The therapeutic alliance online

Kate Dunn

Case study

Sam was an only child who had left school at eighteen with three A-levels and begun working full time in a landscape-gardening business. His parents had separated when he was thirteen after his dad lost his job as a postal worker, partly due to his extreme mood swings and heavy drinking, which then worsened. Sam maintained contact with his dad but saw him only infrequently. During his A-levels his dad was diagnosed with liver cancer. At first he seemed to respond to treatment but then suddenly developed an infection and died within three months of diagnosis. Sam was deeply shocked; his mum refused to talk about it, having remarried a couple of years after she separated from his dad.

Although he enjoyed his job, Sam often felt frustrated; he had particularly enjoyed studying English at school and had written short stories and articles for the school magazine, which he missed doing. He had begun a relationship with a girl he had met at a party and they had kept in touch mainly online, spending occasional weekends together. She was about to study for a PGCE and encouraged Sam to apply for university. With his girlfriend's encouragement and support, he was successful in gaining a place about eighty miles from home and three

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hours' drive from where his girlfriend was studying. He settled in quite quickly and threw himself into life at university, living in halls in his first year and then moving into a shared house with three friends in early summer.

During his second year at university, he was devastated to receive a letter from his mum, informing him that she was suffering from advanced ovarian cancer and that treatment was proving largely inef-fective. She reassured him that she was being well looked after by his stepdad and that he must "continue working hard to make a new and different future for himself". He felt lost, frightened, and confused but said nothing to his housemates or friends. He began drinking heavily, missing lectures and seminars and failing to meet course deadlines. He became irritable and withdrawn, avoiding his friends and often failing to respond to his girlfriend's messages and calls. A concerned tutor urged him to visit the university counselling service. At first he refused (within his family, feelings were never talked about) but whilst online he spotted a website link to the university's e-counselling serv-ice, where he discovered he could speak to a therapist weekly by email without them ever having to meet. This reminded him of the way he and his girlfriend had often maintained their relationship, both when they first met and again, since coming to university. He decided, hesi-tantly at first, to find out more and completed the online application form.

He received an immediate response and soon found himself engag-ing in a weekly exchange of emails with a therapist, where he began to write about feelings he would never have previously articulated; he explored his family relationships, engaging with his losses and simulta-neously expressing his fears about the future. His therapist helped him to identify links between these areas of his life and his current feelings and behaviour. The emails took on great significance for him and he found himself urgently checking his inbox each Thursday and feeling a sense of relief to find each new communication. After a short period of time, he realised he was feeling calmer, more able to engage again with his university work and less frightened and angry. He also found that he was opening up more to his girlfriend and friends in person and feel-ing more supported, less alone, and less frightened.

Sam's circumstances replicate those of many young adults, for whom computerised technology has been central to their lives from infancy. This has impacted widely: on educational experiences and

opportunities, leisure activities, personal relationships, all forms of communication, social interactions, creativity, access to global information, and much more. Far from being in awe of the speed of digital progress, Sam views it as a "given". He belongs to what is sometimes called the Facebook generation, whose identity is significantly shaped and expressed online. His smartphone is always close at hand and in his studies, as well as in other areas of life, he uses an extensive array of hardware and software to enhance his learning, generate information, and construct ideas.

Many of the emotional challenges he faces as he progresses from adolescence into adulthood are common across generations and cultures, but Sam's approach and attitude to seeking help may also reflect his contemporary lifestyle. Might there be opportunities to provide support for Sam in innovative ways that take into account the technological age in which he lives? His upbringing took place within a family where feelings were not openly shared. As a young male, the likelihood of him visiting a therapist in person is considerably less, and risk of suicide is up to three times greater, than if he were female, as evidenced by a report by the Royal College of Psychiatrists (2011). He is struggling to make sense of turmoil in his life and in danger of sabotaging his opportunities whilst feeling isolated, angry, and alone. In 2007, Dr. Moira Walker reviewed the provision of mental health treatment online and wrote: "It is vital to access those silently suffering often extreme distress who desperately need services that do not exist and who rarely find a voice through research projects" (p. 60). Prior to the introduction of the e-counselling provision at Sam's university, he might have remained one of those "silently suffering". Much is written about the dangers and shortcomings of online relationships but perhaps we can consider their possibilities, too.

Students and online counselling

I meet many students like Sam in the university where I work. Perhaps online counselling is a more natural therapeutic approach for students than for other client groups; their lives have been immersed in online activity from an early age and they have clearly expressed themselves fluently in computer-mediated formats in order to attain their university place. When they seek answers to problems, the first place they look is online.

