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The Psychology of Text Relationships

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Editors' Note: Most online interactions take place via the exchange of text messages, either in realtime chat or asynchronous emails. In text-based communication, perhaps more than in any other setting, there is a crucial relationship between what is said and how it is said. In this chapter, the author explains the nature of text-based communication.

I'll begin this chapter by pointing out the obvious: text communication is as old as recorded history, hence the psychology of text communication dates just as far back. Letter writing and the creation of postal systems enabled more people to interact more personally via text. However, the advent of computer networks made the exchange of text more accessible, efficient, and faster than ever before in history. Online text communication offers unprecedented opportunities to create numerous psychology spaces in which human interactions can unfold. We truly have entered a new age, the age of *text relationships*.

In this chapter I will explore the psychology of these relationships while pointing out the implications for online clinical work. Many of the psychological dimensions of text communication in general apply across the board to the various types of text communication tools in particular—chat, email, message boards, instant messaging, blogs, and others more esoteric or yet to be invented. These different modalities differ in sometimes obvious, sometimes subtle ways that make each a unique psychological environment—a fact the online clinician might keep in mind when choosing a communication tool for working with a particular client. Because email is the

most widely used, much of my discussion will pertain to that modality, although I also will address important issues concerning the other modalities. I believe that a true understanding of the therapeutic value of any particular online communication tool rests on a wider appreciation of how it compares and contrasts to the others. Online clinicians might strive to specialize in a particular type of text medium, while recognizing its pros and cons vis-à-vis the others.

Before I proceed into my discussion of the unique aspects of text relationships, I'd like to point out that text is but one dimension of online communication. To encourage a wider view of the whole horizon of possibilities for online clinical work, I'll refer the reader to my conceptual model for understanding the larger set of dimensions that shape the various psychological environments of cyberspace: asynchronous versus synchronous communication, imaginary versus realistic environments, automated versus interpersonal interactions, being invisible versus present, and the extent to which communication is text-driven or sensory-rich with sight, sound, even smells (Suler, 2000). All these dimensions interact with text to create a fascinating variety of therapeutic interventions. Clinicians can combine and sequence these different modalities to address the needs of a particular client.

LET'S TEXT: WRITING SKILLS, STYLES, ATTITUDES

Text talk is a skill and an art, not unlike speaking, yet in important ways different than speaking. Proficiency in one does not guarantee success in the other. Some truly great authors and poets might sound bumbling or shallow during in-person conversation. A person's ability to communicate effectively in text talk obviously depends highly on writing abilities. People who hate to write, or are poor typists, probably will not be drawn to text-based therapy. Self-selection is at work. Others report that they prefer writing as a way to express themselves. They take delight in words, sentence structure, and the creative opportunity to subtly craft exactly how they wish to articulate their thoughts and moods. In asynchronous communication, such as email and message boards, they may enjoy the *zone of reflection* where they can ponder on how to express themselves. In those cases, asynchronous text may be a less spontaneous form of communicating than speech and online synchronous communication, such as chat. Unlike verbal conversation, in which words issue forth and immediately evaporate, writing also places one's thoughts in a more visible, permanent, concrete, objective format. An email message is a tiny packet of self-representation that is launched off into cyberspace. Some people experience it as a piece of themselves, a creative work, a gift sent to their online companion. They hope or

expect it to be treated with understanding and respect. Clinicians might look for how these skills and preferences for writing versus speaking might be associated with important differences in personality and cognitive style.

The quality of the text relationship rests on these writing skills. The better people can express themselves through writing, the more the relationship can develop and deepen. Poor writing can result in misunderstandings and possibly conflicts. In the absence of an accurate perception of what the other is trying to say, people tend to project their own expectations, anxieties, and fantasies onto the other. A disparity in writing ability between people can be problematic. The equivalent in face-to-face (f2f) encounters would be one person who is very eloquent and forthcoming talking to another who speaks awkwardly and minimally. The loquacious one eventually may resent putting so much effort into the relationship and taking all the risks of self-disclosure. The quiet one may feel controlled, ignored, and misunderstood. As in f2f clinical work, therapists might modify their writing techniques—even basic elements of grammar and composition—to interact more effectively and empathically with the client.

