

Anne Stokes The Joanna Case Study and Working Online

In preparation for the 2014 Multi-Modality conference at which Philippa Weitz is speaking about working online she asked a number of clinicians from different modalities to comment on the Joanna case study.

Please be aware that this is "work in progress" for this conference and that each of the contributors will be continuing to work on their reflections for a book planned on the subject.

I assume that the counsellor, like the GP, doesn't know about the physical and sexual abuse initially.

There is a need for assessment as you would F2F, but this may need to be in place before contracting. F2F it might be done in the same session. However in email work or even live text, how it is done will be different and may be more formal, as whatever the orientation of the therapist, it will be written. This will depend on the individual online therapist of course, but in my case, I would want to do the assessment first, as contracting can take more than one email. It seems unfair on the client to do this and then after an assessment refer on. They have already at some level psychologically begun the process.

There would be a need to also check out what contract is in place with the GP surgery re confidentiality. Is it the whole surgery team, or simply the counselling service? I note the counselling service is local, so does that mean that there is any F2F contact with anyone at the surgery – if so who and how? It is important for the counsellor and client to know what the contract with the surgery is re provision of online work.

In the contract with the client, the counsellor has to check the level of confidentiality and security re the client's computer. Is it password protected? Does the husband know that counselling is taking place? Does he have access to the client's emails? I would suggest setting up a secure password protected encrypted means of working together – this may be in place already on the counsellor's side through the service, but what about for the client? Contract re IT / internet failure.

Reading the case study, I am aware that the client's mother was perpetrator and I am female. This may affect the client's ability to form a relationship with me and trust me. (I wouldn't know that initially, but it may become apparent through the way in which the client writes). However online work, and particularly text, seems a good way to work because it may give Joanna more of a sense of being able to 'hide' or control the work than f2f. This is not necessarily 'true' or borne out in practice, but perception is all.

Once abuse is disclosed, I would be wondering about ongoing work as a possibility, and recognise that might not be possible under the counselling service contract with GP; it depends on the what *The online service can offer 6 sessions initially, but this can be renewed in an ongoing way where needed* actually means. If it could be renewed that would have to be approached tentatively, as seeing the words on paper rather than hearing them might spook Joanna. If extension is not possible, then discussing referral to another online counsellor on a fee paying contract could be discussed, and I would make use of the ACTO directory.

At the beginning of the work, I would want to set goals together. There are two possibilities a) that Joanna is unlikely to come out with the abuse initially, so I would be looking for clues to underlying issues which might help that to come in to focus or b) disinhibition would enable Joanna to say a

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great deal and reveal the abuse in the first email or live text session, in which case, I would be looking to put into place goals/ boundaries which would enable us to work safely within what might solely be a 6 session contract. I'd also be aware of the danger of the client 'running' after disclosing and how much easier to 'run' can seem to a client online.

Finding out what helped and what wasn't useful in previous psychotherapy would be useful, and I would be considering how it might be possible to recreate the positives online and avoid parallels with the unhelpful.

I use creativity online whenever possible, and over the course of our work, I would be considering what might be possible and appropriate with this particular client. It might include and unsent letter to mum (sent to me if that felt right for Joanna); sent scanned images, collages, photos; use of metaphors; exploration of fairy tales or childhood stories which resonated with Joanna and a whole variety of other possibilities. It is important to be aware of how easy it is to be creative online and not simply see this as only possible when working F2F.

Once disclosure has been made, there would be a number of questions that I would want to ask re safeguarding. Is the mother still alive, and does Joanna see her? What gender are Joanna's children and if they are girls, does J have any concerns around them with her mother? (And might I have?!) I think that safeguarding issues are potentially more complex to address and find ways through online. The fact that there could be ease of contact with the surgery could make this easier, or in fact more difficult.

Other questions might be around where dad was in all of this during J's childhood? Are there siblings? Does/ did anyone else know what happened? What were her strategies for survival – although staying aware that there have been suicide attempts. There could be a danger of disassociation in this trauma work, so pace, strategies and other support would all be necessary to put in place, as the online counsellor may not be able to know about this in the same way as f2f. That is, at best it would be reported by the client in emails; at worst the counsellor might not know at all unless she asks.

Projection and transference do happen in online text work, and I would be looking to see if this seemed to be happening. If so, when/ whether it was something to bring in to our email exchanges or live sessions. I see myself as fundamentally person centred, but I do use insights and techniques from other approaches. I find Solution Focussed perspectives particularly useful online. With Joanna, I'd need to stay aware of how I asked questions as that could feel abusive and replay the original trauma. Being tentative and relational, with a great deal of affirmation, might be the way to use this approach, though this is an assumption and till I was working with J, it can only be that!

In terms of the medium, I can see that it could be very useful to stay with text based work, and particularly emails. Joanna has 3 young children and therefore would need to be able to turn to the therapeutic work when they are not around and needing her attention. This might be easier than a fixed time for a text based live session. It might also give her the opportunity to simply write down what is going on for her emotionally at a low period and send the email – this depends on the original contract.

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Dialogue for live session

A – Thank you for sending back the contract. Before we start the session, can I just ask if there is anything that has occurred to you, or you want to ask about, since sending it back?

J – Hello A. No it was all quite clear. Thanks

A – And is there anything else that wasn't in the contract that you'd like added?

J – I don't think so. I am not really sure of how this is going to work.

A – Sounds as if it may be feeling a bit strange at the moment. So if anything occurs to you later, do please tell me at any time.

J – OK.

(I have an awareness that I am typing much more than the client. Watch that as it may affect the relationship. Is it happening because she genuinely is unsure of what 'she's supposed to do' or is there something here connected to whatever is the issue she wants to work on?)

A – So, Joanna, I am going to ask you an odd question. If at the end of our time together, you felt it had been useful to you, what would we have achieved?

J – Do you mean today's session or the 6 weeks?

A - Which ever you'd like to go with – or both.

J – OK – I will try to tell you.

(May be I need to be clearer, or maybe J is putting off telling me what she wants. If the latter, keep that in awareness as what she says next may not be what she really wants us to achieve. Also I remember that when clients say they 'will try', they can mean that they don't expect to succeed.)