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Tips for working online therapeutically without a formal training

March 2020. These are extraordinary times, and extraliterary times call for some flexibility from our usual mantra about the requirements to be trained to work online. All the professional membership bodies are giving more or less the same advice during these difficult times: encouraging working safely in a way that will support the client. Whilst they are pointing at ACTO Online Training Providers for those thinking of working online, the reality is, that whilst this will be very useful in the long run, there are many therapists who need to do some work online right now.

These tips are written for right now and assume you have never done any training to work therapeutically online, and cover mobile phones, iPads, laptops and fixed computers.

Being familiar with the technology you are going to use is essential not only so you continue to be professional, but also because you may have to teach the client how to be an online client.

Before we get going, I would like to use an analogy that will help focus us on some of the technical issues that might arise: the wonky table.

The wonky table is endlessly irritating and distracting, it wobbles, tips the coffee out of the cups, disturbing the flow of natural conversation ….. working online is similar.

If the technology and the equipment get in the way they are like the wonky table. When a table does not have a wonky leg, it is almost invisible to us, something we sit at whilst being engrossed in conversation and drinking coffee.

Digital technology needs to be invisible and working efficiently for the therapeutic relationship not to suffer: it must be so seamless that we don't notice it. Following some of the suggestions below, and practicing with friends before getting going clients will mean the therapy less likely to reassemble a wonky table!

Many of these points will equally lead to your own self-care, critically important as you may be working online for many hours each day.

Your Ethical Framework

1) At all times you should think about your ethical framework and whether you are working within the limits of your competence when you take on a client. Not to do so may put both you and your client at risk and will certainly affect the therapeutic relationship. This remains crucial especially in these difficult times. For example, if you do not understand how Zoom works, using it with a client would be outside you limits of competence and is likely to affect the therapeutic relationship.

2) If you are not experienced in online work, then you may prefer to do some holding work with your client rather than explore complex issues such as trauma which require specialist thinking about in the online context. Supporting your client through these difficult times may be the most important goal, and you should discuss this with your client. Equally you'll want to discuss this with your supervisor before setting out on this path.

3) We recommend not taking on new clients for working online without some training. Only move clients to the online format if you have worked with them face to face. This will dramatically reduce the risk to both you and your client as you are likely to already hold a lot on information about the client, and have established a good therapeutic alliance.

Possible Formats, Boundaries and the Setting

4) Some clients will not be able to see you from their own homes as they may be full of children, partners, noise etc, so no privacy may be possible. For this group of clients, we suggest you draw on the walk and talk therapy principles. You client could either go to a park, or sit on an isolated bench or wall, or in the privacy of their own car. The most important thing is for them to be in a safe and private place to talk without interruption and to be emotional without drawing attention to themselves. You may need to alter the therapy delivery format to cope with being outside, for example perhaps moving from video to audio.

5) If you are seeing a client away from their home, give them a check list of things to remember to take: mobile phone, headset (if Bluetooth, take a backup as a Bluetooth one may not last an hour), a battery pack and the lead for it, warm clothing, tissues, dark glasses.

6) If you are seeing your client away from home, you'll want to discuss with the client about setting the laptop or mobile phone somewhere stable so it is not handheld for an hour. On a wall, dashboard, you can even use a camera tripod! Just thinking creatively. Do not be afraid to discuss with the client if you can't hear or see them …. They probably can't see themselves so they will have little or no idea that you can't see them. Make sure they position the camera so there is a solid surface behind them such as a wall to avoid any unwanted intrusion. There will be some more tips under equipment about the good use of equipment.

7) Think about which format you are going to use for these out of the usual meetings. Each one has advantages and disadvantages. The options are audio, video, live chat and email. Be prepared to change, and of course there is the mobile phone or landline for a traditional phone conversation, but they will still need a headset or will tire easily. You will find more suggestions under item 10.

