# 9 Observations About the Practice and Process of Online Therapy Using Email

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**Abstract.** The underlying therapeutic process of online counselling via email displays novel qualities in terms of its dimensionality, the rôle played by empathy and momentum, the significance of memory and sensory modalities, and the influence exerted by self selection bias. Asynchronous online counselling also introduces novelties to the basic mechanics of daily work, including a need for awareness of the practice peak to mean ratio, some subtleties regarding client consent for research, challenges for handling client backlogs, and a problem of representing counsellor experience honestly. Despite all this novelty, however, it seems that no fundamentally new ethical territory has been created by the advent of online counselling; there is, rather, merely new technological territory which challenges us to grasp its ramifications for existing normative principles.

**Keywords:** Email, ethics, online counselling, online therapy, therapeutic process

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## INTRODUCTION

Writing letters to counselling clients is nothing new: Freud was exchanging correspondence with patients over a century ago. Nowadays, letters can be delivered with lightning speed via the internet, and email-based counselling, lumped together with counselling offered via other internet enabling technologies, has come to be known as 'online counselling' or 'online therapy'.

Despite widespread use of these techno-centric umbrella terms, however, from the perspective of the *underlying therapeutic process*, counselling via an asynchronous technology like email seems to me to share little in common with counselling via synchronous technologies like internet chat or videoconferencing. With respect to therapeutic process, I believe chat is more akin to telephone counselling, and email is closer to writing paper letters, than chat and email are to one another.

That difference motivates my primary aim in this paper: offering observations about the practice and process of counselling specifically conducted via email, as distinct from online counselling understood broadly to encompass anything one might do with counselling and an internet connection.

A second aim is to keep those observations both relevant to daily practice and specifically prompted by 'real life' online experience. Reviews of the online therapy literature and private communications with authors widely cited in the field indicate that many who write about it — even some who teach it — have relatively little experience actually *providing* individual online therapy themselves. This does not make their observations or insights wrong, or unhelpful; far from it. But it does leave them incomplete, with many areas of exploration that practitioners could find helpful for developing online practice remaining under-represented in the literature.

Even some otherwise excellent empirical work resists immediate application to daily practice, either as a result of being very specific and quantitative (e.g., Christensen, Griffiths & Korten's 2002 web-based CBT), or instead being very general and qualitative (e.g., re-explorations of Kiesler, Siegel & McGuire's 1984 observation that people communicating via computer may feel disinhibited). Examples from the middle of the spectrum and closer to daily practice are thinner on the ground (e.g., Day & Schneider, 2002; Lewis, Coursol & Wahl, 2004), while no online counselling research of any kind has yet to 'arrive' at all in reference volumes like the classic *Bergin and Garfield* (Lambert, 2004).

By keeping close to actual practice, I hope this paper will pass what I call the 'today test', the questions I ask myself when reading a paper: will this add to my understanding or awareness of myself, my practice, or the world around me in some way that I value? And will it initiate that process *today* — not next week when I get around to reading it again, or next month when I've had a chance to think about it, but today, *right now*?

After outlining my practice background, this paper continues with three main sections, covering the asynchronous therapeutic process, practice issues, and the ethics of online practice.

## PRACTICE AND WEBSITE BACKGROUND

CounsellingResource.com exists primarily to provide information about counselling, psychotherapy, and general mental health. A small area dedicated to my practice describes in detail how the service operates and suggests factors to consider before using it. Additional material covers my academic and professional background, work in technology, training in person-centred counselling, and practice philosophy.

To give an idea of scale, independent statistics from Alexa.com indicate the site currently reaches over twice as many visitors as that of the BACP, nearly three times as many as the Samaritans, one seventh as many as NHS Direct, and just one ninth as many as the American Psychological Association.[1] The counselling service itself has been contacted by people writing from all continents except South America and Antarctica.

> **TIP** The CounsellingResource.com *Building Your Practice* section includes information on how to use Alexa and other sources of market intelligence to help understand the competitive landscape around your practice.

Six months into online practice, I began logging total volumes of emails exchanged with clients. In the roughly 20 months since, I have recorded a total of 715,000 words of individual counselling. Again for scale, this falls somewhere between seven and 12 PhD dissertations, or a little more than the first six *Harry Potter* (Rowling, 1997) books combined; it is roughly 160 times the length of this paper.

To my knowledge, this represents the largest single-practitioner evidence base underlying any research yet published on individual online counselling.

