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I was on a four-month placement as a trainee therapist with Breathe when lockdown was announced in mid-March 2020. I will therefore be addressing the first option of having been engaged in practice work during lockdown.

I am going to examine: my placement at Breathe; preparation for telephone and online therapy; a change in the therapeutic frame; the theory of transition (Bridges & Bridges , 2020); loss; being “good enough”; our senses; my experience of telephone therapy; the challenges and opportunities offered by online therapy; online therapy research studies; endings and conclusion. At each juncture I will critically reflect on how I felt as well as putting my journey into the context of current research where appropriate.

I started my placement in early February 2020 working for Breathe which had been engaged to provide psychotherapy services to a cluster of General Practitioners. For most of my four-month placement I had four or five clients a week, usually on a Wednesday afternoon. With hindsight this was too many in one afternoon and was very tiring. I would be drained by the end of the day and I will therefore try and space out the clients more in the future.

When lockdown was announced we were asked to move quickly to telephone or online therapy. I was given basic training and written materials by Breathe covering telephone and online therapy. I also read what was available on the National Counselling Society website (National Counselling Society, 2020) and Working Online in the Counselling Professions (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, 2019). Everything felt rather chaotic as the change and preparation for online counselling was organised. I felt fairly comfortable with the idea of online counselling as I had received online counselling as a client in the past (approximately ten sessions). I was also used to attending online meetings and telephone

conference calls as part of my work. Looking back, I think I was naïvely confident and underestimated the challenges particularly in respect of telephone counselling (of which more below). On reflection I think I should have attended a detailed course dealing with remote counselling. It was surprising that Breathe, which is an excellent organisation, did not provide in depth and comprehensive training. The whole experience was another ‘baptism of fire’ which I was comfortable with at the time but with hindsight a more structured approach would have been preferable. The outcome of the placement was very positive for me and seemingly for the clients judging by their comments and CORE-10 scores. In future I will pause and reflect before agreeing to new arrangements. Additionally, I will undertake a course in telephone and online therapy. I am procrastinating about this although I am having difficulty with identifying the cause (Grund & Fries, 2018). I will, therefore, research and book a course this term.

There was another smaller but important change as well: the sessions moved from a dedicated room in a council building to working from home. In retrospect I enjoyed being in the ‘therapeutic frame’ more than working from home. The journey to and from the ‘consulting room’ was a clear demarcation; arriving there enabled me to put on the mantle of the ‘trainee therapist’ and leaving allowed me to return to my everyday life. I missed the occasion and setting of the therapy sessions and I realise now that this was an ending for me as outlined in Bridges’ (2020) theory of transition. The ending caused a sense of loss for me which I was comfortable staying with until it passed as telephone and online therapy began. The ending of face to face therapy came suddenly by governmental decree and in turn this created an inner process of transition. Transition occurs when a person lets go of the past and moves into the neutral zone. This is the in-between time when one explores, realigns and creates new patterns and processes and prepares for a new beginning. The neutral period included the remainder of the placement and is still continuing. It was and continues to be a fertile learning period for me (Bridges & Mitchell, 2000).

The clients accepted the new way of working but in the haste to move away from in person counselling I did not allow clients sufficient time to talk through the process and any reservations they had. Furthermore, I may not have sufficiently acknowledged that this was an ending and possibly a loss for them as well (see below). I will be more careful and thorough regarding endings in future.

We had very few technical hitches and the clients transitioned smoothly to online platforms. I looked forward to the online sessions. There were some challenges. One client was working part time and led a busy life – she would regularly miss appointments and her young children would periodically join in the therapy sessions. Although I expected this to clash with my need for structure and order I learnt an important lesson – I can only do the best that I can, given the circumstances. Another way of framing this is I was “good enough”, accepting of an imperfect situation and achieving a positive outcome (Cozolino, 2018). I am happy (proud maybe?) that we managed to complete six sessions and that we both benefitted from doing so despite the challenges with appointments and interruptions.

During therapy we have four senses which gather and send information to the brain: seeing, hearing, touching and smelling. When we are face to face with a client all four senses are active. Touch is a matter of contention although I have, with consent, hugged my then therapist in the past (Rumbelow, 2020). However, when we counsel over the telephone, we can only use hearing (as well as communicating of course). Although I spend a great of time on the telephone and am very comfortable on calls generally, I found telephone counselling difficult. A disembodied voice, no visual connection meant that I found phenomenological noticing very challenging. Even when listening to the client’s tone of voice, their pace of speaking one can miss subtle markers. Communication is less nuanced. This left me feeling distant from my client compared with face to face therapy. I continued to feel this even when I regularly asked

the client what they were feeling and paraphrased what they said to check understanding. I also feel that silence can be important and therapeutically positive. Unfortunately silence during a telephone call can be very unsettling as it is difficult to 'hold' the client. Silence has long been recognised as having significance. Gendlin, for example, thought that silences could be a sign of emotional attunement (Gendlin, 1996). I have noticed that silence can create a closeness between the client and therapist (Levitt & Morrill, 2020).