We might tend to think of writing abilities as a fixed skill—a tool for expressing oneself that is either sophisticated, unsophisticated, or something in between. It's also possible that the quality of one's writing interacts with the quality of the relationship with the other. As a text relationship deepens and trust develops, people may open up to more expressive writing. They become more willing to experiment, take risks—not just in what specific thoughts or emotions they express but also in the words and composition used. Composition can advance when people feel safe to explore; it regresses when they feel threatened, hurt, or angry. Those changes reflect the developmental changes in the relationship. Writing isn't just a tool for developing the text relationship. Writing affects the relationship and the relationship affects the quality of the writing.

This same reciprocal influence exists between the text relationship and *writing style*. Concrete, emotional, and abstract expression; complexity of vocabulary and sentence structure; the organization and flow of thought—all reflect one's cognitive/personality style and influence how the other reacts. People who are compulsive may strive for well-organized, logically constructed, intellectualized messages with sparse emotion and few, if any, spelling or grammatical errors. Those with a histrionic flair may offer a more dramatic presentation, where neatness plays a back seat to the expressive use of spacing, caps, unique keyboard characters, and colorful language. Narcissistic people may write extremely long, rambling blocks of paragraphs. People with schizoid tendencies may be pithy, whereas those who are more impulsive may dash off a disorganized, spelling-challenged message with emotional phrases highlighted in shouted caps. Different writing/personality styles may be compatible, incompatible, or complementary to other styles.

One's attitude about writing also plays an important role. Composition conjures up memories from the school years of one's past. Self-concept and self-esteem may ride on those memories. In the course of an email relationship, those issues from the past may be stirred up.

The International Society for Mental Health Online (ISMHO) Clinical Case Study Group (2001) suggests that the clinician, as part of the initial phase of counseling, assess the client's skills, attitudes, and past experiences regarding both reading and writing. A person's reading, writing, as well as typing skills may not be equivalent, but all are necessary for a text relationship. Some may prefer reading over writing, or vice versa. What does reading and writing mean to the person? What needs do these activities fulfill? Are there any known physical or cognitive problems that will limit the ability to read and write? The clinician might find it helpful to discuss how the person's attitudes and skills regarding in-person communication compare to those regarding text communication. When assessing the person's suitability for text communication, the clinician should remember that developing and enhancing the person's reading and writing skills may be intrinsic to the therapeutic process. Because synchronous text talk (chat, instant messaging) is quite different than asynchronous text talk (email, discussion boards), the clinician might also determine the client's skills and preferences regarding each. How does the person feel about the spontaneous, in-the-moment communication of chat as opposed to the opportunity to compose, edit, and reflect, as in email?

Our skills in text-based clinical work will deepen as we continue to explore the benefits of simply *writing.* Encouraging clients to express themselves in prose may help them tap and strengthen a variety of therapeutic processes. It may encourage an observing ego, insight, working through, a reinforcing of positive mental resources, and, especially in asynchronous text, the therapeutic construction of a personal narrative, as in journal writing and bibliotherapy.

THE ABSENCE OF FACE-TO-FACE CUES

As we'll see throughout this chapter and book, the absence of f2f cues has a major impact on the experience of a text relationship. You can't see other people's faces or hear them speak. All those subtle voice and body language cues are lost, which makes the nuances of communicating more difficult. But humans are creative beings. Avid text communicators develop all sorts of innovative strategies for expressing themselves through typed text—in addition to the obvious fact that a skilled writer can communicate considerable depth and subtlety in the written word. Despite the lack of f2f cues, conversing via text has evolved into a sophisticated, expressive art form. The effective text clinician understands and attempts to master this art.

The lack of f2f cues may create ambiguity. Without hearing a person's voice or seeing body language and facial expressions, you may not be sure what the person means. This ambiguity activates the imagination, stirs up fantasies, enhances the tendency to project your own expectations, wishes, and anxieties onto the somewhat shadowy figure sitting at the other end of the online connection. When in doubt, we fall back on our old expectations about how people relate to us, expectations that formed in our early relationships with our parents and siblings—what psychoanalytic clinicians would call a *transference reaction.* As a text relationship develops over time, these reactions toward the other person may ebb and flow. When you first communicate via text, transference might be minimal because you do not know the other person well and have yet to develop a strong psychological investment in the relationship. Transference reactions more readily surface when emotional attachments begin to form but you still do not have a good "feel" for the person because of that lack of f2f cues. Other peak moments occur when emotional topics come up but you are unable to pinpoint exactly where the other person stands on the issue.