Most clients exchange at least a few thousand words over a period of weeks or months, while some communicate regularly for a year or more; in view of these volumes, I implement a waiting list whenever concurrent client numbers exceed the low teens. This client profile

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[1] Ratios reflect 3-month average 'reach per million' as of 19 September 2005 for CounsellingResource.com (10.5), bacp.co.uk (4.4), samaritans.org (3.65), nhsdirect.nhs.uk (74), and apa.org (96.5).

contrasts sharply with that of other practitioners reporting many hundreds of online clients over a five-year period (Chechele & Stoffle 2003); one colleague privately claims *thousands*. Such figures imply, on average, *significantly* less work with each client — perhaps something akin to the brief support services offered by the Samaritans in reply to 99,000 email contacts in 2003 (Samaritans, 2005).

## ASYNCHRONOUS THERAPEUTIC PROCESS

### Two Dimensions of Email Communication

In terms of its constitutent verbal exchanges, real-time face-to-face (hereafter, 'f2f') dialogue unfolds along the single dimension of time. A written session transcript captures this linearity, recording the words spoken first by one person, and then the other, each in turn. While the underlying subject matter might be very complex, and the topics visited in highly non-linear fashion, the actual flow of dialogue emerges linearly through time.

By contrast, the asynchronous dialogue of email counselling generates an intrinsically two-dimensional process, which develops both within and between emails. The 'turn-taking' of dialogue on a given topic occurs in one dimension across separate emails, while the narrative of each participant expands in a second dimension within a single email. Further, each email itself typically incorporates multiple distinct threads developing simultaneously, as each participant responds in-line to material previously written by the other.

So, whereas a segment of f2f discussion may be captured by a few contiguous pages of session transcript, representing (say) 20 minutes of exchange, a segment of email discussion may occur via scores of 200-word fragments distributed over weeks of separate 2,000-word messages. Concatenating those fragments in sequence linearizes the content specific to a given discussion thread, but fails to capture any

interactions occuring at the same time with related threads developing in parallel: if ordinary f2f dialogue unwinds as a single thread tracing a path through a complex space, email dialogue unwinds as multiple threads tracing paths through a similar space — while at times coming together, intertwining, and separating again.

Only in the limiting case of very brief, single-sentiment or single-idea emails, does an asynchronous exchange reduce to anything resembling the 'tit-for-tat' linear dialogue of two people conversing each in turn.

Certain advantages counterbalance the challenges of carrying on multiple parallel discussion threads. For example, glimpsing the broad message the client is conveying through an entire email, taken as a whole, may allow me to target responses to each individual expression (paragraph, etc.) within an email in a way that is at once mindful of the details of that expression itself *and* its contribution to the overall picture the client is creating.

## Modalities and Memory

Usually, online work lacks the spatio-temporal cues sometimes employed in conceptualizing individual f2f clients like "the woman I see first on Tuesday afternoon", or "my last client at the University on a Friday". Having fewer of these memory associations and triggers with text-based clients, I often find it comparatively more difficult to recall details about each. This may actually help me to encounter each client with 'freshness', as if hearing that individual for the very first time — exactly the opposite of what I would have expected about work conducted in a context of automatically generated, verbatim written records.

However, that 'freshness' also brings with it a disadvantage: discussions sometimes need more repeating or in-depth exploration to help them settle in, both for me and the client. Things don't seem to

'stick' as well in email as f2f. Alison, a 30-year old reflecting on new things she was learning about herself, mentioned:[2]

> *I think the worse part of the discoveries though, is how often I have to rediscover something! Those little nuggets of wisdom that I unearth don't often stick.*

I have sometimes wondered whether differences I notice in my own memory of f2f as compared to text-based encounters might be partly explained by the multi-modal nature of the former and the neurophysiology of long term potentiation and memory creation. When I mentioned this in my reply to Alison, she startled me by replying that her experience of email-based working was essentially *tactile* in nature:

> *That's interesting, I wonder if there is a way to incorporate another sense... I've always been better at incorporating tactile and sight. ...To me, this is mainly just a tactile experience. Half the time I don't even look at the screen while I type...*

Given that Alison and I worked together virtually every week for some 15 months, the rôle of our respective memory characteristics was not at all trivial, and we discussed specific ways she could involve that additional sensory modality to aid memory.

