

Overcoming the Absence of Tone and Non-Verbal Elements of Communication in Text-Based Cybercounselling

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Abstract: The use of e-mail for the delivery of counselling and therapeutic services is currently the most prevalent type of web-based intervention. For those working in this text-only medium, the need to compensate for the absence of tone and non-verbal elements of communication is obvious. What is less obvious are the skills and techniques necessary for overcoming this absence. The authors, founders of Worldwide Therapy Online Inc., the world's first online clinical practice, have developed a set of techniques known as the Presence Techniques that are designed for just this purpose.

Clients may understand the meaning of the words a professional uses. But they may not know what the professional means; the subtext. It goes without saying that understanding is critical to productive interactions, good communication and therapeutic change. However, if both the client/patient and the professional simply assume that the other will understand their meaning since they understand their words, the meaning of those words may come into dispute. This will in turn lead to failed communication and negative therapeutic outcomes. Clarity of intention is a pre-requisite to good communication.

The Presence Techniques have been used to this end by the authors and their affiliate counsellors in text-based cybercounselling for more than a decade. Training on the use of the techniques is provided by the authors in collaboration with the University of Toronto Faculty of Social Work. All counsellors included in this study have received training and continue to receive professional clinical feedback on their work on a regular basis.

This paper explores the use and effectiveness of the Presence Techniques by counsellors working with online only clients. Clients presented for cybercounselling either through a Canadian EAP or through Therapy Online's online portal. Some clients were screened via telephone, while others completed screening, registration and assessment online.

Keywords. cybercounselling, cybertherapy, online counselling, online therapy, Presence Techniques.

Introduction

The authors began work in the field of cybercounselling in 1995. At the time their work was the first such effort to use e-mail to connect with clients who required mental health services. Since then, the use of e-mail for the delivery of counselling and therapeutic services has become the most prevalent type of web-based intervention [1].

From the start it was clear that overcoming the absence of tone of voice and the non-verbal elements of communication would be critical in engaging clients therapeutically and engendering change. Early case studies [2, 3] indicated that the modality held promise. Since that time we have refined our original, and created new, text-based therapeutic techniques that allow us and other therapists and counsellors whom we trained to overcome the absence of tone of voice and non-verbals. These techniques are referred to as Presence Techniques.

These techniques now form the foundation of our cybercounselling work. We have developed in-depth training focused on the techniques [4] and used them in our clinical work with online clients throughout Canada and around the world. They have proven essential in the therapeutic process.

The Therapeutic Alliance

The initial development of the Presence Techniques was as much a response to the fundamental need in counselling to establish the therapeutic alliance as it was to address the lack of tone of voice and non-verbals in our text-based work. The therapeutic alliance is the open, respectful and collaborative bond between counsellors and clients [5]. Research into the counselling process clearly indicates that the therapeutic alliance is a critical factor when it comes to effective counselling [6, 7]. If online counsellors are able to form a therapeutic alliance with their clients the approach holds promise.

Cook and Doyle [8] compared the ratings of the therapeutic alliance from 15 online therapy clients with ratings from clients who engaged in face to face counselling. The online clients completed at least 3 sessions of online counselling. The researchers found that clients participated more in the distance modes and reported a therapeutic alliance equivalent to the face to face ratings.

Prado and Meyer [9] found similar results in their study at the University of Sao Paulo. In this work, done exclusively with asynchronous e-mail counselling, counsellors were able to establish a solid therapeutic alliance.

Finally, Cohen and Kerr [10] found that clients provided similar ratings between online and face to face counselling regarding the counsellor's expertness, attractiveness, and trustworthiness. This is relevant given the absence of visual and non-verbal information in the online modality and the concern that online clients might rate these aspects of counsellors poorly. In addition, clients were asked to rate the depth, smoothness, positivity, and arousal of the counselling sessions as measured by the Session Evaluation Questionnaire [11]. Clients rated the level of arousal higher in the face to face modality but there were no other significant differences between groups.

The Presence Techniques

Emotional Bracketing

Consider a client whose boyfriend has many of the qualities of her father. Recognising this, a counsellor might ask her if she has noticed that her boyfriend and her father have many similarities. The words are simple and the question is easy. The client may even have an answer.

In a face to face interaction one's tone conveys that this is a typical question in counselling and that there is no underlying meaning. But in text this is not so clear. Although the client may understand what the words mean, it is not at all assured that she will understand what the counsellor means. The client may detect a subtext like "this suggests you are abnormal" or "I'm wondering if you were abused".

To ensure that clients understand what the counsellor means we use a technique called Emotional Bracketing. Emotional Bracketing employs the use of square brackets wherein we write about inner non-observable thoughts and feelings.

The following example comes from an exchange with an alcoholic client. Such clients often hear criticism of them and their behaviour even when no such criticism is intended. In our experience in the online modality it is critical that we are clear with such clients about the emotion and meaning behind our statements. The client's name is John:

"It is very important [feeling concerned, somewhat worried] that you reply to this e-mail [feeling pushy but needing to hear from you] as soon as you receive it John. This will be the third time that I have written in the last week [concerned that you may have relapsed]. Please reply."