Under ideal conditions, as we spend more and more time conversing with a person via text, we begin to understand and work through those transference reactions so that we can see the other person as he/she really is. However, even under the best of circumstances, some aspect of our mental image of the other person rests more on our own expectations and needs than on the reality of the other person. With online communication, our mental image of the other person may be affected by what we think he might look like or how her voice might sound. We may not even be consciously aware that we've formed that impression until we meet the person f2f or talk to her on the phone, only to discover, much to our surprise, that she is in some important way very different than what we expected. In general, transference reactions are unconscious. We don't see them coming and don't fully realize how they are steering our behavior. That's why they can get lead us astray and sometimes into trouble.

In online therapy the client is not alone in this susceptibility to misperceptions, projections, and transference. Faced with those silent words scrolling down the screen, the clinician may develop countertransference. The ability to catch oneself possibly misinterpreting and projecting, to always entertain the possibility that one might be in the midst of a text transference, to suspend final judgments about the client until more data comes in, are the keys to effective online therapy. Helping clients also develop this self-correcting awareness, helping them explore and understand their text-based transference as it interacts with the therapist's countertransference, may be a crucial component of their therapy, especially in the psychodynamic varieties.

Some incoming email or discussion board posts may be prepackaged with transference even though the person is a complete stranger to us. If

you have a professional or personal website or other information about you is available on the Internet, people can form inaccurate impressions that they launch your way via an "out of the blue" message. They may idealize you, detest you, or anything in-between. These kinds of transference reactions often are deeply ingrained, prepared responses in the person that are ready to leap out at any opportune moment. On a fairly regular basis, I receive email from people whom I call "spoon-feeders." There is no greeting, no sign-off line or name—just a terse request, or should I say *demand,* for something. Another common transference reaction is the "chip on my shoulder" email. People who have antagonistic conflicts with authority figures may feel free to send a flaming email to someone they perceive as a parental figure. The bottom line with these kinds of unrequested emails is this: You may not have a relationship with them, but they think they have a relationship with you. When beginning work with new clients, an online therapist might encourage them to discuss their impressions of the therapist as a result of seeing the website or other online information about the therapist.

The absence of f2f cues will have different effects on different people. For some, the lack of physical presence may reduce the sense of intimacy, trust, and commitment in the therapeutic relationship. Typed text may feel formal, distant, unemotional, lacking a supportive and empathic tone. They want and need those in-person cues. Others will be attracted to the silent, less visually stimulating, nontactile quality of text relationships—which may be true for some people struggling to contain the overstimulation of past trauma. A person's ambivalence about intimacy may be expressed in text communication because the format is a paradoxical blend of allowing people to be honest and feel close, while also maintaining their distance. People suffering with social anxiety or issues regarding shame and guilt may be drawn to text relationships because they cannot be seen. Some people even prefer text because it enables them to avoid the issue of physical appearance, which they find distracting or irrelevant to the relationship. Without the distraction of in-person cues, they feel they can connect more directly to the mind and soul of the other person. Text becomes a transitional space, an extension of their mind that blends with the extension of the other person's mind. Consider this woman's experience with her online lover:

> Through our closeness, we are easily able to gauge each other's moods, and often type the same things at the same time. We are able to almost read each other's thoughts in a way I have rarely found even in ftf [face-to-face] relationships (only my sister and I have a similar relationship in this respect). . . . It is in the cybersexual relationship where the most interesting aspects have developed. We are now able to actually 'feel' each other, and I am often able to tell what he is wearing, even though we live more than 6000 miles away. I can 'feel' his skin and smell and taste senses have also developed during sexual episodes. I have only seen one very small and blurred picture of this person so I have no idea what he really looks like, but

> I'm able to accurately describe him. He is able to 'feel' me too. I'm sure that in the main it is just fantasizing, but to actually and accurately describe the clothing and color and texture of skin is really something I have never experienced before.

Although we may be skeptical about the validity of such reports—or not fully agree with the idea that physical presence is irrelevant—we clinicians should take seriously this subjective experience some people have of connecting more directly to the online companion's psyche. If a client experiences the clinician in this way, how might that determine a diagnosis and the therapeutic plan for that person?