In 2007, having undergone training in delivering online therapy, I developed an email counselling provision for students as an alternative to the long-established face-to-face (F2F) service. I was cautious; might this approach feel like a "poor relation" to my usual work? How would I engage with individual students? How could we create an alliance "just" through exchanging emails?

The online service was first proposed as a practical way of extending equal access to counselling for all students, regardless of individual obstacles such as timetabling problems, physical constraints in attending sessions or perhaps being away from the university on placement. In reality, we have found that students who apply for e-counselling are less likely to do so for practical reasons; it is more likely to result from feelings of shame or embarrassment which inhibit them from applying for F2F help. For some students like Sam, e-counselling has provided an essential lifeline at what may be a critical moment in time. Furthermore, the factor that emerged as being of greatest significance for participants in online therapy is the special nature and quality of the *relationship* at the centre of the experience.[1] This was not, perhaps, what I had predicted at the outset.

The therapeutic relationship online

Research studies relating to the efficacy of the online therapeutic relationship are still limited in number and scope. However, encouraging evidence is emerging that suggests that alliances in online text-based therapy show similar ratings to F2F studies (Hanley & Reynolds, 2009). Given that it is widely agreed that the single most important factor determining the effectiveness of *any* therapeutic intervention is the quality of the relationship or alliance between therapist and client, this feels significant. Furthermore, it is emerging that there are elements of online therapeutic relationships that may be qualitatively different from F2F alliances and perhaps uniquely facilitative. This chapter will explore these elements, and illustrate them in action by considering how they impacted on Sam's experiences within his own online counselling.

Some online therapeutic interventions set out to *replace* the counsellor with software especially programmed to respond "appropriately and empathically" to the input of the client. The earliest of these was created by Weizenbaum in 1966 with his computerised therapist "ELIZA". This tongue-in-cheek experiment, designed to demonstrate

the limitations of artificial intelligence using a computer program to convincingly replicate the responses of a person-centred practitioner (!), was so effective that some participants continued to seek opportunities to talk to ELIZA even after it was disclosed to them that they were communicating with a computer rather than a real person. Critically, it seems that there was a particular quality about this "unseen therapist", despite her artificiality, that felt different from the "seen", even in this primitive form. Although here I am exploring engagement between two *real* people but mediated through technology, it is helpful to remember the impact of ELIZA.

Early debates about whether or not it was actually possible to engage therapeutically online suggested that such approaches should attempt to reproduce all elements of F2F relationship. Murphy and Mitchell (1998) expressed concern about the lack of visual cues and physical presence, and advocated a need for "compensatory skills" to make up for this. However others, such as Fenichel et al. (2002), suggested it might be a mistake to take this stance and that it could be more realistic and thought-provoking for online therapists to explore creatively those existing and unique factors of online interaction that might be both qualitatively different and simultaneously beneficial for those involved. Schulze (2006) echoed this idea, encouraging practitioners to explore special qualities that may characterise computer-mediated forms of communication of any kind, rather than to seek to develop specific, ever-more sophisticated hardware and software.

The relationship in action

At the university, we decided initially to offer e-counselling by email only: an "asynchronous" approach (involving a time delay of hours or days between communications), rather than a "synchronous" approach (involving a direct live audio or video link between participants). This decision was taken pragmatically, based on the ethical need to ensure security and confidentiality, which we felt more able to address if the provision was delivered asynchronously. (Training programmes in online counselling stress the vital importance of establishing clear frameworks, articulating them through careful contracting and implementation of robust protocols.) We wondered whether asynchronicity might reduce the quality of the therapeutic alliance in

terms of immediacy and authenticity. The actual experience reported by many participants has demonstrated this to be a false premise. From the outset, the striking power of the relationships that emerged in these email exchanges surprised both therapists and students alike and was specifically commented upon by almost all involved. Observations on this were so striking that I decided to conduct research to attempt to identify more clearly some of the phenomena impacting on these online relationships.

Students who had participated in our e-counselling provision and university counsellors offering similar services elsewhere volunteered to be interviewed about their experiences. Data were gathered which sought to identify those factors which had most led to the positive relationships many had spontaneously reported. Full details of this study have been published (Dunn, 2012) and I will describe here, both in the context of Sam's story and also more generally, the major factors that emerged as having significance.

