

Tips for Cultivating Presence and Strengthening Therapeutic Relationships: Optimizing Online Therapy

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We are in a time where telehealth via video sessions is required to maintain a safe social distance as we strive to minimize the spread of Coronavirus while maintaining contact and support of our clients. It is an adjustment for many therapists to offer psychotherapy at a physical distance, especially therapists who are used to doing experiential work. While it may seem like a paradox to offer psychotherapy with two screens between you and your client(s), it is possible and requires some adjustment in your approach to build and maintain presence connection from a physical distance.

Therapeutic presence is a way of *being* with a client that optimizes the *doing* of therapy. It involves bringing your whole self to the encounter with clients and being fully in the moment on a multitude of levels, physically, emotionally, cognitively, relationally and spiritually. Therapists' **presence** involves being grounded in one's self, while receptively taking in the client's verbal and nonverbal experience and being responsive in the moment. Presence provides an invitation to our clients to feel felt, met, and understood, inviting a sense of safety and optimal engagement in the work of therapy. Even though we are not in the same physical space with clients, by cultivating presence and offering all of ourselves from a physical distance; we can build and strengthen our therapeutic relationships.

Below are some tips to help you create an online environment that reflects your therapeutic environment and to communicate presence in online sessions.

Safety

Online safety and security

- Ensure you are engaging with your clients on a telehealth system that has HIPAA (PHIPA in Canada) compliance with BAA agreement. This ensures a level of encryption that provides confidentiality and safety for all.

Consistency and Set-Up

- Set up a place in your home or office where you can see clients consistently, and mirrors your therapy room to the best that you are able. This can allow for a predictable environment for your clients.
- Consider using a larger screen to allow more visual contact and gestures with your full body vs just the head up.

- Ensure privacy and remind your client to ensure their own privacy by asking family members or people who share their home to be in a different room with headphones on ideally.
- Notice in the screen how your eye contact and facial expressions are being communicated – ensure the camera is at eye level.

Optimal Distance

- Find a safe distance between you and the screen. Not too close that feels invasive to clients or not too far away that we are distant and small. You can ask your client to collaborate on finding an optimal distance that feels right to them.

Lighting

- Experiment to find a place where the lighting is optimal – not too bright where there are reflections or too dark that you cannot be seen clearly.

Professional Dress

- Dress professionally as you would in the office. It may be tempting to stay in comfortable bottoms assuming that clients can not see your pants. You can be comfortable and professional – which will allow you to feel in your professional yet comfortable self!

Reminders for Clients

- Ensure clients have a private environment where they will not be disturbed and can feel safe to express and open up
- Invite clients to intentionally minimize distractions - turning off phone, turning of background apps (email feeds, text alerts or messages)
- Remind them to have Kleenex boxes on hand (I learned this in one of my first virtual sessions as I could not pass the box on line!)
- Invite them to prepare emotion regulation tools that they may be used to having accessible in the office (weighted blanket, ice, sensory balls) if that is part of your practice or items available in office with you.
- If you are engaging in EFT work – have them set up chairs beforehand or have empty chairs in reach for when you may engage in experiential work
- Help clients to determine what they need in order to transition gently after sessions – given they do not have the time in the waiting room or travel home that they usually have they may want time to absorb the session before re-entering their home environment.

Pre-Session/Therapy Day

- Take a walk or do something physically to shift to your “virtual office” – just as you would transition to your therapy office
- Take a few minutes to center in yourself, some mindful breaths or a yoga posture, to prepare yourself to invite your client into the virtual therapy room.
- Allow time for self-care outside of sessions – including moving your body or doing some gentle stretches. Especially since your physical therapy space may be less comfortable than usual.

During Session

- During initial session – discuss openly any feelings or concerns as you shift to this new virtual space.

Communicating presence, empathy and resonance:

- Facial expression, prosody of voice (rhythm, timbre, volume, pace), eye gaze, non-verbal, gestures, are some of the ways we communicate our presence and attunement with clients. Ensure these are visible to clients so they can feel you with them in session. You may need to do more of this with online therapist as the face is the main connection point between you and your clients.

Inviting synchronicity

- Allow yourself to mirror client’s facial expressions, eye gaze, vocal tone and pace, breathing rhythm to invite a sense of interpersonal synchrony and enhance connection. Ensure you are mirroring where your client is so they feel you with them.

Receptivity

- While starting the session with an open, centered place within yourself, continue through the session to let go of distraction or fixation on a certain insight in order to be present, open and receptive you're your clients moment to moment experience.

Attuning to yourself

- Stay in contact with your own body and emotional state – to recognize important states such as emotional resonance with clients experience (awareness of how clients’ emotions and experience are being felt in your own body) and countertransference responses (shutting down, triggers etc).

Tracking client's response

- Notice the nuances in clients' micro-expressions – noticing when they are open and in their window of tolerance or overwhelmed or shut down. Can you adjust your posture, voice as needed to meet your client with presence and empathy to help them co-regulate.

Contact

- Ensure you reaching out to clients directly through silent eye contact or responses that are reflective of clients in the moment experience and larger therapy goals.
- Check in with clients ongoing about your distance and whether you or they need to adjust to allow for an optimal feeling of safety.

Closing Sessions/Post Therapy Day

- Determine if you need more time than usual between sessions to transition, take notes, regroup and do some physical stretching or moving.
- When finished your therapy day, be intentional about closing your virtual therapy space as you would your office – ie. closing and putting away your computer, going on a walk, or some other ritual or gesture that lets you intentionally close your therapy day.
- Before engaging in the news and home life, ensure you have some time to transition and take care of yourself.

Feel free to contact me with your ideas or articles on cultivating presence in online therapy. I would love to hear from you and your experience as we traverse this new therapeutic landscape together.

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