Even though in this section I've been underplaying the sensory component of text relationships, I should emphasize that important visual components are present. As I'll discuss later, creative keyboarding techniques (emoticons, spacing, caps, font color and size, etc.) offer a wide visual range of possibilities for presenting ideas and optimizing self-expression, often in ways that mimic f2f cues. As human factor engineers will tell us, the visual interface of our communication software also affects how we think, perceive, and express ourselves. Clinicians might be wise to compare software before choosing one for their work.

TEMPORAL FLUIDITY: SYNCHRONICITY AND ASYNCHRONICITY

Unlike in-person encounters, cyberspace offers the choice of meeting in or out of realtime. In *asynchronous* communication, such as email and message boards, people do not have to be sitting at their computers at the same time. Usually this means there is a stretching of the time frame in which the interaction occurs, or no sense of a time boundary at all. You have hours, days, or even weeks to respond. Cyberspace creates a flexible temporal space where the ongoing, interactive time together can be stretched out or shortened, as needed. The perception of a temporally locked "meeting" disappears, although sitting down to read a message may subjectively feel as if one has entered a fluid temporal space with the other person, a more subjective sense of here and now. The opportunity to send a message to the therapist at any time can create a comforting feeling that the therapist is always there, always present, which eases feelings of separation and allows clients to articulate their thoughts and feelings in the ongoing stream of their lives, immediately during or after some important event, rather than having to wait for the next appointment.

This asynchronous communication does not require you to respond on-the-spot to what the other has said. You have time to think, evaluate, and compose your reply. This *zone of reflection* comes in very handy for those awkward or emotional situations in a relationship. Some people take advantage of this zone. Others, perhaps acting more spontaneously or at times impulsively, do not. When people receive a message that stirs them up

emotionally, they might apply what I call the 24-Hour Rule. They may compose a reply without sending it (or write nothing), wait 24 hours, then go back to reread the other person's message and their unsent reply. "Sleeping on it" may help process the situation on a deeper, more insightful level. The next day, from that new temporal perspective, they may interpret the other person's message differently, sometimes less emotionally. The reply they do send off may be very different—hopefully much more rational and mature—than the one they would have sent the day before. The "Stop and Think" rule of thumb can save people from unnecessary misunderstandings and arguments. A wait-and-revise strategy helps avert impulsiveness, embarrassment, and regret. In online therapy, clinicians can experiment with creative ways of encouraging clients to use this zone of reflection, to take advantage of the opportunity to self-reflect before responding to the clinician's message, perhaps as a way to stimulate an observing ego or enhance the process of working through an issue. In other cases the clinician may suggest that clients *not* delay their response to encourage a more spontaneous, uncensored reply. For the therapist, the zone of reflection allows interventions to be more carefully planned and countertransference reactions to be managed more effectively.

Because email and other asynchronous forms of communication have this adjustable conversing speed, the pacing of message exchanges will vary over the course of a text relationship. There will be a changing rhythm of freely spontaneous and carefully planned messages that parallels the ebb and flow of the relationship itself. Significant changes in cadence may indicate a significant change in feelings, attitudes, or commitment. The initial excitement of making contact may lead to frequent messages. Some people may even unconsciously experience the interaction as if it is an f2f encounter and therefore expect an almost immediate reply. Later in the relationship, the pacing may level off to a rate of exchange that feels comfortable to both partners. As a general rule, the more frequently people email each other, the more important and intimate the relationship feels to them. Some people email each other every day, or several times a day. Bursts in the intensity of the pace occur when hot topics are being discussed or when recent events in one's life need to be explained. These bursts may reflect a sudden deepening of the intimacy in the relationship. Declines in the pace may indicate a temporary or long-term weakening of the bonds between the couple—either due to a lagging interest in the relationship or distractions from other sectors of one's life. Drastic drops in the pace, or an apparent failure of the partner to respond at all, throws you into the *black hole experience*. The partner's silence may be a sign of anger, indifference, stubborn withdrawal, punishment, laziness, or preoccupation with other things. But you don't know for sure. The ambiguity inherent in the no-reply easily can become a blank screen onto which we project our own expectations, emotions, and anxieties.

Some clients will be avid text communicators. The computer is a major feature of their interpersonal and professional life. They do email all day long. Other clients will be novices in the online world. They log on only once or twice a week. To effectively adjust the pacing of their work, the clinician needs to take such differences into consideration.

