

Online relationships and cyberinfidelity

If a client came to you grief stricken about the cyberinfidelity of a lover she had never met, would you be able to take her seriously? As increasing numbers of adults spend their leisure time in chatrooms, **Kate Anthony** argues that a new cultural difference is emerging between clients and therapists in their understanding of what constitutes a valid relationship

IT was as if I'd been talking about a dream I'd had or something – I honestly think he thought I was winding him up!!!! I was in midflow, telling him about me talking with LiBerZzz and how we was sitting on the Lost Couch because I was SO HURT abt this woman Julie and Pete meeting in RL – I mean, it really has devastated me, and he sits there in his big black chair looking like I'd started speaking in tongues. He's got no idea abt how I feel – he can't get his head round cyberspace and my marriage is breaking up because of it. Pete's screen name has just GONE, can u imagine wot I'm going thru? I feel so humiliated. I feel so dirty. I don't know whether he's even alive and I can't work out why I'm so jealous of this Julie for meeting him when he's treated me so terribly. I feel like I'm going mad and all my counsellor says to me is "and is it that you consider what happened with this man to be really real?" I was so angry!!

This extract is from a personal email, used with permission from a user of an Internet chat room, to demonstrate the gap between a client and her therapist in their understanding of a cultural phenomenon that has impacted on the concept of person-to-person relationships. To put the author of the email in context: she had been spending increasing amounts of time in an Internet chatroom and had embarked on

a text-based relationship with one man whom she felt to be her soul mate, such was their intimacy. She arrived at a crisis point when she discovered, to her bewilderment, that the man in question had had many such relationships – and had met other women actually in person. She, for her part, had told her husband that she was leaving him for a man whom she had never met, having been led to believe that her online affair would become a permanent offline relationship. Distraught, she had sought an intake session with a therapist she had seen for short-term work the previous year.

The romantic online relationship is usually a complicated one. The lack of physical clues enables each communicator to develop a fantasy of the other person and to interpret the written word in a preferred way to the one that was intended (Anthony 2000)¹. The individual has the luxury of time, which allows them to edit their responses to reflect their personality as perfect. The respondents don't see day-to-day detail of a person's life – just the edited highlights. Relationships develop (and are ended) very quickly and the definition of what has been termed cyberinfidelity is tenuous.

A few years ago chatrooms were seen as the province of 13-year-old 'snerts' (Snort-Nosed Eros-Ridden Teenagers is one definition, although there are

many). Reaction to adults who use Internet chatrooms socially usually still involves the perception that this is a rather pathetic way to pass time. I find being able to communicate with people who have the same interests and discussion topics can be very liberating and resourceful (and sometimes it's just relaxing to banter about nothing for an hour). However, there are also many men and women across the globe using the Internet to access like-minded people to explore their sexuality and connect to people in a safe, anonymous environment that can be hidden easily from a spouse and family. Young (1999)² identifies the ACE Model of Cybersexual Addiction, an acronym meaning that affairs are more possible because they can now be much more Anonymous and Convenient as well as a means of Escape.

For example, a client comes to you telling of intimate exchanges, exciting meetings, having found a woman who satisfies him emotionally and physically. She shares her favourite poetry with him and tells him how unhappy her husband makes her. He tells her of the hopes and dreams he had as a young man and how the family got in the way. The more they communicate, the more they seem to have in common. She listens to his every word, makes him laugh, they think about each other all the time, waiting for the next time they can meet.

Happy Birthday to email

He tells you he thinks he is falling in love, that he loves his wife and kids but thinks he has a shot at true happiness. He spends most of his time with his lover and they have had sex many times – but he does not think that so far he has been unfaithful to his wife. How could he have been, when he has never met his lover?

The definition of infidelity via the Internet has yet to be decided, particularly from a legal point of view (Maheu, 2000). What is important is for therapists to understand that there are many issues being brought up for some clients by the Internet's existence; a new cultural difference can emerge between clients and their therapists in their understanding of what constitutes a valid relationship. Moreover, there is a lack of understanding of the convenience and safety of the Internet for exploring parts of the psyche that a person would not even consider offline. What of the female married client who finds herself compelled to 'lurk' [to be watching an interactive section of cyberspace without taking part] in a chatroom called Female4FemaleCyber and wants to know if this makes her a lesbian? Without an understanding of what happens in these chatrooms (and subsequently what can take place through more private software such as AOL's Instant Messaging, or ICQ – I-Seek-You), the clinician can get lost in an incomprehensible world of role play, fantasy, eroticism, acting out and usually high levels of rationalisation and denial. Many clients suffer from large amounts of guilt over the people they have cybersex with and then 'click' them afterwards [set software to ignore any future communication from them]. Other clients find that what they considered a safe flirtation with a colleague via email has been misinterpreted as an invitation to have an affair offline and their career has suffered as a result.

Conclusion

It is not my intention to be dramatic or fantastical about how information technology is affecting counselling and psychotherapy. However, I am increasingly interested in our changing attitudes towards it within the profession, in the light of our clients embracing new ways of communicating. It is the clients to whom we owe the deepest respect in ensuring we are competent enough to be empathetic and congruent, understanding the basics of what they are experiencing. This means growing with them in a changing world of communication and relationships, via experiential methods and including information technology issues in counselling and psychotherapy training ■

References

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EMAIL – the electronic message service which has transformed communication – is 30 years old. But as great inventions go, email had a rather humble beginning back in 1971. In fact, Ray Tomlinson, the American engineer considered the 'father of email', can't quite recall when the first message was sent. 'I have no idea what the first one was,' he says. 'The only thing I know was it was all in upper case.'

Tomlinson finds himself in the spotlight again after all these years, having to answer questions about the computer programme he designed as it reaches its 30th birthday. He modestly calls his baby 'no major tour de force'. It was just 200 lines of code, he says. And the inspiration – one computer programme to enable file transfers and a second crude messaging programme – already existed.

But the programmes had their flaws. For example, the message programme at first only enabled a user to send a communique to a colleague's mailbox as long as that mailbox was located on the same computer as the sender's.

Tomlinson got around this by creating remote personal mailboxes that could send and receive messages via a computer network. He also conceived the now-ubiquitous @ symbol, to ensure a message was sent to a designated recipient.

The end product, he said, was simply the combination of the two existing programmes, enabling a person to send a message for the first time to a specified computer user on any computer hooked up to the ARPA Net, the predecessor to today's Internet, developed by the U.S. Department of Defence.

Thirty years on email has become a vital form of communication whose usefulness was demonstrated during the devastating attacks on New York and Washington. While swamped telephone systems failed, email became the only reliable link for many frantic souls during the hijacked plane attacks. It connected friends as telephone circuits became overloaded. Poignant emails from survivors have circulated around the world, filling in clues about harrowing escapes and daring rescue attempts.

But back in the autumn of 1971 email was a relatively small success. That is, Tomlinson adds, simply because there were just a few hundred users of the ARPA Net who could put it to use.

But as the Internet grew from a small coterie of academics and government workers, it created a vast network of personal computer users tapping emails to one another. And the top-of-the-line modem connection at the time operated at a snail-like 300 baud, roughly 200 times slower than the speed of today's standard 56.6 kbps modem. It made only the most concise message practical.

'Reliance took a few years to happen,' says Tomlinson. It wasn't until the personal computer boom in the mid-1980s that email trickled into the lives of computer enthusiasts and university students. Another major stage in its development came in the mid-90s as the first web browsers introduced the World Wide Web to the couch potato. As web usage grew so did email.

Over the years, Tomlinson says, complete strangers have sent him notes of thanks and a few of criticism for his invention – all by email, of course ■