

In practice: **Hanging on the telephone**

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There's more to successful telephone counselling than you might think, says Sally Brown

About the author



Sally Brown is a counsellor and coach in private practice and the editor of *Therapy Today*

Telephone counselling was one of the earliest ways that therapeutic practitioners worked remotely with clients and, for many of us, it remains the first choice, despite the ubiquity of videoconferencing. It's less prone to technological hiccups and appeals to a different client base, including those who aren't familiar with videoconferencing software. Telephone work offers visual anonymity, which may be important for some clients and counsellors. It's a popular choice of remote working for EAP providers and services, as clients only need a mobile phone.

It also allows both counsellor and client more flexibility over where the session takes place, which has become all the more important during lockdown, when some clients have resorted to taking sessions in their parked cars.

If you have had to transition to telephone work quickly or without any training, or less than you would have liked, you may be surprised at how deskilled you find yourself. This was my experience. I opted for telephone over videoconferencing to work with most of my clients during lockdown as I had reservations about intruding into clients' homes (and them seeing into mine). 'How different can it be?'

I mused, only to find out very quickly – it is very different. I found myself asking far more direct questions than I ever would in the therapy room, and finding it difficult to judge when and how long to leave silence.

'Just because you are an experienced counsellor and you obviously are used to talking on the phone, don't assume you will automatically feel competent with telephone counselling,' says Sarah Hart, a long-established telephone counsellor and supervisor who also provides training in telephone counselling for individuals and organisations. 'It's important to get training if you want to be effective at it. Working on the phone is very different to in-person work, not least because we're not able to see our clients. We are trained to use all our senses when we work with clients but all that is channelled into one sense, our hearing, when we work on the phone. It can be very intense – the client's voice is right in your ear.'

Disinhibition

Telephone sessions can also be intense in terms of how fast they move, with clients disclosing faster than with in-person or videoconferencing work. BACP's competency framework for working remotely notes that this may lead to an 'inappropriately rapid disclosure of sensitive information that risks leaving the client feeling overwhelmed; an inappropriately rapid development of intimacy, sometimes followed by withdrawal or distancing; difficulty in pacing sessions because clients have disclosed more information than they had intended; clients coming to regret having made an uninhibited disclosure; clients disclosing issues they would not address had they been in face-to-face therapy; the uninhibited expression of anger, hatred, criticism.'

But, handled appropriately, rapid disclosure can be an advantage, says Hart. 'Early disclosure can help create a therapeutic relationship if the client feels understood by you, which means they may engage in the therapy more quickly. Research tends to show that talking about issues with associations of shame or embarrassment can be easier when there is visual anonymity, because the client does not have to bear a physical response, even if it's just a slight raised eyebrow, that might suggest judgment.'

According to the BACP competences, practitioners are required to have an ability to help clients pace their communications by, for example, interjecting to summarise what the client has been saying or asking the client how they feel about what they have said. We also need to be aware that counsellors can also experience disinhibition in remote work, which may mean they make unhelpful interventions that are 'too direct, forthright or insensitive'. 'We need to remember that we are human too! We are more likely to disclose more than we would ordinarily – and may feel the aftermath of guilt, regret and shame,' says Jo Birch, a counsellor, coach and supervisor who has also been offering training in telephone counselling.

Support resources

- BACP framework - Competences for Telephone and E-Counselling
- Sarah Hart's **telephone counselling courses** <<http://www.sarahhart.co.uk>> for counsellors and organisations
- Jo Birch's '**Introduction to Telephone Counselling**' <<http://www.eventbrite.com/o/rowan-consultancy-13933810664>>' course for the Rowan Consultancy
- A podcast interview with Jo Birch about effective telephone counselling

Beginnings and endings

Who starts a session by making the call is

down to personal preference or agency policy. When the client is responsible for making the call, they retain autonomy over whether they 'turn up' to a session. 'If we call the client, then we're not giving them the chance to come to us,' says Birch. 'And on a practical level, the client making the call allows them to ensure they are somewhere private first. If you are working for an EAP provider, agency or protecting your personal phone number, it may be that you call the client. We need to think through the aspects, including individual client circumstances and impact on the therapeutic relationship.' The person who makes the call also pays for it – another factor that needs consideration, although more and more mobile and landline providers now offer inclusive call packages.

"Telephone sessions can also be intense in terms of how fast they move"

With endings, telephone counselling does not allow the physical transition time of leaving a therapy room. So it's good to discuss with clients what they will do after a call to ground themselves. They might simply take a few minutes to reflect and for some deep breaths or, if they can, step outside the house for a walk or some fresh air.