Asynchronicity presents potential problems. Spontaneity and a sense of commitment to the relationship may decline without that in-the-moment contact. Without being together in realtime, some clients may experience the therapist as less "present." Although time zones seem irrelevant, clinicians need to sensitize themselves to the fact that the client's temporal experience of the therapeutic encounter may not match that of the clinician. I "see" the client in the morning, but the client "sees" me at night. Pauses in the conversation, coming late to a session, and no-shows are lost as psychologically significant cues. Although we eliminate the scheduling difficulties associated with an "appointment," we also lose the professional boundaries of that specific, time-limited appointment. In our culture we are not used to interacting with a professional in an asynchronous time frame. Because online therapists run the risk of being overwhelmed with messages from the client, or having the client drift away, they must be careful to create guidelines for an effective, reliable, manageable pacing of messages.

In *synchronous* communication, such as chat and instant messaging, the client and therapist are sitting at their computer at the same time, interacting with each other in that moment. Text chat includes the more common message-by-message exchanges in which a button is clicked to transmit the composed and perhaps edited message, as well as chat conversations where everything that both parties type can be seen as it is being typed, including typos, backspacing, and deletions, which enhances the synchronicity, spontaneity, and meaning of the experience. In all types of chat the act of typing does slow down the pace, thus making the conversation a bit asynchronous compared to f2f meetings. Technical factors, especially transmission speeds, also determine just how closely a chat meeting approaches the tempo of an in-person encounter. In text-only chat, for example, "lag" due to busy networks may slow down the conversation between the client and therapist, resulting in temporal hiccups of several or even dozens of seconds between exchanges. This creates a small zone of reflection, which can be useful. However, it's not easy knowing when to wait to see if someone will continue to type, when to reply, when to change the topic of discussion. A conversation may accidentally become crisscrossed until both partners get "in sync." Users skilled in online chat create incomplete sentences or use dot trailers at the end of a sentence fragment. . . . that lead the companion into the next message. To allow the other user to express a complex idea, you may need to sit back into a listener mode. Some users will even type "listening" to indicate this posture to others. Some people have a greater intuitive sense of how to pace the conversation: when to talk, when to wait and

listen. They possess an empathic understanding of the synchronous text relationship and of the particular person with whom they are conversing.

The temporal pros and cons of synchronous communication are the mirror image of those for synchronous communication. Synchronous communication provides the opportunity to schedule sessions defined by a specific, limited period of time—the culturally familiar "appointment." It can create a point-by-point connectedness that enhances feelings of intimacy, presence, interpersonal impact, and "arriving together" at ideas. People may be more spontaneous, revealing, uncensored in their self-disclosures. Pauses in the conversation, coming late to a session, and no-shows are not lost as temporal cues that reveal important psychological meanings.

On the down side, the zone of reflection diminishes. Clients may lose the opportunity to compose their message, to say exactly what they want to say. In fact, some people feel they can create a stronger presence in asynchronous communication because they have more opportunity to express complexity and subtlety in what they write about themselves. They present themselves more fully. In synchronous communication clients also may associate "therapy" specifically with the appointment rather than experiencing it as a process that generalizes to their outside life.

DISINHIBITION

It's well known that people say and do things in cyberspace that they ordinarily wouldn't in the f2f world. They loosen up, feel more uninhibited, and express themselves more openly. Researchers call this the *disinhibition effect*. It's a double-edged sword. Sometimes people share very personal things about themselves. They reveal secret emotions, fears, wishes, show unusual acts of kindness and generosity, and as a result intimacy develops. Clinicians dare to make important interventions that they would have withheld f2f. On the other hand, the disinhibition effect may not be so benign. Out spills rude language, harsh criticisms, anger, hatred, even threats. People act out in all ways imaginable. Intimacy develops too rapidly resulting in regret, anxiety, and a hasty termination of the relationship. Clinicians say something better left unsaid. On the positive side, disinhibition indicates an attempt to understand and explore oneself, to work through problems and find better ways of relating to others. And sometimes it is simply a blind catharsis, an acting out of unsavory needs and wishes without any personal growth at all. Earlier in this article I cited an email in which a woman, a complete stranger to me, intimately described her relationship with her online lover. Consider also this email from another stranger:

> i am so suicidal every day that i have to tell somebody i would die and it would be all my parents fault for beating me every day and my classmates faults for making my life miserable every day and my dealers fault for going out of town and my fault for being manic depressive and suicidal and it would all be yalls fault cause your

> fuckin site is to god damn confusing and i couldnt talk to anybody. *thank you for your time* please feel just fucking free to email me back

What causes this online disinhibition? What is it about cyberspace that loosens the psychological barriers that normally block the release of these inner feelings and needs? Several factors are operating, many of them driven by the qualities of text communication that I've described previously. For some people, one or two of these factors produces the lion's share of the disinhibition effect. In most cases these factors interact with each other and supplement each other, resulting in a more complex, amplified effect.

