

# ONLINE COUNSELLING AND GUIDANCE SKILLS

A Resource for Trainees and Practitioners

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## 4

## ONLINE LISTENING, ATTUNEMENT AND ATTENDING TO THE CLIENT

Online counselling skills presented in this chapter:

- Communicating your presence, interest, and attention when ‘listening’ online
- Developing and maintaining attunement with a client

Exercises and vignettes are included within this chapter, demonstrating the skills in practice and encouraging thought on the subject matter discussed.

This chapter discusses the skills of listening, attending, and forming attunement with clients. Such aptitudes are essential features of an effective online practice. The absence of a client’s physical presence within computer-mediated interaction requires a more focused and creative approach by the practitioner during the process of developing attunement and understanding of the client and their presenting issues. It is also the responsibility of the online practitioner to facilitate an online exchange where both parties can be ‘heard’ and enabled in listening to the other person (Kraus et al., 2004).

The skills discussed in this chapter contribute to the overall sense of clients experiencing a sense of the practitioner being actively engaged, attentive, and ‘listening’ during online exchanges. As within face-to-face exchanges, it is important for practitioners to identify any evident blocks which restrict their full attention during the process of listening to and attuning with a client, as otherwise this may restrict the potential to develop sufficient rapport (Nelson-Jones, 2005).

## **Communicating your presence, interest, and attention when 'listening' online**

This subject area covers two categories:

- communicating an online presence, interest, and attention in a general context of engaging with clients; and
- communicating your presence whilst 'listening' to client narrative.

### **Communicating an online presence in a general context of supporting clients**

Each human being emanates a presence, whether in a face-to-face or online context. It is a dynamic which forms a part of the process of defining who we are as individuals, and how we are experienced by others. When meeting people within a face-to-face interaction, a person's presence will be evident in a physical context and this contributes to many features in how others would describe what that presence represents. When interacting online, with the absence of physical and auditory representations, there is still the opportunity for an individual sense of presence and a therapeutic alliance to be formed and experienced by both client and practitioner.

Research indicates that such an experiencing of presence is significant within video-conferencing media (Wootton et al., 2003). The personality attributes of an individual will still be evident during computer-mediated communication (CMC), albeit in a different form to that which is available during face-to-face interactions. The primary function of an online supportive interaction is to provide professional assistance to clients, whilst also seeking to establish a relationship, whether this is formed during a single interaction or developed over a number of sessions. The online practitioner will be seeking to establish themselves with clients and included within this process will be aspects of their personality being conveyed during the delivery of their service. As such, presence forms an important feature within online supportive relationships due to the unavailability of physical and auditory attributes. Clients still require a strong sense of a practitioner's presence and their ability to be attentive and responsive to their needs. It is the content and structure of the practitioner's narrative and the professionalism in which they deliver their service that is experienced by a client. This forms a key aspect of experiencing a practitioner's presence. Being mindful of this throughout the process of engaging with a client and

developing the online relationship is integral to professional practice and the resulting quality of service a client experiences.

### Communicating your presence whilst 'listening' to client narrative

This second feature, of practitioners communicating their presence whilst listening to a client, refers to how listening is explicitly demonstrated as a client is presenting narrative during computer-mediated exchanges. During face-to-face interchanges, a practitioner can provide clear indications that they are listening to a client by the use of eye contact, body language, and auditory indications. A client has the reassurance of knowing that the practitioner is still in the room with them due to being present in a physical context. Within an online context, a practitioner has to adopt other indicators to inform clients that they are listening and being attentive.

During computer-mediated interactions, both parties are reliant on technology to keep them together in the 'online practitioner's room', which at times can be affected by technology issues or disruption to Internet connections and so on. With this potential risk of breakdown in communication, either client or practitioner can be left requiring reassurance that the other party is still available and able to resume communication. When a client is communicating online narrative, particularly if it extends over a period of a few minutes, it is important that they are given reassurances by the practitioner that they are still present and 'listening' to the client. This may be discussed at the onset of engaging with clients by practitioners highlighting how they will signify their consistent listening during times when clients are providing information or conveying more than a paragraph or so of narrative.

The importance of communicating presence is particularly pertinent during an initial online meeting as clients may present large amounts of information to the practitioner. A client's general level of anxiety could be heightened if they are concerned by an absence of listening reassurances being conveyed by the practitioner during their presentation of information or narrative.

Examples of a practitioner demonstrating their presence whilst listening to their client can be any of the following, in addition to personalised styles of conveying presence whilst listening:

- A series of full stops at appropriate intervals between client narrative, which will appear as:  
Jane says: .....
- The written form of 'Hmm.....' or other signifier of listening to replace the verbal equivalent which would be apparent in a face-to-face interaction.
- Narratively expressing the words 'I'm still here', or 'I'm listening'.