Additionally, asymmetry in the speed with which a complex expression can be *read* — as compared to spoken (slower) or written (slower still) — appears to reinforce the general truism that ideas or insights originating *with the client* are better retained than those coming from the therapist: the former demand a more significant investment of the client's time to generate and write than the latter, which may be read only briefly. The empirically established primacy of client contributions

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[2] All clients mentioned have given explicit written consent to be directly quoted for this paper.

to therapeutic change (Tallman & Bohart, 1999) appears to be amplified and underscored in this asynchronous medium.

## Constraining Momentum Versus Deepening Momentum

While limitations of memory play an important role in the emergence of a therapeutic process via asynchronous communication, so too does an opposite factor: the 'momentum' created by seeing the same material in an email more than once, such as when one participant's words have been partly or wholly quoted in a new email. (Imagine reviewing the previous session's written transcript with a f2f client, before every single office hour.)

I distinguish between *constraining momentum*, which tends to limit the introduction of new material into the discussion by providing a tempting 'template' into which each successive reply can be fit; and *deepening momentum*, which encourages keeping to a given topic even as we engage with it in greater and greater depth. A conceptually attractive analogy for constraining momentum is the so-called 'watchdog effect' of quantum mechanics, referring to the fact that the very act of repeatedly observing a quantum system restricts that system's state from changing.

The distinction between constraining and deepening momentum bears directly on the challenge of appropriately articulating empathic responses. Only rarely can these be simple re-statements of what the client has already expressed. I cannot 'just' sit and listen or nod or repeat verbatim, relying on body language or presence to communicate deep engagement with a client; usually, it must be articulated textually in something other than simple cut-and-paste fashion.

The risk of generating constraining momentum — and the appeal of deepening momentum — creates for me a relentless nudge in the

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direction of deepening and expanding the empathic response. Perhaps more than any other single counsellor factor (as distinct from client factor), it is the skill of textually conveying empathic understanding in such a way that momentum tends to deepen the exchange, rather than constraining it, which separates effective online practice from the mere application of prior f2f skills to the online environment.

**TIP** The CounsellingResource.com *Online Supervision and Training* section focuses especially on the therapeutic process, and the Managing Editor has a particular interest in distinctions such as that between constraining and deepening momentum.

## Self Selection: A Free Bias Toward Effective Working?

Self selection can induce bias into everything from election results to consumer surveys and scientific studies: solicit participants on the basis of their interest in a given topic, and expect results to be biased to the extent that the set of people interested enough to participate may not represent the population as a whole.

A similar phenomenon appears to exist in online counselling, with several clients having mentioned choosing to work with me specifically because my approach appeals to them. Others have described feeling as if we'd already had a session before we began. Benjamin, an engineer in his late twenties, put it simply:

> *When I read your web site, I at least knew something about you before we start[ed], and that's important to me. I liked what I read about your approach to therapy, as well, so I came back and signed up. You said in your e-mail that I could start wherever I want, but to tell you the truth I've got so much on my mind that I don't even know where to start.*

But even at this early stage, Benjamin already felt sufficiently at ease that he *did* make that start, and we exchanged tens of thousands of words over 4 months.

Non-random (i.e., informed) counsellor selection by clients amounts to client self selection for a service in which they are already predisposed toward confidence of a positive outcome. While this is no guarantee of one, evidence (Tallman & Bohart, 1999) certainly suggests it helps.

Naturally, clients working f2f can read about practitioners before selecting one too, but those seeking an online therapist can compare not just a small set from their geographically local vicinity, but a large set from *all over the world*. Therefore, I would expect the phenomenon of self selection to be more prevalent for those seeking online counselling than for those seeking f2f counselling.

This raises an interesting ethical question: should self selection bias be courted deliberately, by increasing the information available to clients about an online practice?

## EMAIL-BASED COUNSELLING IN PRACTICE

### Peak to Mean Ratio and Realistic Response Times

Replying to client emails naturally takes time, and more often than not, one or more are awaiting my attention. Comparing the *maximum* amount of email that is ever waiting to be answered at a given time to the *average* amount of email that is outstanding over all times gives the *peak to mean ratio*. (In communications engineering contexts, the peak to mean ratio represents the 'burstiness' of data being transmitted across a channel.)

In my practice, the peak to mean ratio is over 15: sometimes my outstanding workload balloons to 15 times what it is on an average day.