Anonymity (You Don't Know Me). As you move around the Internet, most of the people you encounter can't easily tell who you are. People only know what you tell them about yourself. If you wish, you can keep your identity hidden. As the word *anonymous* indicates, you can have no name—at least not your real name. That anonymity works wonders for the disinhibition effect. When people have the opportunity to separate their actions from their real world and identity, they feel less vulnerable about opening up. Whatever they say or do can't be directly linked to the rest of their lives. They don't have to own their behavior by acknowledging it within the full context of who they "really" are. When acting out hostile feelings, the person doesn't have to take responsibility for those actions. In fact, people might even convince themselves that those behaviors "aren't me at all." This is what many clinicians would call *dissociation.*

Invisibility (You Can't See Me). In many online environments other people cannot see you. They may not even know that you're present. Invisibility gives people the courage to do things that they otherwise wouldn't. This power to be concealed overlaps with anonymity because anonymity is the concealment of identity. But there are some important differences. In text communication others may know a great deal about who you are. However, they still can't see or hear you—and you can't see or hear them. Even with everyone's identity visible, the opportunity to be "physically" invisible amplifies the disinhibition effect. You don't have to worry about how you look or sound when you type something. You don't have to worry about how others look or sound. Seeing a frown, a shaking head, a sigh, a bored expression, and many other subtle and not-so-subtle signs of disapproval or indifference can slam the breaks on what people are willing to express. The psychoanalyst sits behind the patient to remain a physically ambiguous figure, without revealing any body language or facial expression, so that the patient has free range to discuss whatever he or she wants without feeling inhibited by how the analyst physically reacts. In everyday relationships people sometimes avert their eyes when discussing something personal and emotional. It's easier not to look into the other's face. Text communication offers a built-in opportunity to keep one's eyes averted.

Delayed Reactions (See You Later). In asynchronous relationships people may take minutes, hours, days, or even months to reply to something you say. Not having to deal with someone's immediate reaction can be disinhibiting. The equivalent in real life might be saying something to someone, magically suspending time before that person can reply, and then returning to the conversation when you're willing and able to hear the response. Immediate, realtime feedback from others tends to have a powerful effect on the ongoing flow of how much people express. In email and message boards, where there are delays in that feedback, people's train of thought may progress more steadily and quickly toward deeper expressions of what they are thinking and feeling. Some people may even experience asynchronous communication as running away after posting a message that is personal, emotional, or hostile. It feels safe putting it out there where it can be left behind. Kali Munro, an online clinician, aptly calls this an "emotional hit and run."

Solipsistic Introjection (It's All in My Head). As I described earlier, people sometimes feel online that their mind has merged with the mind of the other person. Reading another person's message might be experienced as a voice within one's head, as if that person magically has been inserted or introjected into one's psyche. Of course, we may not know what the other person's voice actually sounds like, so in our head we assign a voice to that person. In fact, consciously or unconsciously, we may even assign a visual image to what we think that person looks like and how that person behaves. The online companion now becomes a character within our intrapsychic world, a character who is shaped partly by how the person actually presents himself or herself via text communication, but also by our expectations, wishes, and needs. Because the person may remind us of other people we know, we fill in the image of that character with memories of those other acquaintances. As the character now becomes more elaborate and "real" within our minds, we may start to think, perhaps without being fully aware of it, that the typed-text conversation is all taking place within our heads, as if it's a dialogue between us and this character in our imagination—as if we are authors typing out a play or a novel. Even when it doesn't involve online relationships, many people carry on these kinds of conversations in their imagination throughout the day. People fantasize about flirting, arguing with a boss, or very honestly confronting a friend about what they feel. In their imagination, where it's safe, people feel free to say and do all sorts of things that they wouldn't in reality. At that moment, reality *is* one's imagination. Online text communication can serve as the psychological tapestry in which a person's mind weaves these fantasy role-plays, usually unconsciously and with considerable disinhibition.