## Developing and maintaining attunement with a client

When listening to another person in a face-to-face setting, a practitioner pays attention to the verbal dialogue of a client, whilst taking note of other characteristics within the presentation of the content. There will also be evidence of non-verbal indicators, which may promote a more in-depth understanding of the individual and the issues being presented, whilst also reinforcing a client's ability to strengthen their sense of self (Greenberg et al., 1993; Magnavita, 2004).

Imagine yourself sitting with a client at this moment in time and consider how you would attempt to gain the maximum in listening to their dialogue and forming an understanding in order to begin the process of providing support. You would be noting the following, in conjunction with observing the client's overall presentation:

- verbal content
- pitch of voice
- fluidity of speech and pauses or gaps in between subject matter or feeling expression
- pacing of verbal dialogue
- level of eye contact offered whilst talking, as well as subject and feeling expression areas where eye contact is avoided
- apparent silences or areas where the client appears to block themselves from entering into discussion on difficult subject areas
- body language
- visual and verbal characteristics of the person, including gender, cultural origin, disability, and personal faith.

There may be a tendency to take some of these features of being an attentive listener for granted when working in a face-to-face context, but remain integral to the overall skill of taking note of the comprehensive indications present when in a face-to-face interaction with clients. Some of these skills cannot translate into online working for obvious reasons, nonetheless it is possible to 'fine tune' those skills which are adaptable into online work. As skilled listeners, we have more than auditory senses to utilise when 'listening' to a client.

The following section includes the skills previously listed which have been adapted to illustrate those which can be used by the professional when conducting online CMC.

### Verbal content

Verbal content becomes the presented 'written narrative'. Although practitioners will not hear the client's voice unless both parties are using an online

microphone system, there is the opportunity to read and ‘hear’ the verbal content through the conveyed written narrative generated in online exchanges.

Using the examples in Box 4.1 and Box 4.2, we can consider how the written narrative is being conveyed and how it might differ if presented in a verbal account. The examples include both asynchronous and synchronous contexts, thereby demonstrating how differences in the medium may influence the transference of verbal communication into a written narrative or structure.

An example is provided from an initial simulated email from a client.

#### **Box 4.1 Verbal content as written narrative**

Hey ....

I feel I have a lot to say in my email, so if the content is too long please let me know and I'll make it shorter next time.

I'm finding it difficult to manage my financial situation at the moment as I have got myself into debt due to credit cards and a loan for a new car. It's starting to affect my health as I'm constantly worrying about how I'll pay the bills each month. I haven't been able to talk to my partner about this as she's really careful with money and always plans ahead. She would never use credit cards or take out loans either, so she wouldn't understand and it would only make the stress of the situation worse. I've always had a problem with managing money, but recently it's feeling out of control. I need some support with deciding how I can change the situation I'm in. It can't carry on like this or I will lose my home and my partner .....

In the example provided within Box 4.1, the content is direct and precise. The opening greeting sounds quite informal and relaxed, but the general tone within the email expresses a sense of urgency to deal with the problem due to financial and personal implications for the client if continuing with the current level of debt. The subject content and description of the presenting issues can also appear briefer than if presented by spoken word as sentences can be shortened and elaborations such as those used in a face-to-face context are often not included. There appears to be a sense of urgency to resolve their difficulties, whilst also wanting to ‘spill out’ all of the problems that have been a concern in the time leading up to seeking support. This may place the practitioner under pressure to offer a quick and directive response. This point is highlighted further by each sentence holding a new aspect to the overall theme of support required.



For those professionals who support clients in a face-to-face context, this may feel similar to meeting a client on the first occasion who brings a list of things they would want to discuss and presents the contents as a direct feature of importance to the meeting. During a first online or face-to-face meeting, a practitioner can feel as though they have been left with a lot to 'hold' or respond to.

Receiving an asynchronous request from a client with content such as that contained within Box 4.1 could leave the recipient feeling a sense of urgency and responsibility to offer solutions, where the preferred response would contain encouragement to the client in being proactive in exploring the possible options in alleviating the difficulty of their circumstances. This feature of assisting a client in problem solving is discussed in detail in Chapter 2.

If the same content was presented within a face-to-face context, there may be further indications for the receiver of the dialogue in how urgent the situation was, perhaps denoted by tone of voice, body language and so on. In an email reply to the client (Box 4.1), it is important to convey an understanding of the written narrative and encourage the client to provide a more in-depth account of the concerns they had expressed in their first communication with the practitioner. During initial exchanges, a client may be hesitant in offering too much in written form whilst they are consciously or unconsciously trying to gain a sense of who they are interacting with, in conjunction with determining the level of confidence they can place in the practitioner. During CMC, there may be instances where clients are less anxious and inhibited regarding 'spilling out' their presenting difficulties than would be apparent during face-to-face encounters. The anonymity of online communication can reduce the likelihood of feelings relating to embarrassment, guilt, and shame. There is also the likelihood that a client constructing a written narrative is less likely to present contradictions than in verbal communication (Murphy and Mitchell, 1998).