I did not experience any significant 'disinhibition' (Suler, 2016) with my telephone clients. All of my clients seemed comfortable to move to online platforms after discussion of the merits of working over the telephone or online. I do wonder now, however, whether I gave them enough space to consider this move? They would have noticed my enthusiasm to transfer to online counselling. It is a lesson learnt. Coincidentally I am waiting to hear from a new placement client who wants to communicate by telephone.

The clients and I adapted quickly to online therapy. I soon learnt that it was important that both the client and I were properly framed on the screen so that we see each as much of other's face, body and arms and hands as was comfortable. This allowed better phenomenological noticing (Mann, 2014, p. 191) and a greater sense of connection. I also realised that I needed some quiet time to get into the right frame of mind before the therapy session. I found online counselling more productive than telephone counselling. I felt more connected to the client and was able to pick up on some non-verbal cues on screen. A survey of one hundred and forty five psychotherapists in the US and Europe (Bekes & Aafjes-van Doorn, 2020) concluded that most psychotherapists were positive regarding online therapy although their opinion of online psychotherapy was affected by their modality (CBT practitioners were more positive than psychoanalysts, for example). Additionally, the therapists surveyed did report that working online was more tiring, they felt less competent, less confident and not as connected to their

clients and less authentic (but see below). This does not accurately mirror my own experience: I felt no less competent or confident online although I did feel very tired as mentioned earlier. I may on occasion have felt less connected and authentic but this was rare and may not have exceeded the occasional lapse on my part had we been working face-to-face. I therefore feel very positive about online therapy although I have some caveats for example, clients who are in their own homes can be easily distracted: deliveries; forgetting to put phones on mute; young children and pets were some of the distractions that arose with the clients and myself. These events cut across the flow of the therapy session and can be disconcerting even after we had discussed possible distractions. I also felt that one client became disinhibited and I had to gently but firmly re-establish boundaries and our professional relationship.

I remain unsure of the best methodology of achieving the optimum therapeutic alliance online as opposed to traditional face-to-face sessions. I need more experience of both methodologies before deciding although my experience to date of online therapy has been constructive and encouraging. The research on this key topic is contradictory with a number of studies suggesting that the digital working alliance was inferior (Norwood, et al., 2018). An Australian/New Zealand study, however, demonstrated that participants felt digital communication allowed far greater flexibility and accessibility to counselling and was generally supportive of remote therapy (Inglis & Cathcart, 2018). One study concluded that integrative psychotherapists were able to achieve relational depth and engage online (Mitchell, 2020). A recent study of one hundred and ninety psychoanalysts concluded that the majority felt as confident and competent as they had during in person therapy although half of the analyst's therapists described a lower level of connection with their online patients (Bekes, et al., 2020). It should be noted that these studies lacked randomised control trials and some were based on a small sample of practitioner's or clients' views.

I tried to prepare my clients for the ending of therapy online by discussing this with them in the fourth or fifth online session and allowed them time to express their feelings about the end of working together. I noticed how remote and distant I felt doing this online as opposed to in person. The termination of therapy was bitter sweet for me – I was glad that the clients had made progress but it seemed clear that some of them needed further sessions which were only allowed in exceptional circumstances. I also felt a sense of loss. I sensed many of the clients too felt a sense of loss perhaps even abandonment (Elliot, et al., 2018, pp. 165-166). Moreover, I felt a shift in my sense of identity away from the trainee therapist to – nowhere, an absence - during the following summer months.

In conclusion I will encourage more specific description and discussion of the emotions and somatic responses that the client and I experience to ensure that we understand each other more clearly and openly. Discussing explicitly what is happening for the client (and myself where appropriate) in regard to emotions and phenomenologically will illuminate both parties experiencing. Rereading the above makes me realise that I adapted well to regularly changing circumstances and significant uncertainty. Like many others I have been resilient during a year full of change and transition. Resilience is defined by the American Psychological Association as a “process of bouncing back from difficult experiences and adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress” (American Psychological Association, 2020). My confidence grew during the placement and I developed greater humility through working with clients. I am looking forward to new beginnings which generate new energy and identities.

As Henri Bergson, the French philosopher, states in *Creative Evolution*: “to exist is to change, to change is to mature, to mature is to go on creating oneself endlessly.”

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