



Personal Outcomes Stories during COVID: Learning from practice

Your role and organisation:

Paula Ferguson, Counsellor, FE sector

How have you been able to keep a focus on what matters to people during COVID?



We adapted very quickly, I think, to being deployed to working from home (WFH) after the college closed. As a team, we worked out how we could best share referral information safely, adhering to GDPR guidelines, so we could contact students and offer options to receive counselling whilst the college was closed. The options included email, phone and video counselling (such as Zoom and WhatsApp), to make this accessible to those who preferred to see their counsellor's face. Those who didn't want any of these options were offered the chance to remain on the waiting list for college re-opening.

I've frequently opened my first session with clients by asking them about their experience of lockdown; looking at e.g. what they may be enjoying about it, what they may be finding challenging about it, and how they are coping with any challenges they encounter. I've been quite overwhelmed by how people have coped during this time. I'd say that the majority of clients I've spoken to have adapted really well – I think technology is enabling people to stay connected and to get through this.

What have you had to do differently and what made this possible?

All meetings have been done differently, using video calls mostly. Again, I'm surprised at how quickly I adapted to this. Only the most vain really want to look at themselves on a video but within a wee while I actually felt fine about this. Maybe I'm more vain than I thought! 😊 Doing video calls with clients is really good – it opens up a connection not as possible via phone or email, because we can see each other and be a bit more natural in the back and forth interaction. I find this trickier on the phone, as I'm sometimes unsure when the person has stopped speaking and I've to reply!

We've had to evaluate our work differently too. It's not always realistic to expect clients to print off forms, complete them then scan them back. To help with this we've tried to create more accessible ways of gather evaluative information, including using comments clients made throughout and at the end of the work.

What have you noticed that has been better?

I've really enjoyed WFH – it feels like it has slowed time down a bit and technology has meant I've never felt lonely or isolated. If I needed support from a manager or colleague I've just had to pick up the phone or arrange a Zoom call. I've been able to spend more time doing things like CPD because I don't have had travel time to factor into my day.

From a client perspective, those who have chosen to engage through phone, video or email have stuck with it; I regularly check in with them that their chosen medium is working. Someone even said they were loving the work – something they thought they'd never say about counselling! They found the method we were using very freeing – for some people, not seeing a face must really help in the therapeutic process.

How did this make you feel?

I feel really good about all aspects of WFH and providing counselling services in ways other than face-to-face. This Covid lockdown has actually really boosted my confidence in using different methods to counsel people. I never thought counselling on the phone, for example, would be something I would want to do. Turns out it's nowhere near as daunting as I thought it would be! Being thrown in at the deep end, albeit with lots of support, has been so good for me.

Six months ago, if I'd heard the world was going to look so different, I'd have panicked and hoped for the best. It turns out I was one of the lucky ones, working for an organisation that could keep providing services whilst adapting very quickly to the circumstances. It has alleviated many anxieties I may have had about possibly feeling a lack of purpose and direction. I want my good fortune to benefit others.

What have you learned through this?

I have learned that myself and the organisation I work for are pretty well equipped to continue to offer counselling to those who are happy to use remote methods. I surprised myself at how quickly I adapted, with minimal anxiety. It helps hugely to have had such supportive colleagues, both in the organisation I work for and in the college. They are all amazing, kind, professional people who are committed to the making the counselling service continue to function well.

I also feel more relaxed in this slower pace of working. It doesn't feel like I am juggling too many things, either personally or professionally. I have learned that many people, including colleagues and clients, feel similar. Although maybe if the lockdown continues too long or has to be put in place again, people may not feel the same. I think the great weather and longer days have helped. I would maybe not want to be in this situation in e.g mid-late November. However, if it happens, it happens and I'm sure I'll manage.

Anything else you want to tell us?

It's been really nice to reflect on what this period has really been like for me. I have thought about it a lot but this has felt like I have been given a platform to voice my feelings. Thanks 😊