Box 4.2 is an example provided from an initial simulated synchronous chat dialogue, where John is the client and Pete is the service practitioner. The meeting has been pre-arranged and John has arrived a little late for the 'session'. It is also John's first experience of seeking synchronous support online with an online counsellor.

#### **Box 4.2 Initial email exchanges**

*Pete:* Hi john..... I was waiting for you to appear online....i thought you may have had problems with your internet connection. How are you... are you okay to begin our session this evening?

*(Continued)*

(Continued)

*John:* Hi Pete, good thanks arrived home late from work. This is the first time I've ever used this so I may be a little slow, apologies

*Pete:* don't worry we have an hour for our meeting and I can offer support if you are unsure of anything.....

*John:* Great! Now how does it work? Do you ask questions and I answer them?

*Pete:* i'll ask a few questions along the way.... and give you space to think and so on and talk where you need to...

[Pause]

*Pete:* it's your 'session' so I'll let you lead it as it feels best for you.....do you have any initial questions before we begin

*John:* OK. No questions it was all clear in your initial email which I received. The booklet on how to use the service, confidentiality etc was also helpful.

*Pete:* Good.....I'm glad you feel the booklet was helpful. Perhaps you could begin by telling me some background to the issue you would like to explore in our meetings together?

*John:* OK. I'd like to understand why I suffer with bouts of depression that have been ongoing over the last 4 or 5 years. It affects my work and friendships/relationships. I often distance myself from people when I'm feeling depressed and this then makes matters worse.

In Box 4.2, the initial content of the meeting involves a discussion regarding John's late arrival for the session and a brief clarification of how to conduct the session. In this example, some time has been lost in providing an explanation and 'settling in' to the first meeting, prior to focusing on the presenting issues. When using synchronous computer-mediated technology, it is beneficial to have included some prior asynchronous contact as proportionately the written narrative which is available through synchronous working can be considerably less. When a client has sent an initial outline of the presenting difficulties to the practitioner prior to the meeting, in conjunction with a practitioner providing guidelines on working synchronously, this reduces the time taken up with contracting and other preliminary issues during the first synchronous appointment.

In the example provided, John appears to be able to express his thoughts and concerns clearly in written format. Synchronous exchanges may provide more evident insight to this than other CMC, as both client and practitioner do not have the same access to spell-check or the same level of time to construct a reply.

The initial impression of John during this first interaction indicates a sense of self-confidence and preciseness in how he responds to the practitioner. He feels confident enough to ask for clarification, where unsure of how to proceed, and is courteous in offering information as to his late arrival for the session. His use of exclamation marks and abbreviation of words like 'okay' indicate directness and an ability to be assertive when needed. The overall sense of John's written narrative illustrates confidence in self-expression and the articulation of words and the aptitude to translate this into CMC.

### EXERCISE 4.1

#### NARRATIVE CONTENT IN EMAILS

What additional features of narrative content are apparent to you in Boxes 4.1 and 4.2, and how might your replies differ or be further developed to those provided by the simulated practitioner response?

#### Pitch of voice

Pitch of voice can be experienced in an online context as a feature of a client presenting written words in different font or colours, highlighting words in bold, using exclamation marks and question marks, or capitalising words and letters. A further example of pitch variation can be demonstrated by **BYE!! for now .....** or **HELLO!!**oooooooo..... You will have noted that as the extended word moves from capitals, bold text and exclamation marks to lower case letters, it provides a sense of how the word is being spoken and the pitch used in an online context. The use of full stops at the end can also signify a sense of the other's online 'voice' becoming fainter, ending in an extended form to emphasise the depth of feeling, or convey a greater awareness of something mentioned in a dialogue. Words can be adapted in this manner to illustrate a written pitch, depth, or quality, and provide an indication of what the sender is trying to convey, either consciously or unconsciously.

Box 4.3 provides an example which includes elements of pitch of voice in a simulated email from an ongoing client, where a strong therapeutic alliance has developed over a number of email exchanges.

**Box 4.3 Pitch of voice conveyed in an email**

Hi Petra,

It has been sooooo....hard for me to write this email. I feel that the situation with my boss has become much more difficult recently as she does not take on board my feelings regarding the pressure I'm under at work. I decided that if I could just say how I felt here it might help to clear my head and then allow me to think about it more calmly and find a way of handling it better. So here goes!!!

My boss is NOT an EXPERT on everything at work!!! She is NOT PERFECT! She takes her own frustration out on everyone else, and doesn't really seem to give a thought or care about it. SHE IS NEVER RESPONSIBLE FOR HER MISTAKES! Someone else is always responsible. Yet, she does make mistakes a lot and blames others for the outcome. SHE IS SO UNFAIR in how she treats the people who work with her, PARTICULARLY ME!! She has such a distorted view of things that it irritates the ..... out of me! It leaves me feeling UNDERVALUED and de-motivated most of the time. I wish she would leave and then I could concentrate on my work and being happy!!!!!! I wish she was here now so that I could say these things to her, and that she would LISTEN to me.

