

## Brief Online Counselling FAQ

1. [How do we ensure privacy?](#)
2. [How do I make sure I still send the message of being genuine and build rapport?](#)
3. [How do I navigate scope and competence in an online setting?](#)
4. [How do I get by without any body language, tone, intonation, or other non-verbal cues?](#)
5. [How do I challenge or provide feedback without being able to read how I am coming across?](#)
6. [How do I create a sense of safety, when I use my space, tone and body language to normally do this?](#)
7. [What do we do if a person just stops responding half way through a conversation?](#)
8. [How to respond to complex emotions such as anger/confrontation?](#)
9. [How to respond when the person is considering suicide?](#)
10. [How do we end a conversation?](#)

Disclaimer: This resource was developed by Amie Kroes for the OCRCC “Using Technology to Support Survivors: Innovation in Frontline Settings” Project. All the below are examples and not exhaustive lists. I have attempted to provide as much detail as possible without being terribly overwhelming. More detail/clarity provided upon request.

### 1. How do we ensure privacy?

If by privacy you mean protecting the users location and personal information, this is done through a series of technological functions. Encryption is a way that we ensure that if they data is being intercepted, that the data does not come up in the same visual way it does for you, it comes up looking like code. This is the same technology used by banks, government websites, and any website that starts with https:// The “s” stands for secure.

Other ways to ensure privacy is to not ask for any personal information, and to make it known that the client should not share any personal information, such as last name, address, name of workplace, name of school etc. However, it is important to know, and make available, that even with the best technological features, anything sent over the internet has the possibility to be accessed by a third party. We mitigate risk as much as possible, but we can never guarantee 0 risk.

If by privacy you mean confidentiality, like any service you provide, your agency has steps and measures in place for protecting any type of transcript or case note.

If by privacy you mean safety, then consider your informed consent process. Informed consent is something that counsellors use daily. Online counselling is not different. Ensure that clients know what to expect from the counselling experience (who they will talk to, what they can talk about, how long they get, what is appropriate vs inappropriate, what privacy and confidentiality assurances there are), what some of the benefits and risks are, and give them an opportunity to ask questions and opt in/out. Sometimes people are concerned about information overload for the client, or delaying the response time for the client; however, if you would not bypass informed consent in a real-life context, you should not bypass informed consent in an online context either.

## 2. How do I make sure I still send the message of being genuine and build rapport?

Regardless of the type of counselling you subscribe to, use of self is going to be important. You need to find ways to infuse the essence of yourself into text based conversation. Like I person conversations, empathy, non-judgemental listening, communicating unconditional positive regard, these things are very important. The client needs to be able to tell that they are talking to a human being. Everything you “do” normally is still important, but you need to be able to express it differently.

Some common ways of doing this include (list is not exhaustive):

- a) **Empathy:** “That sounds very difficult for you”
- b) **Non-Judgemental:** “There is no wrong way to act or feel. This is a safe space for you to explore these difficult emotions”
- c) **Honesty:** “I had to sit and ponder that question for a moment there...”
- d) **Attending and Acknowledging:** “That is a good question, it might take me a moment to write out my reply as the answer is a little lengthy”.
- e) **Restating and Reflecting:** Do not parrot, but strategically mirror certain words. Offer tentative interpretations. “You said you used to feel ‘alive’ and now you feel like a ‘rock’, does that mean that you have noticed a big change in yourself that feels heavy?”
- f) **Summarize and Synthesize:** Provide focus for the client, remain on track and help to use the time wisely on the established need. “You mentioned the incident, your family, your current relationship, and how this is impacting you at work. Which area do you think we should focus on in this conversation to make it feel meaningful to you?”
- g) **Probing:** Supportive requests for more to ensure clarity – not the same as fact finding. “Clarify for me...”, “Are you saying...”, “I want to make sure I understand correctly...”
- h) **Check assumptions:** “Correct me if I’m wrong...”, “Can you share with me what you interpreted/heard/understood/perceived from our conversation?”
- i) **Silence:** Like in face to face conversations, this is a hard tool for many to utilize. Gauge if they have completed their thoughts, they may speak in spurts – check in if you aren’t sure. Or create a moment of silence – just communicate that you are. “That was some pretty heavy stuff shared just there, I’d like to just sit with that together and really let that sink in.”