Questions which underlie the online therapeutic relationship

Central to much online communication is the *unseen* nature of the "meeting". This can prompt a phenomenon that has been described as a "disinhibition effect" (Suler, 2004). Presence online is communicated solely by the text or images that appear on the screen, initiating an urgent drive in many participants to disclose detailed information about themselves and their situation rapidly and as fully as possible. This phenomenon can be illustrated by asking a number of philosophical and also practical questions.

Who am I?

When communicating a sense of self online and asynchronously, many report conserving very carefully how they will be perceived by the person receiving and responding to their communication. Anonymity is a powerful feature of disinhibition; it can empower people and free them from the constraints of embarrassment and shame that may silence them in other settings. (At the same time, of course, we should not forget that there may be risks within this freedom of expression, too. Cyber-bullying and even cyberwars are widely reported and demonstrate the negative potential in such "freedoms".)

Participants in online communication report valuing the opportunity to convey aspects of themselves that they may have previously kept hidden or perhaps not even considered before. Indeed, they sometimes choose to explore fantasies as well as realities in this respect, expressing these not only in words but also using sound, video, avatars, and other symbols or metaphors. For Sam, "Who am I?" was the question at the heart of a search for his young adult identity in a world far removed from his family setting. "Who am I?" also prompted new curiosity about his background and the influence of his parents and upbringing; it gave him a safe space to express both his love for his family members and his anger concerning some of the things that had happened between them alongside his fears for the person he might become. Sam often felt that assumptions were made about him, based on how he spoke, dressed, and conveyed himself physically; communicating a sense of himself that was unaffected by such things felt liberating. He shared concerns in his counselling about his father's mental health that he had never previously articulated. I was able to send him links to reliable sources of information where he could explore his concerns and we were able to discuss his fears in this context.

Who are you? Who is in charge of this?

Not only does the personal identity that the client chooses to portray take on special significance, but also the identity he apportions to his therapist. The unseen nature of their relationship enables the client to imagine his therapist however he might wish him to be, to apply to him a persona that feels helpful for him *at that time*. If this reflects a rather idealised image, might that be empowering at first for the usually inhibited and fearful client? This phenomenon is reported as being especially significant for clients who are usually suspicious of the motives of others, who may have been let down previously by figures of authority, or who may have experienced earlier unsuccessful therapeutic encounters. One role of the online therapist may be, slowly and gradually, to challenge this phenomenon, having initially acknowledged its usefulness and purpose.

In Sam's case, his reluctance to talk aloud about feelings arose partly from a lack of experience, but also from a background that stigmatised emotional difficulties and could prompt feelings of disempowerment when engaging with "experts" or authority figures. Clients in online

therapeutic relationships regularly report feeling greater equality and autonomy, and more frequently identify feeling an internal locus of control than F2F clients. Trust is a necessary component of any successful therapeutic encounter and Fletcher-Tomenius and Vossler (2009) suggest that trust may actually be enhanced by anonymity. For Sam, to experience feelings of trust in such a relationship was empowering.

Transference and countertransference phenomena feature powerfully within online interactions (maybe the potential is heightened by the unitary clues when communication is by text alone) and these phenomena are often more openly and explicitly discussed within the therapy. Without the other cues (body language, etc.) that exist in F2F meeting, there is more need and, indeed, freedom to *describe* inner responses and to request information from the other about the same.

Where are we?

When two people engage in communication online, where do they each perceive the meeting-point to be? Sam chose to write his emails privately in his student accommodation, at a time of his choosing (usually late at night), where he felt secure and unobserved. When he finally pressed the "send" button, he imagined his email travelling through cyberspace and visualised its destination as somewhere neutral and separate from locations that were linked in his mind with stress, pressure, and upsets. (It is important to note that "black hole" experiences may arise if communications fail to elicit a response at the expected time. These can be disturbing and this should be acknowledged by both parties. Contracting information should include reference to this phenomenon and suggest ways of avoiding it.)

Sometimes Sam may have felt that the interaction was taking place inside his head; previously he had kept such inner dialogue to himself and it may have reassured him to be able to connect his therapy back to this safe place. This inner location may represent "transitional space" (to use Winnicott's terminology). In time, he found he began to communicate more openly and out loud about his feelings. Healy (1996) describes this effect beautifully when he says: "It has been suggested that the Internet represents a kind of 'middle landscape' that allows individuals to exercise their impulses for both separation and connectedness". Fink (1999) refers to "telepresence" or "the feeling (or illusion) of being in someone's presence without sharing any

immediate physical space" (Rochlen, Zack, & Speyer, 2004). Sam recognised this feeling too, having taken initial tentative steps towards beginning a relationship with his girlfriend in a similar way, before developing their relationship in person.