The client's use of capitalisation and exclamation marks in Box 4.3 provides an illustration of the emphasis of feelings, whilst also indicating that if the narrative was presented in a verbal dialogue, the pitch of voice and the feeling expression would be heightened and more profound when expressing particular aspects of the content. This offers the practitioner a more insightful understanding of how the client is experiencing her feelings towards the work situation and her boss. This in turn paves the way for constructing a reply to the client where a deeper level of empathic response can be conveyed. The client is also indicating that expressing certain written narrative in this manner will allow her to begin to reflect in a calmer manner, therefore allowing herself to express her anger and settle into a place where she could consider things in a more calm and insightful manner.

In the example provided in Box 4.3, the pitch of the narrative could have been heightened further if the simulated client had highlighted the capitalised words with bold or a particular colour to increase the impact of the text.

*Instances where pitch of voice or feeling expression is not apparent* Box 4.3 provides an illustration of this where a client is openly expressing their

feelings or using identifying aspects relating to pitch of voice and providing the practitioner with a strong sense of the feeling range experienced whilst writing the text. It cannot be assumed that where a client does not explicitly express feelings, either in synchronous or asynchronous communication, that they are not being experienced by the client. It could be that the client is fully engaged with their feelings when discussing issues and recollections they have brought to the online session, but are not disclosing them due to any or all of the following reasons:

- feelings arise unexpectedly
- embarrassment or discomfort when revealing feelings
- uncertainty in how the practitioner will respond
- not wishing to appear vulnerable.

When interacting with and supporting clients in a face-to-face context or via telephone contact, the practitioner will have access to auditory, visual, and physical cues to indicate that the client is experiencing feelings or a level of distress. When working online, such cues may be absent and therefore it is vital not to make assumptions that an absence of written narrative indicates the client is not experiencing a range of feelings.

In face-to-face therapeutic work, there are instances of clients making a 'door handle' statement which can prove to be revealing of feelings or something which they had not disclosed in the session. Similar occurrences may arise during computer-mediated exchanges, and as a result can leave both practitioner and client feeling that the meeting had ended in a manner which was not beneficial to either party. This can be particularly evident where the client has not explicitly expressed their feelings in the course of a session, but has chosen to leave it to the end of a meeting to reveal that they had been emotionally impacted by an aspect of the interaction or memories which had arisen. It is therefore always advisable for the practitioner to remain 'tuned' to the client's words throughout the content of both a synchronous and asynchronous dialogue exchange.

It is beneficial to leave an adequate amount of time at the end of synchronous exchanges to provide an opportunity for the practitioner to close the session, whilst also checking if any issues had arisen that the client would wish to make the practitioner aware of. By having this awareness, the practitioner can make preparation for 'tuning' in to the client's dialogue in a different manner during a subsequent session in order to pick up any non-evident explicit cues where feelings or distress are being experienced by a client. Where instances such as this have occurred, it is also beneficial to spend some time at the beginning of the following session encouraging the client to discuss what they need from the practitioner to assist with managing and expressing feelings as they arise.

**EXERCISE 4.2****PITCH OF VOICE**

Upon reflection of the examples provided in Box 4.3, consider how you might interpret or express the pitch of voice in an online context with the following list of emotions:

- excitement
- happiness
- fear
- anxiety
- sadness
- low mood
- frustration
- anger.

If you are able to, share your thoughts with a colleague. Compare and discuss similarities or differences in how you have expressed pitch within the context of these feelings.

### Fluidity of speech and pauses or gaps in between subject matter or feeling expression

When interacting in a face-to-face situation, we are present in a physical context to note where gaps in the other's speech occurs, and often gain a sense of why this may have occurred. When working in the context of asynchronous exchanges, the writer may punctuate a break or ending in the flow of a subject area by beginning a new paragraph, and may even leave the previous subject matter incomplete, or with an abrupt ending. This may provide an indication of where it has been difficult to continue or complete an area of thought or discussion, which could relate to the level of feeling disturbance the client is experiencing whilst communicating. This may also indicate that a client has a learning difficulty or mental health issue which affects the flow of their thought processes.

You may have noted from the examples of simulated client work illustrated throughout this book that during synchronous computer-mediated communication, I have used a short sequence of full stops at the end of a line to indicate where either the practitioner or client intends to continue with a thread of discussion. An example of this can be found in Box 4.2:

Pete:

don't worry we have an hour for our meeting and I can offer support if you are unsure of anything.....

The full stops signify that Pete has not finished a thread of discussion, but has 'released' a piece of text onto the shared screen so that the recipient is not left for a lengthy period of time waiting for text to appear on the shared dialogue screen. This practice assists with the flow of conversation and prevents the other party being distracted whilst following and participating in the dialogue.