8) You are likely to be sitting at your computer for many hours. It's really important that you think about your self-care and comfort right now and set things up as best you can – this does not need to cost anything except time to do. The advice about creating a professional frame and screen presence for you to work in will be equally useful for

your client. Further investing in your seating arrangements to protect your body, and how you protect your eye sight and hearing is crucial for an online therapist. If you follow the tips below you will be comfortable in the way you work.

Photographers have spent many hours perfecting their shots. We can learn a lot from them, and having good screen presence is essential in online therapy. It should be invisible to the session – if it gets in the way of the session then this is a distraction to the work we do – like the wonky table. Some of the ideas below come directly from photography. We recommend you turning on your Zoom camera and studying the image you portray in the light of the information provided below. We are aiming at seamless screen presence so clumsy use of technology does not get in the way of a session, so back to the wonky table example!

- Think hard ahead of the session about the image you wish to portray. If you are using video turn on the camera before a session and check out how it looks and ensure that there is nothing distracting about what can be seen on your video screen. Lamp shapes coming out of the back of a person's head on video can be very distracting! Choice of décor for video is a personal matter, from neutral to cluttering, each will bring its own issues and you should consider this subject especially in a therapeutic setting.

- One of the major errors is people sitting too close to the screen. In a face to face setting you'd be around 2 metres apart. Being up close and personal on a screen can feel very invasive and none of us want to see your nasal hair! We recommend around 18 inches or 45 cms between you and the screen. You are aiming for a good head and shoulders position in the centre of the screen. The distances quoted here may vary dependant on your computer and camera. You are aiming to be in the middle of your screen, both vertically and horizontally.

- Make sure that the lighting is good on the screen. Lighting is critical, as in photography. Try never to have a window directly behind you or to the side of you. Direct sunlight shining on you (if a window is in front of you) is also a problem. Spend time practising what gives the best effect before a session. Good enough is not good enough in this context.

- Ensure that your screen is straight. This is easy to fix. Just use something that is behind you, that you can see on the screen, the edge of a door, or a bookcase to find a vertical line. Ensure that you screen is tilted to find a parallel line to the edge of the video screen. Having a screen leaning forward or backwards will distort the picture and be a distraction.

- Ensure that your eye line is 2 to 3 inches / 5 cms above your camera. In other words, you are slightly looking down at the camera. Make sure your laptop / computer screen / camera is at the right height to achieve this. You may need to lower or heighten your chair, or the computer. Alternatively buy a folding computer table such as an etpark foldable lap desk (or similar) which is ideal in so many situations and allows you to alter the height easily. It is very difficult watching a shaking camera for any length of time and it is exhausting for the person holding the mobile phone or other device.

- Not only should you make sure you are looking slightly down to the camera, think of all the newsreaders – they talk to us directly – what they are doing is always looking at the camera, which gives the illusion that they are looking at us. So ALWAYS look at the camera, and if you are also using a second screen ensure that it is within your eyeline without having to move your head or eyes. You may need a second screen in order to complete notes during a session – practice this activity before doing it during a therapeutic session.

- Always use a head set. The sounds will be much better and a headset ensures far greater sound privacy, particularly important for privacy in therapy. This is especially important if there are two of you on the same meeting in the same building as you may get interference. Try to be as far away as possible and have one of you muted at all times. Avoid using the inbuilt speakers on the phones – this is fine for short telephone conversations but the sound quality will be poor and put you and your client under stress if used for therapy sessions. If you are going to spend many hours in a day using a headset, try to mix them up by changing headsets every couple of hours. You have the choice of the sort provides with mobile phones, which go in your ears, the sort that look a bit geeky but sit over your news like a radio DJ, or bone conduction heat sets. Investing in protecting your hearing is very important.

- If you are on a group meeting, it is good netiquette to keep your microphone turned off if you are not speaking. This makes a huge difference to meeting quality. If you are the meeting organiser you have some control over muting and unmuting attendees so if you hear a poor connection you can test this out by muting one speaker at a time. On the subject of netiquette, you may find Carole Francis-Smith's Netiquette Guidelines very useful **https://www.carolefrancissmith.co.uk/diamondleaf-training/the-netiquette-revolution/** [Last accessed 26/03/2020].