When reading another's message, it's also possible that you "hear" that person's words using your own voice. We may be subvocalizing as we read,

thereby projecting the sound of our voice into the other person's message. Perhaps unconsciously, it feels as if I am talking to/with myself. When we talk to ourselves, we say all sorts of things that we wouldn't say to others.

Neutralizing of Status (We're Equals). In text communication we don't see the trappings of status and power—the fancy office, expensive clothes, diplomas on the walls and books on the shelves. In addition, a long-standing attitude on the Internet is that everyone should be equal, everyone should share, everyone should have equivalent access and influence. Respect comes from your skill in communicating (including writing skills), your persistence, the quality of your ideas, your technical know-how. Everyone, regardless of status, wealth, race, and gender, starts off on a level playing field. These factors combined tend to reduce the perception of authority. Usually people are reluctant to say what they really think as they stand before an authority figure. A fear of disapproval and punishment from on high dampens the spirit. But online, in what feels more like a peer relationship, people are much more willing to speak out or misbehave.

Of course, the online disinhibition effect is not the only factor that determines how much people open up or act out in cyberspace. The strength of underlying feelings, needs, and drive level has a big influence on how people behave. Personalities also vary greatly in the strength of defense mechanisms and tendencies toward inhibition or expression. People with histrionic styles tend to be very open and emotional. Compulsive people are more restrained. The online disinhibition effect will interact with these personality variables, in some cases resulting in a small deviation from the person's offline behavior, and in other cases causing dramatic changes.

FLUID AND TRANSCENDED SPACE

In text relationships geographical distance poses as no barrier to accessing other people online. Despite hundreds or thousands of miles of distance, the connection is always seconds away, always available, always on. The therapist can reach into the client's environment, intervening *in vivo*, in ways not possible during f2f counseling. In return, clients may experience the therapist as "here" (e.g., immediately present in their life space). Issues of separation and individuation take on a new meaning, which may be an advantage or disadvantage, depending on the client and the therapeutic circumstances.

A much more subjective, psychological sense of space replaces the physical or geographical sense of space. As I mentioned earlier, people may experience text relationships as an intermediate zone between self and other, an interpersonal space that is part self, part other. Sitting down at one's computer and opening up the communication software activates the feeling that one is entering that space. However, the very nature of text

relationships—reading, writing, thinking, and feeling, all inside our head as we sit quietly at the keyboard—encourages us to continue carrying that internalized interpersonal space with us throughout the day. How often do we compose email messages in our head as we wash dishes and drive the car?

Although text relationships transcend geographical distance, they don't transcend the cultural differences associated with geography. People around the world have different customs for conversing and developing relationships, including text relationships. Some of the ideas discussed in this chapter will be culture-bound. A good rule of thumb in conversing with people from other lands is to be appropriately polite, friendly, and as clear as possible in what you write. Stretch your email empathy muscles. Unless you're very sure of your relationship with the person, avoid colloquialisms, slang, humor, innuendoes, and especially subtle attempts at cynicism and sarcasm, which are difficult to convey in text even under the best of circumstances. Starting off polite and later loosening up as the relationship develops is safer than inadvertently committing a faux pas and then trying to patch up the damage.

SOCIAL MULTIPLICITY

Spatial fluidity contributes to another important feature of cyberspace—social multiplicity. With relative ease a person can contact hundreds or thousands of people from all walks of life, from all over the world. By posting a message on bulletin boards read by countless numbers of users, people can draw to themselves others who match even their most esoteric interests. Using a Web search engine, they can scan through millions of pages in order to zoom their attention onto particular people and groups. The Internet will get more powerful as tools for searching, filtering, and contacting specific people and groups become more effective.

But why do we choose only some people to connect with and not others? A person will act on unconscious motivations—as well as conscious preferences and choices—in selecting friends, lovers, and enemies with whom to establish a text relationship. Transference guides them toward specific types of people who address their underlying emotions and needs. Pressed by hidden expectations, wishes, and fears, this unconscious filtering mechanism has at its disposal an almost infinite candy store of online alternatives from which to choose. As one experienced online user once said to me, "Everywhere I go in cyberspace, I keep running into the same kinds of people!" Carrying that insight one step further, another said, "Everywhere I go, I find . . . ME!"