What can I say?

Disinhibition may create a refreshing sense of freedom. Within some family settings, such as Sam's, emotional disclosures may be viewed as embarrassing and emasculating. At the time of seeking help, Sam's repression of these feelings was making him feel profoundly angry, depressed, and leading to withdrawal from his usual activities. Freedom to own and articulate emotions, without fear of witnessing a judgmental response in the listener can be very powerful, and can bring surprisingly rapid relief. (This was something described repeatedly by participants in my research). Many find that their first emails initiate a kind of outpouring of extreme feelings and accounts of deeply traumatic events (often using little punctuation and formal sentence structure). Sam's first email described in stark detail the rapid deterioration in his father's health and what it had been like to visit him in hospital just before his death—something he had not been able to share with anyone before. James Pennebaker, has extensively explored the therapeutic value of writing about traumatic events, a process which he has shown to provide rapid and significant benefits for those who engage in it, not only emotionally and psychologically, but also physically.

We feared that asynchronicity might impair the immediacy and authenticity of the relationship, but the evidence suggested otherwise. The explanation for this may best be found in the expression "time to think", used repeatedly by those reflecting on the positive qualities of their e-counselling relationships. Having this facility was identified as significant more consistently than any other factor within the online relationship. For many, the fear that daunts them most when considering F2F therapy is that they will either not know what to say "in the moment", or that they will "say something stupid". Sam was strongly influenced by this, having grown up believing emotional expression to be a sign of weakness. Having a greater sense of control over what is said and when, such as is afforded by asynchronous online counselling, has been described as transformational. Not only can the content be reconsidered or revised before sending, it can also be deleted; there is

always the opportunity to change or review the content until the "send" button is engaged.

How do we go about this—what are the "rules"
of our relationship?

Therapists aim to establish and work within careful boundaries with their clients, contracting about when and where to meet, addressing matters of confidentiality, striving at all times to protect the interests and safely of the client. This applies no less to the online therapeutic encounter. Through training, practitioners learn about features unique to online work that are critical when implementing safe and ethical practice. It is not within the scope of this chapter to describe these in detail; nonetheless, they play an important role in the creation and development of the relationship. Online therapists will have origi-nally trained in many different modalities and they adapt these within their online approach. Some particular elements of this process have been identified in the research as being significant in the development of the online relationship. An online therapist, especially when work-ing asynchronously, is more active than many F2F therapists; after all, you cannot simply respond with "aah ….", "hmm ….", "uhuh …."! Many clients, like Sam, welcome this more equitable dynamic where they can always expect a full and detailed response. As all informa-tion is delivered electronically, initial contracting information must be explicit and full; this is welcomed by cautious and perhaps wary clients. Here, the initial information he received encouraged Sam to continue.

The actual structure of the exchanges evolves uniquely for every therapist/client pairing. Creative use of text, font colours, punctuation, emoticons, and much more can communicate surprisingly rich feelings. The use of imagery, perhaps through shared, extended metaphors or through the attachment of pictorial or audio-based files, for example, can generate a profound sense of connection. The medium also affords the therapist "time to think" where mentalisation processes may per-haps be encouraged and modelled. Sam, as a writer, welcomed this opportunity to communicate and share imagery and began developing a new vocabulary for feelings that felt both validating and helpful in understanding responses of others.

What happens when we finish?

Endings are central to relationships—therapists pay great care and attention to this critical element of their work. What remains of a relationship after it has ended is unique in every case. The relationship will be remembered for many reasons, shaped and determined by factors relating to each individual, the dynamics between them and an enormous array of influences from the outside world. Within the online relationship, whether synchronous or asynchronous, there is an opportunity for every word (or image) that has been exchanged to be stored, kept "on the record". Although this may be a daunting prospect, at first, for the therapist, clients report it as instilling a meaningful and significant quality to their therapeutic relationship. They describe returning to transcripts, sometimes months or years later, and gaining new insights from re-reading the exchanges. They are reassured by the record; they can use it as a monitor of change. It is also a tangible and permanent link to a relationship that may have occurred at a critical moment in time.