- Make sure you have a truly comfortable professional desk chair – not an armchair – you are going to be sitting in it a lot and self-care requires ensuring you do not get back issues, or wrist issues etc …. Having a good supportive chair is a help. Every chair is different and if you can we recommend that you try out different office chairs before buying one. Do not buy a cheap chair, it will not last and will not support you properly. You might want a chair that comes with a footrest – some of these the foot rest is separate and for others it folds underneath.

Equipment and Software

9) **Test:** Ensure that you have tested all equipment and software before your first session. Do this with a friend and ask them to be hyper-critical – not telling you the truth won't help you learn. Always try out the software before your first professional session otherwise you may look unprofessional.

10) **Format options**: Talk the client through the format options well ahead of the session, and send the client any resources they will need, perhaps this guide, or the associated **Academy Zoom Guide**. Make sure clients are comfortable with the technology they are going to use or it will be like the wonky table and a complete distraction from the therapy.

a.	**Video**	is most similar to face to face but only seeing a head and shoulders amount so you miss a lot of prompts and cues.
b.	**Audio**	is most like the telephone and you lose more of the prompts and cues
c.	**Live chat**	is the most difficult in some ways as there are so few cues, and we recommend you do not do this unless you are trained in live chat.
d.	**Email**	this too is fraught with issues unless you are trained, but it can be a life saver sometimes, and you may find that if a client really can get no privacy during this crisis, that the only way to do the therapy may be late at night via email. Please ensure clients password protect any

document they send you as an attachment and that they never do their therapy in an open email.

11) **Audio and video**, ensure that both you and the client are prepared with the right kit. Protecting your senses and using good equipment will be important for you if you are spending hours online with clients:

    a.   **Headset**   either bone conduction headset (expensive but excellent and thoroughly worth the money), Bluetooth (battery might run low) or wired (some iPhones won't take wired headphones any more, e.g., iPhone x). Of the wired sort some fit in the ear and some sit over the ear. It's a question of choice.

    b.   **Camera**   no doubt you have experienced others holding a device – it is very tiring for both parties, holding it is tiring and looking at it is distracting. Ensure that whatever device is used is lodged firmly (blue tack, clothes peg, pile of books or bricks etc). So, do not handhold a device for a session.

12) **Internet bandwidth**: both you and the client will need sufficient band width for the sessions. If you are unsure, do a speed test yourself and ask your client to do one. **https://www.speedtest.net/**. You will need a minimum internet download speed of 3.5 mbps and minimum upload speed of 1.5 mbps. If you or they are using a mobile phone signal, ensure the 4G signal that is strong enough, at least 3 bars.

13) **Software options**: Choose your video / audio / live chat software. We recommend Zoom currently **https://zoom.us/**. It's very professional and secure, but remember, there is no such thing as 100% security anywhere in life and certainly not with software. Always have a plan B, such as a phone number. Skype or VSee are fine for home use but not for professional therapy that requires privacy – from an ethical framework point of view, any video software that requires a contacts' list is breaching our etic framework requirements concerning confidentiality – it is NOT alright for a client to see when you are and are not online, and vice versa; it is not alright for you to see when a client is and is not online. This is also enshrined in GDPR. Zoom operates entirely anonymously so avoids any of these confidentiality issues.

> These tips have been put together by Pip Weitz, **pip.weitz@acadtherapy.online**. If you feel anything needs modifying please email her with clear feedback about how to improve these instructions.
>
> We hope you have appreciated these tips, and if later on you might be interested in training to work online therapeutically with an aim of joining the Association for Counselling & Therapy Online (ACTO) as a Professional Member, you can find more about the Academy for Online Counselling & Psychotherapy and our dedicated online therapy training courses at **https://www.acadtherapy.online/**.