Using this 'signal' of continuing dialogue also prevents conversations overlapping or subject matter changing before the thread of discussion has ended. Where a group of people are interacting, this is particularly useful as an indicator for others to wait for completion of one person's input prior to others offering a reply or moving on to another subject discussion area.

You may also have noted that there are occasions where a sequence of full stops is used to signify pauses in thought or a change in the flow of content during one line of text, as in Box 4.2:

Pete:

It's your 'session' so I'll let you lead it as it feels best for you.....do you have any initial questions before we begin

This style can be useful in both asynchronous and synchronous CMC as a visual indication of natural pauses which occur in verbal sentence structure and change in subject matter.

### **E X E R C I S E 4.3**

#### **FLUIDITY OF SPEECH**

Consider what additional methods of highlighting dialogue continuation or natural flow of narrative presentation can be adopted within both asynchronous and synchronous exchanges. Sharing this activity with a colleague could provide valuable feedback on how this might be experienced when using it within client work.

### **Pacing of verbal dialogue**

When communicating online, in either a synchronous or asynchronous context, without the facility of a medium that provides voice call (which is available with software such as Skype or MSN Messenger), this aspect of face-to-face working can translate across to a heading defined as 'pacing of narrative'. The pacing of verbal dialogue does hold some similarities to those discussed in the section on verbal content, and further endorses the similarities which would be evident in comparing these facets of face-to-face interaction.

I will outline how this may convert to both synchronous and asynchronous computer-mediated communication without actual voice content using examples which hold differing dynamics behind the nature of how the pacing of narrative is evident. Within professional online practice, there may be many more variations which are evident within a client's pacing of both synchronous and asynchronous communication. I have provided two examples as a basis for illustrating this feature of online communication and leave you, the practitioner, to consider further variations and their relevance as they arise within your professional practice.

**Asynchronous communication** Within face-to-face communication, a client may talk in a rapid pace where sentences flow from one straight into another without a reasonable pause to allow the listener to take in information during the flow of dialogue. If this is translated across to written narrative, there are similarities as the text appears as a piece of unpunctuated communication where the subjects matter changes without pause or space or time for reflection by the writer. When this occurs within a face-to-face context, the listener may feel confused and even overwhelmed by the volume and content of the exchange. This usually represents a level of urgency or anxiety being experienced by the presenter of the communication, as they rush to convey the details relating to the subject. Often in face-to-face encounters, the pace of the verbal presentation is influenced by the conscious and unconscious emotions associated with the content of the material being verbally expressed, and the extent of content which the client wishes to convey.

There may be occasions where a person does not consider the word count guidelines which have been suggested prior to commencing ongoing support. This may result in the narrative pacing being rapid and extending the asynchronous dialogue to a word count beyond the time in which the recipient of the material can read and form a reply within a single exchange. A client will often realise after writing their email that they have included too much narrative and ask the practitioner to clarify this in their reply.

Some clients experience the task of constructing their email as difficult for a variety of reasons and the resulting pacing of narrative is slow, which is reflected in the minimal level of content received by the practitioner.

#### **Box 4.4 Pacing of an asynchronous dialogue**

I'm sending through my weekly email to you with a few thoughts and questions regarding my progress with self-help sheets you sent last time

I tried to complete the sheet which asked questions about how I'd felt over the last week but I find it hard to get time to sit down in the evenings and think about what's happened in my day and write it all down. You mentioned last



time that I would need to put time aside for it but it's not easy for me to do that with everything else that's happening at home with family life. i'll try it again this week and see how I get on. Work is really busy at the moment and I feel tired in the evening too. The relaxation sheet you gave me was helpful and I managed to find time last night to try it out. I did feel okay afterwards (more relaxed than usual). John, my partner took the children out for a walk so that helped too. In respect of my eating patterns I've talked with my Gp and he's offered to refer me to a dietician at the hospital, just have to wait for an appointment.....

Box 4.4 provides an example of where the pacing of narrative is hasty and flows quickly from one point of discussion to another without a pause or extended reflection on the topic presented. The client has sent the email without spell-checking it first, resulting in errors. The absence of an opening greeting to the practitioner indicates a detachment from the person who will be receiving the email. This may be a feature of how the client communicates asynchronously, or represents a further aspect of the hurried nature in how the email was written. The overall structure and content of this email may well represent a similarity to how the client is experiencing a lack of order and suitable time management in their personal life, and therefore offers insight which can be considered in the practitioner's reply.

**Synchronous communication** When working synchronously with clients, the pacing of narrative is clearly more apparent as both parties are communicating in real time, therefore making the pacing visible as it occurs during the flow of communication. Within this CMC, there is a natural opportunity for the practitioner to observe and explore with a client any apparent fluctuations in the pacing of the written narrative.

In Box 4.5, Julie has suggested a synchronous meeting with Sam as their asynchronous exchanges do not appear to be generating a sense of connection and forming of the required online relationship. Julie felt it may be the choice of asynchronous contact which was impacting upon this. They agree to meet for one session to try to enhance the online rapport and attunement.