Allowing enough time to prepare for and process a telephone session is also important for counsellors, says Birch. 'When we meet in person, we may take time before a client arrives to set up the space, plump the cushions, get the water or whatever, then sit quietly and reflect on the session ahead. For telephone work, there may be a temptation to think it's "just a telephone call", and not take time to prepare in the same way or allow ourselves time to process afterwards. But attending to this is an important part of the process,' she believes.

'Take time to create your space, somewhere comfortable and free of office clutter. I prefer to put the phone on a stand and talk on speaker to provide a space between us where the words can unfold. But I know other people enjoy the intensity of the earphones, and they also offer privacy if there is potential for the session to be overheard.'

Hart also recommends taking as much care to prepare your telephone counselling space as you would your counselling room. 'It's best to be free of distractions, so perhaps choose a neutral space rather than sit at a desk that you usually do other work from,' she says. 'I have invested in a good pair of Bluetooth headphones, which means I can sit naturally, stand or move around – another great bonus of telephone work for me is that it frees me from sitting down all day.' Birch agrees that this is one of telephone counselling's selling points. 'Moving around can help you and the client embody the experience,' she says.

Sound of silence

Judging when silence is helpful or becoming uncomfortable or even persecutory for a client can be harder on a phone call without the usual visual cues that we rely on to assess what may be going on for the client. So it may be that we need to be more direct with clients, checking in to say, 'I am aware there is silence and was wondering how that feels right now.' If a client ever says 'Hello?', then you know you have let the silence go too long, says Hart. 'They are wondering if you are still there,' she says.

Payment matters

Telephone work can be done without hiring physical premises or incurring travel expenses but that doesn't mean you should charge less than you do for in-person work, Hart argues.

'It is intense work that requires additional skills and training, so why would we be paid less for it?' Working on the telephone also allows you to offer a specialist service across a wider geographical area than in-person work. 'I work with parents, but mostly mothers who are separated from their children. It is niche work but, as I work on the telephone, I can work with clients wherever they are, including in temporary accommodation,' says Hart.

Online banking makes payment for remote working much easier, but you need to clarify when you expect the payment – before or after a session – before you start working. 'I ask clients to pay me before the session and include in my contract that, if payment is not made, then a session may not go ahead,' says Hart. 'You will also need to be clear on your cancellation policy and how much notice you require before a payment may be incurred.'

Contracting

Clarifying payment terms is just one element to be included in a contract for telephone counselling, and a good reason to recontract if you have transitioned an in-person client to telephone work. Other issues to cover include what you will do if you get cut off during a call. For instance, is it up to the client to call back? If they can't get through, will you continue via email? Privacy is important, especially if the client is taking the call at home. 'It's worth specifying that calls should be taken in an appropriate space, so that means not while driving, on public transport or in a public space where they could be overheard, such as a café,' says Hart. How to get the contract sent to and signed by the client needs some thought if a client has opted for phone counselling because they don't have internet access or a computer. If it can't be sent by email, you will have to send it by post.

Training and supervision

If you are thinking of making telephone work a regular part of your practice, then a training course will help you work effectively, ethically and in a way that is sustainable. It's also worth considering getting a telephone-specific supervisor who can support you, especially when you first start out, says Hart. 'It makes sense to be supervised in the medium you are working in, which means you aren't restricted by locality in finding a supervisor. My advice would be to look for a supervisor who has chosen to work on the telephone, rather than offer it ad hoc when clients can't make in-person sessions.'

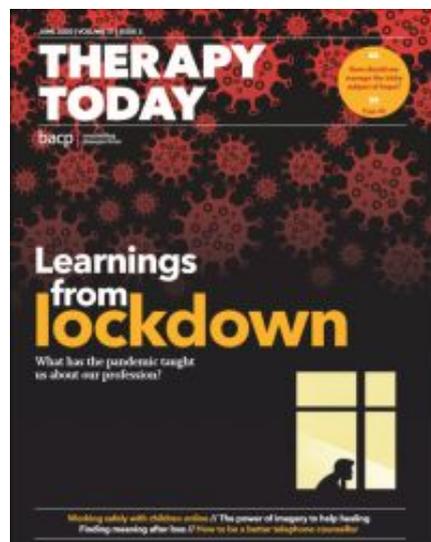
You can listen to an interview with Jo Birch, BACP accredited counsellor, coach and supervisor, about telephone counselling on the *Therapy Today* podcast.

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'I know what can happen when we stand together, no longer silenced by shame and isolation'. Therapy Today, June 2020



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