Awareness of this basic quantity — whether by 'feel' or via explicit measurement — is *crucial* for avoiding breakdowns in quality of service. For example, the ratio helps me determine how to link my advertised response time to the size of a client's email — so that I can be assured of providing a quality response to all my clients, without everything falling to pieces when luck has it that a dozen clients all decide to write several thousand words over the weekend, their messages peeking out from my inbox first thing Monday morning.

Failing to specify any link at all between response time and email size would be analogous to guaranteeing that any client contacting a f2f counselling service would be seen by a counsellor within a given period of time and for any duration desired: maintaining such a guarantee would be impossible, and offering one unethical.

> **TIP**  For examples of how response time can be linked to email size, just visit the CounsellingResource.com *Counselling Services* section.

I learned this lesson very early in online practice with the help of Cassandra, a trainee nurse working on anxiety and relationship issues. Her training schedule made it convenient for her to spend several hours replying to my messages immediately upon receiving them. Shortly after exchanging 13,000 words of emails in just four days, I recognized the obvious: I cannot commit to replying fully to all emails within 48 hours. In retrospect, the questionable ethics of a blanket 'guarantee' seem blazingly obvious, but nonetheless I only came to learn this practicality through experience.

Exactly such 'guarantees' are advertised at most of the online therapists' websites I have visited.

## Research and Client Consent

The seemingly straightforward act of requesting permission from a client to use session material for research or teaching purposes acquires additional subtleties when all material is automatically recorded verbatim. Whereas a f2f practitioner might ask permission to record a *specific session*, an online counsellor might request permission to draw on an entire body of material potentially stretching back through months or even years of verbatim records. A client may in effect give *retroactive* permission to use material far into the past, material which normally would not even exist in f2f settings.

This raises special considerations not only for ensuring that consent is well informed, but also for managing the therapist's own behaviour: as soon as an online practitioner forms the *intention* to request permission, he thereby becomes aware that what he writes *right now* may at some point in the future be used for publication or teaching. This creates an asymmetry with the client, who may not know in advance that a given exchange could ultimately be published. Such asymmetries do not normally arise in f2f practice, where the potential for publication does not exist until *both* parties have become aware of it and explicitly agreed to it: again, f2f material does not normally become available for publication retroactively.

## The Client 'Stack'

In f2f practice, a given hour is scheduled and 'owned' by a specific client; analogous 'session times' for email counselling clients do not usually exist. Incoming emails stack up, and the counsellor acquires a new responsibility: deciding how much time to allocate to which client, and in what order.

In my experience, seeing multiple unanswered emails in my inbox prompts reflection not only on the external mechanics of which email to handle first (e.g., comparing relative lengths of outstanding emails, time available, response time commitments, etc.), but also on my own *internal* processes as I hold several clients in awareness at the same time:

- Of these clients, what would it be like for me to respond to each one right now?
- Which client do I *want* to respond to first?
- What feelings, thoughts, or assumptions come bundled up along with my personal preference to respond to a given client first?
- What role does my sense of the relative difficulty of working with each client play in influencing the order in which I respond?
- Do I simply need more time to reflect on a given client's email before responding?
- Do I have a financial incentive to respond to a given client sooner or later than I otherwise might?

Except via some prescriptive algorithm which would dictate mechanistically how I am to organize my replies, I cannot imagine these and related questions ever disappearing from practice. And while the questions themselves might seem quite obvious at first blush, their 'answers' (or, rather, the exploring and reflecting they prompt) rarely are.

## Client Contact and Representing Experience

Assumptions about time which apply to f2f practice break down in the case of email counselling, posing particular challenges for representing accurately and honestly the work online counsellors do.

In f2f practice, the assumption that client and counsellor meet once per week (or more for psychoanalytic practice) for roughly an hour offers a good start for interpreting statements like "I have completed 12 weeks of work with this client". By contrast, statements about the calendar time duration of email counselling are, without further qualification, close to meaningless: one cannot justifiably assume *anything* about how frequently counsellor and client exchange emails, how much they say in those emails, or how much time they spend reading and writing. Similarly, reporting an online practitioner's "years of experience" appears to me at best meaningless and at worst misleading. It particularly risks grossly misleading audiences who are less well informed about the realities of online practice, such as less experienced colleagues or members of the public who may mistakenly believe that years imply something about *actual experience*.

