

Is Online Therapy the Future?

As the country went into lockdown last year, the NHS could barely cope with Covid patients let alone the soaring increase in mental health problems. Faced with cancelled hospital appointments, long waiting lists to speak to, let alone see a GP and isolation from friends and family, we found new ways to access help from qualified therapists when we need it using Online Therapy.

At the beginning of March 2020 my long-established practice nose-dived as couples couldn't make the shift to working online, preferring to wait "until all this was over, it won't be long!" Everyone was very preoccupied with the huge changes in our lives, working from home, home-schooling, huge fears of getting ill and being hospitalized. Having therapy was the last thing on their minds. Many felt concerned that they wouldn't be able to connect in the same way with a therapist who wasn't in front of them.

Slowly but surely couples took the plunge and started to try out online therapy, accepting it was better than nothing! Recognising there were some benefits after all, one of which was not having to travel to and from their therapist's office and still remains one of the main attractions

Having offered both face to face and online therapy for some time, I recognised that online work was the way forward having undergone online therapy training, the main issue was to accept the challenge of helping clients navigate the transition from the familiar face-to-face therapy to the more 'alien' online format and to reassure them that online sessions can be very effective. This new experience was understandably daunting and unsettling.

Now that we're moving slowly out of lockdown, this raises many issues for therapists and clients once again. Will they wish to continue to have sessions on a screen or will they want to go back to working face-to-face? We haven't worked out all the answers yet, but here are some pros and cons that might help us make a decision that works for each and everyone of us.

HOW DOES ONLINE THERAPY WORK?

Clients meet their therapist in front of a computer screen, laptop, iPad or mobile. Only a secure internet connection is required. At Coupleworks our experienced therapists, have online training and use Skype, Zoom and Facetime platforms. It can be used for individuals and couples. A link or reminder to join is sent well before a session.

Your therapist will guide you through the technology and discuss a back up plan should you encounter technical problems.
Sessions are usually for 50 minutes.

It's important that your online therapist is registered with a professional body like BACP, UKCP, and BPS. Being members of such associations gives the assurance they are fully qualified, have insurance and abide by a code of ethics and maintain privacy and confidentiality.

Given that technology now plays such a big part in all our lives, many counsellors have studied online therapy as part of their training or have undergone further training in this area.

BENEFITS OF ONLINE THERAPY

- *Accessing therapy from your home, or work place without the stress and additional costs of travelling to and from your therapists consulting room
- *Clients can more easily access the right therapist and type of therapy from anywhere in the world
- *Often more flexibility for session times to include evenings and weekends
- *Choosing to have sessions in the comfort of your home
- *Often more privacy at home than travelling to your therapist
- *Easier to stick to session times
- *Clients can find it easier to talk online and are more able to articulate their emotions better. The screen is their barrier
- *Invited into your clients homes and seeing their interaction and body language in their own homes gives a very different perspective than when seeing couples in an office. The appearance of children bursting into a session or the family pet being cuddled on screen, all brings their real lives into the therapy.
- *Self care before and after your therapy session. Ensure you have privacy and you are comfortable where you are having your session and you have everything you need close by. Mobiles should be turned off and you have some water and tissues to hand, should you need them.
Factor in some down time for yourself and your partner after your session rather than going straight back into work or another online meeting.
- *Surprise how well online counselling can work

ADVANTAGES OF FACE-TO-FACE THERAPY

- *Some clients are fearful of technology and are too anxious to engage in online work.
- *Couples like the office environment. They like meeting up after work to travel to a session together and then spending time after the session perhaps to have a drink or grab a meal together and process the session together. It is often an essential part of the counselling weekly process.
- *Finding a safe, private place at home for regular sessions may be challenging for some clients. During lockdown clients were often forced to have sessions in their cars or locked in their garages – anywhere that gave them privacy

*In-person contact and being seen and observed is very important for some clients, who may not have had this experience in their lives.

*Computer screen is often seen as a barrier to intimacy

*More boundaries than with online sessions. Clients tend to go from one zoom meeting to another without taking a breathing space

IS ONLINE COUNSELLING AS EFFECTIVE AS FACE_TO_FACE SESSIONS

Recent research shows that well managed online sessions are as effective as face-to-face sessions and deliver the results.

As with any form of therapy, the most important factor for a successful therapeutic outcome is the therapeutic alliance between client and therapist. So feeling comfortable with your therapist and feeling you are being heard and understood is just as important working online as face-to-face.

CHALLENGES FOR THERAPISTS

For sure moving my practice to online for the past year has been challenging and at the same time rewarding and meaningful.

I have really missed the lack of physical presence with my clients. Recognising I have to work really hard not to miss out on important visual clues when you are mostly seeing the upper body of your client and if image quality on screen is unclear. Managing my anxieties about technology and now make sure I explain to my clients what they need to do to get connected online, what happens if things go wrong with the internet connection and how to manage when unexplained technology errors may suddenly appear.

My client base is now more global than ever before which brings a very different and exciting dimension to the work although working in different time zones can be challenging.

Whilst there are advantages and disadvantages to online therapy where some clients and therapists find that it works very well there are others who don't like it, and don't want to continue working in this way. What's really important is now we can make a more informed choice again: there are now options if we want to travel to meet a therapist face to face in a consulting room away from home or we prefer to plug in our computers and find a space at home. My feeling is there is room for both and we will all find our ways of adapting to each other's needs.

If you would like to discuss things further or to make an appointment, you can call me on **07976 403741** or (020) 8959 9528. Alternatively, you can contact me by email: dawnkaffel@couplescounselling.com. **Dawn Kaffel**