#### **Box 4.5 Synchronous dialogue via email**

*Julie:* Hello Sam. How have you been this last week?

*Sam:* Hi ....it's been okay

*Julie:* As I had mentioned in my email, I felt meeting synchronously today might be beneficial to us both in getting to a point where you feel that

*(Continued)*

*(Continued)*

your concerns regarding your daughter are moving to a more positive place, and also I was a little uncertain if email support was proving to distance you from me as your counsellor

*Sam:* Okay.....It does feel better talking in this way with you

*Julie:* Shall we spend a few minutes at the end of the meeting deciding how to move forward with appointments

*Sam:* okay that would be good

*Julie:* Was there something in particular that you wanted to talk about today?

[There is a few moments pause before Julie can see Sam writing a response. She consciously holds back for her to reply. If the delay had lasted longer she might have asked Sam if she was OK, whilst also ascertaining if she was pausing before considering her reply.]

*Sam:* I had another fall out with my daughter this week

*Julie:* Would you like to talk about that as it feels as though it was something that stands out above anything else?

[Again there is a lengthy pause before Sam begins to type a response and Julie waits rather than interrupting.]

*Sam:* Okay. Don't really know where to start though.....

In Box 4.5, aspects of the client's narrative pace are very slow, particularly when considering how to discuss issues which have occurred during the last week. The practitioner is immediately aware of this and consciously decides to wait before remarking on it to the client. The decision is based upon Sam being a relatively new client and Julie not yet being familiar enough with Sam's synchronous writing style to know if this is her usual pace, or whether there are other factors involved. If the narrative pace continued in this manner, Julie may ask Sam if she is experiencing any personal difficulties or emotional responses which were affecting her ability to reply without a considerable delay.

## EXERCISE 4.4

### PACING

How might you approach the subject of pacing with clients within synchronous exchanges? What considerations would influence how you might approach this subject with clients?

### **Level of eye contact offered whilst talking, as well as subject and feeling expression areas where eye contact is avoided**

This feature of listening and attending skills is not transferable to CMC unless utilising a webcam for synchronous meetings with clients. When using a webcam or other aid where the person is visible, paying attention to eye contact will be more restricted than in face-to-face contact. This is due to the requirement to be involved in other activities, such as typing during the course of the online exchange. Nonetheless, this does provide some advantage over a complete absence of visual indicators.

*Subject and feeling expression areas where eye contact is avoided* With the absence of a physical presence during online counselling exchanges, there will not be the same opportunity to notice where a client avoids direct contact when speaking. In face-to-face contexts, this can represent a client experiencing a feeling of embarrassment, shame, or anticipation that they may be judged by the practitioner, and so avoid being in receipt of disapproval or judgement by averting their eyes from direct contact with the other person. There may also be occasions where a client looks away from the practitioner whilst considering how to form a reply or structure the content of a piece of communication. In such instances, this may not be related to feelings which are described in the former example of eye contact avoidance or aversion.

When interacting with clients using asynchronous dialogues, such as email exchanges, the practitioner would not have an indication of eye contact avoidance unless the client had included information relating to this as a reflection within the content of their communication. When synchronously engaging with a client, such visual eye contact aversions may be apparent due to breaks in the flow of dialogue, or when the practitioner can visually see that the client has begun to construct a sentence but notices a pause in their writing. This can be particularly helpful when using an instant relay chat medium as both practitioner and client will usually have a visual indicator that shows when either party is writing text. This facility can therefore give insight to where a break in eye contact with the computer screen or thought process has occurred, and where it may be appropriate to invite a client to share what may have caused the pause in their writing.

#### **EXERCISE 4.5**

#### **DEALING WITH PAUSES**

How would you envisage being able to maintain a focus and concentration when there are lengthy pauses due to a client requiring more time to construct their thoughts and form a synchronous reply?

**EXERCISE 4.6****STEERING A CLIENT**

Consider how you might encourage a client to identify where uncomfortable thoughts or feelings are causing the client to divert their attention?

**Apparent silences or areas where the client appears to block themselves from entering into discussion on difficult subject areas**

During online interactions, there is the absence of visual indicators which illustrate apparent silences in the same manner as would occur in a face-to-face exchange. The manner in which it may become evident during a synchronous online interaction is highlighted in the simulated client example provided in Box 4.6, where Mia is a worker employed in a voluntary online agency providing synchronous online support to young Asian women.

**Box 4.6 Dealing with difficult pauses**

*Mia:* Hello Shirin....you mentioned last week that you would like to talk about finding somewhere local to continue your study after finishing sixth-form study...and also the subject you want to study. Would you like to start with that today?

*Shirin:* Hi Mia. Things have changed since last time and I'm not sure I need to talk about that any more.

*Mia:* Can you say more about that Shirin as last week you seemed really keen to discuss it?

*Shirin:* No it's okay I think I just want to talk about something else this time

*Mia:* Sure that's fine Shirin. If you feel it's already been resolved we can talk about something else.