## 3. How do I navigate scope and competence in an online setting?

Like with any modality or technique, the counsellors competence, and recognition of scope is important.

When it comes to competence, aside from trainings, there are things you can do to build your online knowledge and skills. Some include:

- Spending time in online spaces to familiarize yourself with internet communication culture and “netiquette”. This can include online chats, discussion boards, and reading blogs.
- Take the tutorials offered on the communication system you will be using
- Spend time practicing your typing skills on the device you will be using
- Get information on how the system works (encryption, firewalls, virus protection, storage, etc.)

In relation to scope, online/SMS conversations are not comparable to F2F conversations.

**Disinhibition** is common when afforded the anonymity and distance of communication via technology.

- Serious issues will come up faster (almost immediately) than F2F. You will have very little time to get to know the presentation style or baseline of a client
- There is less of a power dynamic when between screens – informal nature of the communication style leads to faster flow of conversation
- After a fast, large disclosure, this can lead to “oh what have I done?!” moments where a client will disengage – sometimes go quiet, sometimes actually log off
  - It is important to respond fast and normalize this experience
  - “You just gave me a lot of personal information there, it is sometimes normal when people do this that they feel vulnerable and exposed.”

You will notice that the pace and breadth of the conversation will be faster and further than F2F, it is therefore important for you as the counsellor to help create boundaries or scope to the conversation. It is also your job to recognize what you can and cannot achieve online.

[Top of document](#)

#### 4. How do I get by without any body language, tone, intonation, or other non-verbal cues?

Netiquette is etiquette while using the ‘net’. This is what common practices are to demonstrate intention, emotion, tone, sarcasm, etc. Recognizing the unavailability of non-verbal communication online is not new, so there are already established ways of communicating these less tangible things.

- a) Emoticons:** The faces that you can use to demonstrate emotion. 😊 ☹️ If it would be appropriate to smile in real life, it may be appropriate to 😊 in text.
- b) Acronyms/Abbreviations:** short forms of words that mean something to an online user. “lol”, “brb”, “smh”, “idk”, “afk”, “afaik”, “pft”
- c) Emphasis:** CAPS LOCK, **bold**, *italics*, underline, \*stars\*
- d) Emotional bracketing:** [sigh], \*smile\*, [nodding]

Just as words can mean different things to different people, be cautious with the online non-verbal messages you send. Mirror a client’s usage of non-verbal communication, if you can and it makes sense to do so. Or, have a brief conversation to establish understanding and create norms. This can be used if you think that you, or the client may misinterpret what you are trying to communicate.

“I see you used the acronym “idk” and I’m not familiar with it, can you fill me in?”

“Instead of saying ‘hmmm’ which I think could mean so many things, when I need a moment to think, I am just going to say PFT, which stands for pause for thought. Feel free to use that as well if I ask you a question that you need some time to think about, just so I know you are still there, but just need some time, is that okay?”

[Top of document](#)

## 5. How do I challenge or provide feedback without being able to read how I am coming across?

When you are having F2F conversations, you can sometimes tell when someone makes a facial expression, shifts their body posture, or makes a noise to indicate a response to a challenge or to feedback. This gives you an opportunity to respond to their non-verbal response. Online, you only get the verbal response – which may actually be a lack of a verbal/text response. This can be tricky to navigate.

### **When giving feedback:**

- Offer it tentatively – “When you say that, I hear that instead of fear it might actually be anger, what do you think?”
- Use it to help them find meaning or insight as opposed to pointing out deficiencies
- Be curious as opposed to making a statement “I wonder if \_\_\_ could also mean \_\_\_, what do you think?”
- Question your understanding as opposed to their logic – “help me understand...”, “I’m confused...”, “I interpreted that as \_\_\_\_\_ am I on the right track?”

### **Clients Response to feedback:**

- If they agree or disagree – you have an opportunity to respond.
- ... ← if the client just sits in silence, or if you see they are writing, then not writing, then writing (if you have the ability to see when someone is typing – this is common), they are trying to develop what they want to say.
- One word answer – “yeah”, “maybe”
- No response, left chat

When a client does not answer in a well-articulated way, it can sometimes leave us wondering if the client was okay with the feedback, or if we need to do some more work around the feedback. If you are not sure, check-in. “What I just said there may have made you uncomfortable, can you tell me how you are doing”, “I just offered an alternate view that you may or may not have considered, tell me if you think I’m way off base”. This allows for an opportunity that if a client has not interpreted your intention in the way you had hoped you can correct it, or if this the feedback was problematic, then you have an opportunity to discuss.