For Sam, endings, grief, and loss were central to his situation at the time of seeking help and the opportunity to explore these and then manage the ending with his therapist in a thoughtful and considered way, retaining a concrete record of the events to which he can return at different times in the future, was an essential therapeutic element of the relationship.

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After a therapeutic engagement ends, practitioners hope that an essence of the relationship will endure. We hope that, as a result of the engagement, our clients may move forwards in their lives in ways that may have a positive impact both on reflections on past experiences and also on present and future events. Sam's online counselling relationship gave him a chance to explore new forms of expression, particularly relating to previously hidden inner feelings and thoughts. He recognised that this had a significant effect on many aspects of his life, not just his online world. He experienced a transition through his online therapeutic relationship to a greater openness and confidence in other relationships and this mirrored major transitions taking place in his life more generally at that time. Sam chose to end his online therapy without

meeting his therapist; others choose to engage in further sessions in person, a further powerful transitional step.

Online therapeutic relationships differ in very many ways from F2F relationships. Whilst this chapter has dealt with an example involving asynchronous communication, many of the features described here can and will apply similarly to synchronous approaches, although these may vary in essence with each different use of technology. Many elements of the F2F relationship can never be reproduced online, but I hope that this exploration of some of the unique and special qualities that arise alternatively in this context may encourage more practitioners to consider online work and to enter the technological arena professionally as well as personally. This may challenge traditional thinking about the nature of communication but so long as human beings remain at the heart of the process, the motivation for true relationship will surely endure.

Commentator One: Heward Wilkinson

In this chapter, Kate Dunn has skilfully and sensitively mapped subtle features of the Internet-based therapeutic relationship in a particular form, that of email to email exchange. It would not be impossible to reconstruct other modes or forms by transformation from this one but this is a clear and valuable start. Kate talks with much subtlety about how the email to email exchange can, especially for the present generation for whom it is second nature and almost a reflex (but we may note that many of the previous generation have adapted creatively also), enable an extremely and sometimes unexpectedly rapid depth of disclosure. Obviously this phenomenon is also vividly evident in both political and erotic uses of the Internet, which are changing mores fundamentally "as we write".

"As we write", is precisely the point! Kate indicates this here and there, and I wish to allude to it more fundamentally. As she indicates, there is the rich paradox of a permanent but yet generative record, not needing supplementation by the dubious and undialogical mechanism of "notes". This paradoxical combination of permanence with generativity is the prerogative of "writing" since the god Theuth in Egypt (as, for instance, Socrates wrestles with him in Plato's *Phaedrus*), and is at the heart of what, since Derrida, is known as "deconstruction". And here is another delicious paradox: that it has leapt fully clad into four-dimensional life in our use of the Internet for this carefully boundaried,

yet so unexpectedly powerful, kind of dialogue, which the serendipitous modern creation/discovery of the Internet has made possible! So, in fact, it was perhaps not inappropriate that Tim Berners Lee was recognised by the British Olympics Lead-In in 2012 before Peter Higgs, though on a classical understanding we would be placing Professor Higgs far higher! These are the implicit issues Kate Dunn's very subtle piece evokes.

Commentator Two: Martin Pollecoff

It's in the nature of Web 2.0 and Psychotherapy 2.0 that clients access services in the way that works for them rather than the way in which it has been traditionally offered by the therapist.

Whether its twenty-four hour online banking, a next-day delivery from Amazon, or email therapy, each new offering gains a fresh tranche of clients, converts who would never have had any interest in the traditional offering. Ms. Dunn's work steps right out of the meme of the consulting room and the fifty-minute hour complete with its by-the-hour fees. And this send sends a signal that it's no longer the clients who have to change to fit in with our way of working. The challenge for us therapists is that we have to be creative and step out to meet the "new clients". For those of us who believe that wider access to therapeutic services is vital, the advances featured in this chapter come as a breath of fresh air.

Here, unlike in the consulting room situation, the client has control of the medium. Both the therapist and the client remain imaginary to each other, in that they are dealing with someone they have never met and may never meet. There is not even the sound of a voice, only story, style, and grammar, and yet, transference is there—freed of notions of time and space. The work occurs in this wonderfully disinhibited "middle landscape", a perfect place for us to state and share feelings that could never previously have been uttered. And when you think about it, for a young person, there is something magical and sustaining in knowing that you travel with a wise ally, one who is never more than a text message away.

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Note

1. A pilot scheme was run for the first two years and students provided feedback about many aspects of the service in questionnaires sent to them at the conclusion of their online therapy.