*Shirin:* I'm not sure if coming to the agency was a good idea really as it's not helping me to sort things out in the way I'd hoped.

*Mia:* Can you say more about that Shirin as I'm not clear why you feel that way?

*Shirin:* Well I talk here... but nothing really changes. I can't really see how it can change

[Mia notices that Shirin began to type something further but then stopped. Mia waits for a moment or two then sends the following question.]

*Mia:* I noticed you were typing something else Shirin, but I didn't receive any text on the screen... was there something you wanted to say?

[After a moment or so Shirin sends her reply, although it is evident to Mia that she stopped and started typing several times before 'releasing' any text onto the screen.]

*Shirin:* My parents make decisions for me about my study and where to study. So there's no point in me talking about it here as I just feel more upset about not having any choices

[The dialogue continues with Mia asking Shirin if she would like to talk about her frustration with the conflict between her own and her parents' wishes for Shirin's future.]

In Box 4.6, although there was no visual contact between the practitioner and client, Mia has an awareness that her client is feeling reluctant to pursue conversation in a subject area which she had previously identified as a priority. Clearly, there are underlying reasons for the client avoiding discussion on the subject, but with considered encouragement, the practitioner endeavours to support the client in exploring the underlying issue which is not being explicitly expressed. The practitioner has picked up on the 'visual' indications of the client experiencing a block in revealing the issue which is concerning her, and provides a supportive opening for Shirin to look at what might be contributing to her avoidance of the issue.

## EXERCISE 4.7

### DEALING WITH PAUSES

Consider how you would encourage and support a client in face-to-face exchanges where apparent 'blocks' occur. How might your skills in this area transfer across to online exchanges?

### Body language

Unless the client has supplied a personal photograph, adopts an avatar to illustrate their online persona, or is visible via a webcam, there is an obvious lack of visual presence when working online with clients.

A photograph or avatar is also static and only captures impressions of body language in the context of when a photograph was taken, or at the point the avatar image was adopted. Where a client has provided a photographic image,

this can be useful as a tool for gaining insight to characteristics of the person, even if only to the point of being able to see the pose and body mannerisms at the time the photograph was taken. If practitioner and client use webcams during synchronous exchanges, there will be a limited advantage of being able to observe body language as both parties may also be typing and therefore not continuously looking at the other person. When using a microphone for speech communication in conjunction with a webcam, this will move the potential to observe body language to a closer likeness in that of face-to-face communication.

### **Visual and verbal characteristics of the person, including gender, cultural origin, disability, and personal faith**

During computer-mediated exchanges, the verbal characteristics of a client's presentation transfer from a face-to-face context as dialogue expression and narrative connotations. There will be distinct differences in these two features, which are heightened by factors such as gender, cultural origin, disability, and personal faith. Lago and Smith (2003) provide a practitioner guide to promoting awareness and professional development to counteract the potential impact of such features within therapeutic relationships.

There are also the influences of social, economic, and demographic features which will be present. Prior to considering these factors, it is important to take into account that there will be a personal framework in how each client structures and presents the content of their dialogue expression and narrative connotations. These features will vary according to the external and personal influences being experienced by the individual, both in the past, the present, and the future. The manner in which a client presents during computer-mediated exchanges and structures their communication and its content is therefore influenced by many factors, and is multi-layered. Such differences can be experienced as magnified within online interactions, particularly where clients are sourced from countries of origin which are demographically different to the practitioner (Suler and Fenichel, 2000). This occurs in the practitioner's encountering of clients within a face-to-face setting, but has differing nuances within the context of computer-mediated exchanges. It is important to consider and note this to inform the skills of listening, attending, and attunement to a client.

To further qualify the terms of dialogue expression and narrative connotations, the following explanation of the terms may assist in providing clarification:

- *Dialogue expression* The word dialogue represents spoken words, conversation, or literature in the form of a conversation. CMC, although usually in written form, consists of the words and conversation between two or more people. It is in essence the conversation which occurs in CMC. It often includes the presence of internal thought processes, which can be denoted

by the visible insertion of words within brackets or the use of other symbols to create awareness for the reader that internal thoughts or feelings are being conveyed and shared. The manner in which a client adopts their dialogue expression will vary, just as it occurs within face-to-face interaction. This is present as a unique personal watermark of each client.

- *Narrative connotations* Within the context of literature, the word 'narrative' is defined as telling a story, giving an account of something, or recounting the sequence of events that are related to a process or occurrence. If two people were given the task of verbally conveying the same narrative to another person, there would be variations in how they each applied connotations to the presenting of the narrative, which in turn personalise the delivery of it. In addition, this may have the effect of changing the meaning behind the words. This often occurs when particular emphasis is placed on words, or pauses are included where not necessarily indicated within the text. This holds a similar feature within online communication as each client will bring a personalised style of narrative connotation.

