

Dear ACC Members and Affiliates

In response to our email last week we have had a number of counsellors asking us about ethical and practice issues relating to the anticipated impact of Coronavirus. We thought it worth sharing these questions and our responses with you. The questions have been very helpful to us in further develop our thinking. They are on the topics of on-line counselling and -supervision.

Also, one of our members has offered for the benefit of all, a note that she has developed for her clients. It is included as an attachment to this email. Please feel free to use and adapt as you think appropriate.

The most important thing to be doing now, in addition to implementing hygiene practices, is to discuss with your clients the potential impact of measures to delay the spread of coronavirus on your counselling relationship and agreement.

### **On-Line Counselling**

Please note that moving to on-line counselling from face-to-face counselling is for consideration only where an extended period of postponement of face to face meetings with on-going clients is not possible. This could be due to either parties vulnerability to infection or restrictions placed on movement.

*How ethical is it to move clients from face to face to on-line counselling? Can a counsellor who has had no specific training in on-line counselling offer this to clients as a contingency for the Coronavirus outbreak? Is Skype safe?*

ACC's Ethics and Practice state that counsellors should work within their level of competence. So, if a counsellor believes that they are not in any way competent to work on-line, then this is not an option that they can offer to their clients.

In normal circumstances we would expect counsellors to undertake training before they offer on-line counselling. However, the developing situation with Coronavirus with its risk of interrupting on-going therapeutic relationships for a significant period of time, is something of an exception.

We are suggesting that counsellors who have

- a) sufficient experience in counselling practice (we suggest a minimum of 250 hours)  
and
- b) competence in using technology like Skype, Zoom or Vsee

can consider whether they should offer on-line counselling to suitable clients, especially where they believe that there would be a significant adverse impact on the client if therapy sessions were to cease.

This is an *ethical decision* and if you are a counsellor considering this you will need to weigh up the risks and benefits of offering this service for any client that you believe may be suitable (see below). That is the risks might outweigh the benefits for client A, but not client B. As with all ethical decisions this needs to be done in discussion with your supervisor and ultimately you must have the support of your supervisor before you can proceed. You will also need to check that your professional indemnity insurance covers you for working in this way.

If, as an outcome of these discussions, you decide to offer the possibility of on-line counselling to one or more of your clients, then you also need to discuss the risks, benefits and practical arrangements with them, ensuring that you have their informed consent before embarking on this new way of working together (more on this below).

Some points to consider

1. *Conducting an assessment of suitability of the client for transferring to on-line working.*

This needs to be both a psychological and a technical skills-based assessment. What psychological factors pertaining to your client might be positive indicators for them being able to transfer to work on-line, and what might give rise to concern? It's especially important to think about the impact of the loss of the element of physical presence with one another (although you are still 'present' in other ways on-line). This may lead to thoughts about limiting the scope of the work that can be done during this time.

Is the client practised at using tools such as Skype, Zoom and/or VSee? How technically skilled are they, and will they be able to resolve issues with connectivity or use of the tools?

2. *'Speed skilling' the counsellor*

A counsellor who wants to consider offering an on-line service to their current face-to-face clients, should determine what knowledge and know they need and how practically it can be obtained in a short time frame. There may be instantly available on-line CPD courses, books, journal articles and sources of useful information on the internet. Could a colleague who is trained and skilled in on-line counselling give you a 'master class'? Do you have a peer group who can help you reflect on the how your practice might need to adapt? If at all possible 'test out' a Skype session with a colleague and gain feedback on where to best position yourself and to arrange the background etc.

3. *Researching the tools*

There are a number of providers of which Skype, Zoom and VSee are the most commonly mentioned. There is (and historically has been) some concern over the security and privacy of Skype, but we know that it is used routinely by many counsellors. The Information Commissioners Office (ICO) have advised another professional counselling accredited register (the HGI) that provided that there is informed consent from the client, then Skype can be used for counselling.

You may wish to consider the platform that is most familiar to your client, as this will be of obvious benefit to them.

In all cases be careful not to use the application's messaging system to communicate anything other than messages relating to practical details of connecting.

If you are not already registered with the ICO then you will need to do so.

4. *Preparation and Contracting for the new arrangement.*

Have a frank and open discussion with your client about whether or not on-line counselling is something that they would like to consider, being clear about the limits of your skills and

experience, what you have considered in terms of the risks and benefits, and how on-line counselling may impact on and potentially alter the therapeutic relationship/space that you have established between you. Discuss whether the work you will do on-line will differ in anyway, for example if you want to limit the scope of what is worked on, until face-to-face counselling can resume.

If your client is willing to try transferring to on-line counselling, then you should consider either setting out a new counselling agreement or add an addendum to your existing counselling agreement describing the new arrangement. As part of the agreement, or in addition to it, provide information for your client that covers issues to do with for e.g. ensuring that their PC is virus protected and that they are working with the latest version of the chosen software etc; establishing the privacy of their surroundings during a counselling session, ensuring that they cannot be overheard or interrupted for the duration of the call. This should also include a protocol as to how the call will be initiated and ended, what will happen if there are connectivity or other issues with the call etc. The scheduling of appointments should ideally also allow a flexible time frame to take into account time lost in establishing a connection.

#### 5. *Review*

Check-in regularly with the client to make sure that the on-line counselling is of benefit to them and make adjustments as required.

#### **Supervision**

*What happens if my supervisor is unwell or I can't meet with them or their designated replacement? What happens if a local counselling centre can no longer afford to pay for supervision because of the lack of client fees? If I have no clients how can I afford supervision? Will ACC relax their supervision guidelines in these situations due to the special circumstances caused by Coronavirus?*

None of us can be sure what situations we might face professionally over the coming months. It is likely that we will be anxious, and our clients will be anxious, and anyone involved in managing and supporting a counselling centre will be facing difficult decisions. What is clear to us is that the wider professional counselling community will need to work creatively in support of each other during what may be challenging times, and precisely because of these challenges, counsellors and their supervisors will potentially have a greater need than usual for supervision!

We believe it is important to demonstrate respect for on-going supervision contracts where possible. There may be an opportunity to move from face-to-face to on-line supervision – taking into account the relevant considerations outlined above. However, we would also encourage all of our members to develop networks of mutual help and support and to think creatively about how to prepare for and meet any shortfall in supervision arrangements. It may be possible, for example, to develop an interim peer support group or for a supervisor to move from offering individual to group supervision. These arrangements may not meet the highest of ethical and practice standards, but they can be a 'good enough' interim solution and certainly better than leaving individual practitioners isolated.

In addition to this, we will be sending a separate email to our accredited counsellors and supervisors with a view to recruiting volunteers who will be able to give ad hoc telephone support for any professional and ethical issues that an ACC member needs advice and assistance with when they don't have access to their supervisor.

In relation to relaxing our practice standards on supervision we affirm the importance of practising in a professionally responsible way. This means that if supervision arrangements by necessity have to change because of Coronavirus, please make a note of the circumstances and of what you done to help mitigate the loss of supervision support (for example seeking peer support/group supervision/ACC ad-hoc support etc), making sure that you note start and end dates and any other significant changes that take place.

### **Final Points**

Please continue to send in your questions, thoughts and suggestions. ACC members collectively hold many hundreds of years of practice and life experience. We will be happy to pass on information that can further help our community. We are aware that are practice guide to working on-line needs updating which we be working on as a priority.

The ACC team is testing out our office continuity planning and are trusting that we will be able to provide a support service for our members over the coming months.

We hope that whatever this crisis brings, it will also remind us that we are a professional community of faith who can help and support one another and together hold trust in God for our future.

Best wishes

The ACC Team