



The Disinhibition Effect in Online Therapy

The disinhibition effect is a psychological factor that can manifest itself in a remote therapeutic relationship. Understanding what this is and how to work with it is a vital part of being competent to work ethically online.

The term 'disinhibition' refers to a lack of restraint or disregard of social conventions. If a person is disinhibited, they may act without forethought and without regard to risk. In the moment, disinhibition can feel liberating and even euphoric, but it can also carry a price tag of regret, guilt, remorse or shame when the behaviour is looked at retrospectively – and leave an emotional scar that lasts a lifetime.

The disinhibition effect can bring about these feelings in online clients: it's like the remoteness of the online world almost makes things feel less real: it creates a kind of 'bravery' of being out of range. Online, it feels easier to leave negative comments; engage in bullying or trolling; make sexual advances; make judgements based on race, sexuality, culture or any other difference; or claim to be an expert in any given subject.

Background

The term 'disinhibition effect' was first coined by psychologist John Suler in his 2004 paper '[The Online Disinhibition Effect](#)'. Suler noticed that some clients self-disclose more readily and/or act out more often or more intensely online than they would face-to-face. This can lead the client to feel overwhelmed, foolish or anxious – or to fail to return for the next session at all.

He explored six factors that together can create this effect:

- dissociative anonymity ('You don't know me')
- invisibility ('You can't see me')
- asynchronicity ('See you later')
- solipsistic introjection ('It's all in my head')
- dissociative imagination ('It's just a game')
- minimisation of status and authority ('Your rules don't apply here').

Dissociative Anonymity

One of the principal factors behind the online disinhibition effect is that you can use the internet with relative anonymity. It's not unusual for a client to feel protected and to experience reduced feelings of vulnerability. Online clients may disclose personal information very quickly, and so become overwhelmed.

Invisibility

When using text-based or online services, clients' inhibitions may become lower. Potential clients may misrepresent themselves, pretending to be someone they are not. While it is generally important to accept clients at face value, do bear in mind too that, when working online, it is possible that your client is not who they say they are.

Asynchronicity

This is sometimes referred to as 'post and run'. In other words, when communicating by email or text, clients may 'do an online doorknob'.

The asynchronous nature of email or text may lead clients to disclose information they would not have disclosed if they were working with you in real time. Disclosing via email or text may be cathartic for the client, allowing them to share information to avoid judgement or questions. Clients sometimes subvocalise as they write/read, leading to a perception that they are talking to themselves. Talking to oneself can lead to disinhibition or oversharing.

Solipsistic Introjection

One of the differences when working online as opposed to face-to-face is not 'seeing all' of each other: we may not see the person we are speaking to at all (e.g. when working by telephone) or we may see only their head and shoulders (e.g. when working on an online video platform). This can lead to either party assigning a persona or imagined characteristics to the other. Clients who use telephone or email counselling can be particularly susceptible to this; this can lead to professional boundaries being crossed.

Dissociative Imagination

Emily Finch, a lawyer who studies identity theft in cyberspace, observes that people might see cyberspace as a game in which the standard rules of everyday interaction do not apply. Clients may see online therapy as just a game to play out a fantasy, and this can happen with telephone counselling, where the client is a voice on the end of the telephone.

Minimisation of Status and Authority

In the online world, status and authority are significantly reduced. Therapists may find that the power balance is very different online. The main area to consider here is that of boundaries, which can be breached when disinhibition kicks in.

Responding to the Disinhibition Effect

As therapists, we may need to control the speed of the client's disclosure, gently slowing this down while we build trust and the therapeutic relationship. Rapid disclosure may be fuelled by clients believing that getting it 'off their chest' will in itself make them feel better – yet in reality doing so might leave them with shame. We must also take care not to become more directive than we would usually be in our face-to-face work: doing so can be another product of the disinhibition effect.

In conclusion, the disinhibition effect makes it especially important to ensure that you have completed specific training for online counselling, and have regular clinical supervision with a supervisor who is themselves experienced in online working.