initial work was often around managing expectations – what did they think counselling

was – advice vs finding their own answers vs a magic wand?!

So how can counsellors adapt in this brave new world?

1. Decide what platform to use [then stick with it but review periodically]:

At the start of lockdown there was a LOT of online chat about trying to find the 'perfect' online counselling platform. I found myself getting very caught up in this, with fears of getting it 'wrong' and that eternal counsellor bugbear of not being 'good enough'. In the end I decided to put all the security I could in place and used Zoom.

2. Decide how many clients you can work with [then learn to say no]:

With clients coming at me from all directions I learnt to recognise when I had reached capacity. It wasn't easy turning people away but I would try to signpost them. I knew this would mean I could work effectively with the clients I had, and practice self care too.

3. Sell yourself:

When face to face counsellors 'moved' online the competition for clients skyrocketed. I found that when I updated my various profiles to say I had already done specialist online counselling training and had been practising solely as an online counsellor pre-lockdown that the number of enquiries I received increased. How can you make yourself stand out from the crowd?

4. Be flexible:

I realise that many counsellors need to know they have a regular income stream and this usually means seeing clients weekly on the same day at the same time.

I found that offering one-off, fortnightly, OAAT sessions and not stipulating that I'd need to see clients on the same day/time, enabled me to corner a market in terms of offering a flexible service to those who needed that flexibility. To be honest it was a bit of a gamble but strangely it works, and I've had a steady stream of bookings over the months.

5. Seek peer supervision [as well as your regular supervision]:

Coincidentally I set up a peer supervision arrangement with another ACTO member at the end of 2019. Having those monthly meetings together with online peer support through Facebook has been invaluable – it can be a lonely world counselling online. NB Pick your Facebook groups wisely and unjoin those that leave you feeling stressed and/or unsupported.

6. Normalise:

I think it is vital to normalise clients responses to the pandemic. Feeling anxious or low about potential threats to our health and the ever-changing limitations imposed upon us is perfectly normal. The big question is how can we effectively support clients to adjust, manage, and move forward?

7. Don't claim to be Harry Potter.

Emma West

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