A practitioner can use their understanding and familiarity with the individual characteristic of each client's online presentation to gain insight in how best to develop rapport with a client, whilst also noting changes in dialogue expression in conjunction with narrative connotations, and the significance of this.

#### ***Varying personal influences on dialogue expression and narrative connotations***

To illustrate the variations that may become apparent, take a few moments to consider how you might write an email to a friend with the intention of informing them that you are going away for a few days on a business trip. Next consider how the email content and style may vary if you were writing it in the following circumstances:

1. At the beginning or end of the day.
2. When under pressure to complete another task.
3. When you had just received some bad news.
4. After having a disagreement with someone close to you.
5. When looking forward to the trip in contrast to experiencing a resistance to go.

Although the intention of the email communication remains static, each of the circumstances listed above would influence, to varying degrees, how the dialogue expression and narrative connotations would be presented within the email. All of these variations, alongside more defined gender, cultural, disability, and personal faith differences, will be apparent during online communication. These are considerations which the practitioner will be able to utilise to gain insight into their clients and presenting issues, particularly where an ongoing relationship is formed due to the variations which are influenced by personal and external factors.

The colloquial terms and dialect will be evident and can provide insight into elements of a client's mannerisms and their origin. Within face-to-face communication, you may have two clients who present to a service for support with the same presenting issues yet the manner in which they verbally recount material to a practitioner will be individual and unique. This occurs in the same manner during computer-mediated exchanges. The individual narrative style and the form in how this is presented will vary with each online client and is naturally influenced by many factors beyond the direct differences of gender, cultural origin, disability, and personal faith.

*Dialogue expression and narrative connotations relating to gender, disability, cultural, and personal faith features within online communication* When supporting others in a face-to-face interaction or relationship, the facets of difference and diversity presented by each client will generally be evident due to there being a physical encounter. This provides a visual perspective that offers a level of insight and awareness which is not readily available when conducting an online practice. The potential to engage with others within a global interface naturally enhances the opportunity for practitioners to encounter clients from a broader range of cultural base, origin, and social and economic context. This requires consideration and awareness by practitioners, as they will not have access to the same opportunities for visual and audio indications to signify a need in accommodating apparent difference in how a client may present their dialogue expression or narrative connotations.

Within face-to-face encounters, a valuable tool to assist in opening and continuing a dialogue, where such diversity occurs, is encouraging discussion on perceptions of difference (Nelson-Jones, 2003). By not addressing such factors, this can adversely impact upon rapport and the relationship (Multi Cultural Issues Board, 1996). The same principles apply when engaged in computer-mediated supportive relationships with clients.

The variations which can occur across a global perspective are too numerous to highlight within this section, but the key considerations for an online practitioner fall into two main areas:

1. The apparent difference in how a client expresses themselves necessitates sensitivity by the practitioner and time for reflection on how the online communication can be facilitated and developed to provide the appropriate environment which is conducive to the interaction and relationship. The responsibility lies with practitioners to establish an interchange where both parties feel 'heard' and understood.
2. In addition to considerations regarding the individual features of a client's dialogue expression and narrative connotations, it is important to reflect on gender, cultural, disability, origin, and personal faith differences. These feature as a further layer of variation in client presentations. There may be



an increased tendency to stereotype and pre-judge clients when encountering difference in an online setting as there is an absence of physical presence and visual indications. There is an increased likelihood to adopt the use of projection or transference responses. If a practitioner forms an image of their online client as a means of consolidating their engagement with the person, this may lead to projections based upon prejudiced and biased perceptions of the client. It is therefore important for online practitioners to note that this may occur, and monitor their image interpretations of clients to avoid such projections which may subsequently impair the client relationship.

## Summary

The skills discussed within this chapter form key aspects in the process of communicating, listening, forming a relationship, and attunement with clients. They are the basis of how an online practitioner conveys their understanding of the client and the individual presentation of material or issues within the online interaction. Without proficiency in these features, the exchange between practitioner and client would become impersonal and impracticable. The practitioner is required actively to demonstrate their understanding and attunement with a client, using skills which are adapted from those apparent in face-to-face encounters, in conjunction with seeking to establish and convey an online presence which instils a sense of trust within clients. It is vital that clients experience a feeling of being valued and heard. There will be distinct differences in how each client presents on a personal level, in addition to how their personal material, dialogue, and narrative style are conveyed within the context of CMC. Consideration of these points will assist practitioners in achieving attunement with their clients.

## Points for consideration

- How do you currently communicate interest, attention, and attunement within face-to-face encounters? Consider how this could be transferred into CMC.
- What key issues would be apparent within differing platforms of CMC, which are additional to those illustrated within this section, and may impact upon securing attunement and the appropriate listening skills when engaging online with clients?
- What do you anticipate might influence your personal tendencies towards stereotyping or prejudicial reactions when encountering diversity within your engagement with online clients?

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Further reading, references, resources, and skill development activities relating to the subject matter within this chapter can be sourced via the companion website to this book.