My procedure of recording the number of words exchanged with each client is designed in part to address these pitfalls of interpretation. When I referred earlier to 715,000 words of counselling, this reflects the total of new words (excluding quotations from previous emails) written by each client and by me. It *excludes* introductory, contracting and other administrative communications; casual queries and one-off requests for feedback or support; simple 'question answering'; and supervision services: it represents only *bona fide* ongoing *counselling* with individual clients. While certainly not perfect, this method of logging client work is both quantitative and meaningful in ways that talk about calendar time or client numbers is not.

Note that word counts do not translate directly across the modalities of f2f, email and chat. For a given duration of time, the relative ease of verbal speech suggests f2f work may expend more words and cover more territory; while its asynchronous nature and unlimited time for reflection may allow email work to pack more meaning into fewer words. Like email, chat suffers from the 'keyboard disadvantage' and requires more time to communicate a given number of words than f2f

— Day & Schneider (2002) report a chat session mean of roughly one third of the 6000-word f2f session mean — yet it lacks email's advantages for conveying more meaning with fewer words.

While the relative 'amounts of counselling' enabled by different modalities are not yet clear, it *is* clear that describing online counselling experience in familiar f2f terms like years or weeks risks grossly misleading one's audience. Two brief articles (Mulhauser 2005a, 2005b) address in more detail ethical issues raised by some online practitioners' penchant for reporting their experience in years or in numbers of clients.

## DO UNIQUE ETHICAL PRINCIPLES OF ONLINE PRACTICE EXIST?

Several major organizations offer ethical or 'best practice' guidelines on online therapeutic work (ACA, 1999; APA, 1997; ISMHO, 2000; Kane & Sands, 1998; NBCC, 2001), making them freely available to both consumers and professionals via the web.[3] Yet, as far as I can tell, no fundamentally new ethical territory has been created by the advance of technology which enables online counselling to take place. There is, rather, merely new *technological* territory. These 'guidelines' are primarily what ethicists call *technology assessment* documents, providing introduction and orientation to the technological context and its ramifications for our existing normative principles, such as the principles of non-maleficence or fidelity embodied in BACP's *Ethical Framework* (Bond, 2002). Technology assessment documents are subject to debate and disagreement, are virtually never complete, and typically go out of date quickly — unlike the underlying normative principles themselves, which *do not change* with technology. (Consider the normative principle of non-maleficence, for example: it will not

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[3] BACP does not feature here: unlike the *Ethical Framework*, access to the organization's suggestions in this area is restricted to members only.

suddenly become right to harm clients merely as a result of someone's inventing a new way of communicating.)

Moreover, the application of existing normative principles to the online context, in all its complexity, does not lend itself particularly well to codification in the form of technology assessment guidelines. Unfortunately, the preponderance of available guidelines may nonetheless encourage some online practitioners to accept adherence to them as a substitute for the *technical* competence required to support ethical decision-making and risk assessment *in situ*.[4]

By way of analogy, consider a f2f counsellor's duty to evaluate the extent to which a consulting room is sound-proof before using it, a duty which derives from the normative principle of fidelity and respect for client confidentiality. Judgements about the suitability of a particular room are not a matter for prescriptive mandate (e.g., "practitioners should only use rooms with wall thickness exceeding 14mm"); instead, they require well-informed personal experience and awareness. In this example, that awareness presupposes an ability to hear, and a hearing-impaired counsellor would not be able to practise ethically — with vocalizing clients, anyway — without taking steps to evaluate sound-proofness in some alternative way. She cannot guarantee ethical practice merely by adhering to prescriptive guidelines about wall thickness any more than a technologically unskilled online practitioner can work ethically by merely keeping to 'best practice guidelines'.

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[4] For example, some therapists apparently now believe — erroneously, in my view — that the *technological* step of using encryption equals the *ethical* step of safeguarding client confidentiality. Mitchell and Murphy — themselves encryption software vendors — have gone so far as to assert that practitioners are ethically required to use encryption when communicating with clients and that it is unethical for a practitioner even to *publish* what they call a "regular e-mail address" (Mitchell & Murphy, 2004, p. 208).

An online therapist operating without *intimate* knowledge of her technological context is akin to a hearing-impaired counsellor who hasn't checked whether her clients can be overheard outside the consulting room. It is not enough for an online practitioner merely to propose something along the lines of "I'm going to focus on my clinical skills and not worry about the technology" — like an underwater welder saying "I'm going to focus on my welding skills and not worry about the swimming".

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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