If the client leaves chat, this can feel pretty crappy for us. But in this moment, our feelings and pride should not be as relevant. Re-read the chat and see if the feedback was appropriate. If it was, then you still accomplished something. Your feedback was heard. You will never know if they left because of your challenge, or technical difficulties. The beauty of online chat or SMS is that it gives lots of power to the client. It is much more difficult for them to get up and leave a F2F counselling session than it is for them to close a window. They are empowered to control their own fate through technology, and that needs to be okay with us. We may think that they could have benefitted from more, we may be concerned that we have left them open and vulnerable, but these are OUR thoughts. Self-determination is real. It’s okay. (If you have serious concerns about their safety – different action may be necessary).

[Top of document](#)

## 6. How do I create a sense of safety, when I use my space, tone and body language to normally do this?

- Vocalize/write all of the things that you intuitively do. Be as descriptive as possible when necessary.
- Recognize that the anonymity and distance afforded by online/SMS communication may be all the safety the client needs
- Ask the client as you are getting started if they are in a safe place and unlikely to be interrupted
- Refer to the informed consent pieces of the process to ensure the client understands what to expect – then make sure you provide that
- Have knowledge on the safety measures of the technology you are using, and on measures clients can use to keep themselves safe (ie. erasing history on their computer)

[Top of document](#)

## 7. What do we do if a person just stops responding half way through a conversation?

Working on the assumption that the person is still in the chat room, check-in.

- “Just checking to see if you need more time to explore how you feel about what I just said?”
- “I just gave a lot of information there, do you have any questions?”
- “This can be a really difficult topic to talk about, how are things going over there?”
- “I’m here when you are ready”
- “While you consider what I said, let me know if you need anything from me, such as any clarity”

If they client has left the conversation:

- Hopefully you have already said what to do if they get disconnected for any reason.
- Re-read the chat and see if the conversation and any feedback you gave was inappropriate. Learn. There could be lots of reasons they left – this is the same as any aversive response from a client whether F2F or not.
- If you have serious concerns about their safety – follow your policies on breaching confidentiality with the information you have available.

[Top of document](#)

## 8. How to respond to complex emotions such as anger/confrontation?

- **Normalize:** “It is normal to feel \_\_\_\_\_, it’s okay to let it out in ways that are safe and helpful for you”
- **Externalize from the client:** “You are not an angry person, you are person experiencing anger”
- **Externalize from you:** “I can tell you are frustrated, and I get that I am an easy place to put that anger, but it appears that the anger is really about \_\_\_\_\_ situation and not this conversation”.
- **Redirect:** “Sometimes it is really helpful to sit in our difficult emotions, but sometimes they can be a bit destructive. I’d like to take a break for a second and just ask you to tell me three things you can see right now...”

- **Explore:** “You made a comment there about being unhappy with how this conversation is going, I’d really like to understand that more so we can get back on track”.

[Top of document](#)

## 9. How to respond when the person is considering suicide?

Use your skills in Applied Suicide Intervention. This process is not different online.

The only difference is if you feel they are unsafe and in crisis. Like a telephone crisis line, you have less information to go on should you be required to break confidentiality. Any information you do have can be directed to your/their local authorities.

If they are still connected, see what information you can gather. Try to help them make a plan for staying safe. Provide resources and referrals, including other online options if that is their comfort zone.

These situations are always difficult, debrief.

[Top of document](#)

## 10. How to end a conversation?

Like everything else via text, you need to be specific and clear. You cannot stand, or look at a clock to indicate the ending of a session. Many of them end quite naturally and by the client’s choice. However, some people are reluctant to end, or just want someone to talk to. Endings in these cases are always difficult regardless of the modality of communication.

“We seem to have covered a lot of ground here today. I think this is a good place to end today, but if you have any further questions or think the crisis chat is needed again in the future, you know how to get a hold of us”

“It seems like you have a lot more things you would like to talk about. However, today we have come to the end of our hour (enter the time limit you put in your informed consent around expectations), I would recommend you contact our centre to book an in person appointment or use (Referral) for follow-up support”.

[Top of document](#)