What is critical in this exchange is that we have conveyed to the client that it is concern and worry, rather than anger or frustration, which has led us to write what we have.

This example also illustrates another important use for Emotional Bracketing. It allows the counsellor to say something that may be difficult or challenging and then use the brackets to tone it down. Counselling regularly involves different degrees of confrontation.

Face to face the counsellor can read the client's reactions and modify their language and tone, or ask the client about their reaction when it appears that there may have been a misunderstanding. In the text-based work we do not have this luxury. Therefore, it is critical that we are clear within our messages and replies what we mean.

Emotional Bracketing is also valuable in the early stages of counselling when establishing the foundations of the therapeutic alliance. The technique allows us to show the client warmth, understanding and compassion in ways that are unique to this process. This also helps to underline the fact that this is a different kind of e-mail communication; just as we engage in certain kinds of dialogue face to face that make it clear that counselling is a different kind of conversation.

Clinicians new to cybercounselling sometimes make the mistake of using the square brackets of Emotional Bracketing to provide simple information. Parentheses should be used for this purpose. Rather, Emotional Bracketing is used just as tone and body language are: to enhance meaning.

Descriptive Immediacy

A second Presence Technique that we use to overcome the absence of tone of voice and non-verbal elements of communication in our text-based work is Descriptive Immediacy. This technique provides the client with information about the counsellor's observable, non-verbal behaviour toward the client.

It is our belief that clients need an experience, not an explanation. It is typical to work with clients who have heard explanations of what is wrong with them from everyone from their parents to their teachers to the bartender. Descriptive Immediacy is used to intensify the client's experience of engaging with a counsellor by bring the client and the counsellor into the presence of one another in the text; to give them an experience. Here is an example of a session in which the client is dealing with fear:

"When you said at the beginning that you were scared I let out a big sigh. I found myself nodding my head as you talked about your fear. And yet. As you kept describing it I started to see that you have a handle on the fear. When you were done I sat back and smiled and thought 'he knows what to do'. And I really think you do."

The technique can also be used with brackets, as this example illustrates:

"Wow! [smiling with wide eyes and a thrilled look on my face]

Tina, you showed real courage in the game today. [imagining myself offering you a handshake] Congratulations!"

In each case the goal is to intensify the experience of engagement. The technique also aids us in establishing the therapeutic alliance.

Counsellors new to the process sometimes make the mistake of using this technique to ascribe behaviours to the client. Saying to a client "my face is full of admiration for you" is an acceptable use of the technique. However, "you smile and nod your head in reply" is not.

Descriptive Imagery

Descriptive Imagery is related to Descriptive Immediacy. In our initial work we did not distinguish between the two but as we and others have used the techniques it has become clear that they are distinct techniques.

Descriptive Imagery is the use of descriptive language to help the client create a mental picture that is relevant to the therapeutic environment. Descriptions of the counsellor's office, the weather and the community context are some typical images that may be relevant. For example, we might write:

"My office is warm and quiet and there are a number of comfortable chairs that you may choose from. On one wall is a bookcase with textbooks. The window looks out onto the garden and a babbling brook in the distance."

Descriptive Imagery is used to ground the clients in the virtual presence of the counsellor and to aid them in experiencing a deepened reality of their interactions.

Time Presence

Time Presence is a final technique that also fulfils the purpose of bringing the client into the counsellor's presence and of providing them with a therapeutic experience.

Time Presence involves writing as though the interaction between client and therapist is in the present. So a counsellor might write something like "a moment ago when you said you were angry I thought..." or "last session when we were discussing". In logical terms the statements do not make sense. But when integrated into the cybercounselling process they aid the client in engaging in the here and now of the sessions.

Client Comments and Outcomes

Therapy Online's therapists are trained in the use of Presence Techniques and employ them as a regular part of treatment. Anecdotal reports from clients who were treated entirely online confirm the value of the approach. One client notes that "I found this process to be beneficial." Another states that "My counsellor's wittiness and sense of humour was a big factor in opening up to a complete stranger. She offered great suggestions that I have implemented in my relationship with my husband and children and I am very grateful."

Recent research [12] by the authors comparing face to face and online counselling with clients from the same referral source indicates that there are no significant differences in outcome measures. It seems likely that the Presence Techniques play an important role in the lack of difference in outcomes between the two modalities.

Conclusion

The Internet and e-mail communication are ubiquitous. We have no doubt that cybercounselling will continue to grow and soon become as unsurprising as online shopping or banking. However, the tremendous importance to successful counselling of establishing a solid relationship in the form of the therapeutic alliance presents a challenge.

The Presence Techniques have been created to address this issue by providing ways for counsellors (and clients) to communicate essential non-verbal and tone-of-voice information that is not contained in the words used to describe a problem, ask a question, or explain a therapeutic task.

More specific research needs to be done looking at the use of individual techniques and their value in the overall success of online work. Anecdotal evidence from clients and counsellors and outcome research comparing face to face and online modalities indicate that the Presence Techniques are a part of successful cybercounselling.

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