As I mentioned earlier, online clinicians might keep in mind that a person who contacts them for counseling may already have seen their

website or learned a substantial amount about them. The client-to-be may have been shopping around the Internet for a therapist who seemed right for him or her. Knowing how and why the client came to you, what pre-contact impressions the client formed, and why the client decided against other online therapists, all may be important issues to discuss. The therapist might also keep in mind that the client knows those other online clinicians are still waiting off in the wings. Ending one relationship and beginning another involves just a few clicks. Online social multiplicity may magnify the factors contributing to early termination, such as counterdependence, flights into health, a fear of intimacy and vulnerability, and other forms of resistance. Clinicians with a prominent online presence may also receive many unsolicited contacts from strangers with varying degrees of transference reactions and a wide variety of requests for help, advice, and information. They will need to develop strategies for deciding when and how to respond to such contacts from strangers whose motivations and needs may not be obvious.

Social multiplicity creates opportunities for a fascinating variety of group work. People experiencing similar problems, even unusual problems, easily can join together with a clinician in an email or message board group, regardless of their geographical location. In addition to this ability to form unique, topic-focused groups, online social multiplicity also creates opportunities for group format and process not always possible in f2f meetings. Using layered interactions a group could function at two different levels using two different channels of communication, with one channel perhaps functioning as a metadiscussion of the other, a computer-mediated enhancement of the "self-reflective loop." The group process becomes layered, with perhaps a core, spontaneous, synchronous experience and a superimposed asynchronous metadiscussion. In a nested group, people could communicate with each other while also being able to invisibly communicate with one or more people within that group. Although such private messaging could create subgrouping and conflict, it also could be useful in enabling group members and the therapist to offer hidden coaching and support that ultimately enhances the whole group. In overlapping groups, individuals or subgroups within one group can communicate with individuals or subgroups from a sister group, which enables a comparing of experiences across groups. Some online clinicians also use a metagroup that silently observes a meeting and then offers its feedback to the whole group, or privately to individuals during or after the online meeting. In a wheel group, the clinician might multiconverse with several clients at the same time, as in chat or instant messaging, essentially serving as the hub of the group with all lines of communication directed at the clinician. The clients may not even know that other clients are present or that a "group" even exists.

RECORDABILITY: ARCHIVES AND QUOTED TEXT

Most text communication, including email and chat sessions, can be recorded and saved. Unlike real-world interactions, we have the opportunity to keep a permanent record of what was said, to whom, and when. Most email programs enable users to create filters and a special folder to direct and store messages from a particular person or group, thereby creating a distinct space or "room" for those relationships. If we've only known certain people via text, we may even go so far as to say that our relationships with them *are* the messages we exchanged, that these relationships can be permanently recorded in their entirety as perfectly preserved in bits and bytes. Stored email communication is not unlike a novel that isn't a record of characters and plot, but rather *is* the characters and plot.

At your leisure, you can review what you and your partner said, cherish important moments in the relationship, reexamine misunderstandings and conflicts, or refresh a faulty memory. The archive offers clinicians an excellent opportunity to examine nuances of the therapeutic relationship and the progress of their work with the client. Clinicians also might encourage clients to create their own archives, as well as invent a variety of therapeutic exercises that have specific objectives in guiding the client's reviewing of that stored text.

Left to their own design, people differ in how much of a text relationship they save. The person who saves less—or maybe none at all—may have a lower investment in the relationship. Or they may not be as self-reflective about relationships as people who wish to reread and think about what was said. On the other hand, that person may simply have less of a need to capture, preserve, or control the relationship. Some people like to "live in the moment." They may not feel a need to store away what was said, which doesn't necessarily indicate less of an emotional attachment.

When people save only some of the text, they usually choose those chunks of the relationship that are especially meaningful to them—emotional high points, moments of intimacy, important personal information, or other milestones in the relationship. Comparing the text saved by one person to that saved by the partner could reveal similarities and discrepancies in what each finds most important about the relationship. One person might savor humor, practical information, personal self-disclosures, emotional recollections, or intellectual debate, whereas the other may not. Saving mostly one's own messages, or mostly the other person's messages, may reflect a difference in focus on either self or other. The area of significant overlap in saved messages reflects the common ground of interest and attitude that holds the relationship together.

Unless you're simply searching for practical information (e.g., phone number, address), what prompts you to go back and read old text may indicate something significant happening in the relationship or your reaction to

it. Doubt, worry, confusion, anger, nostalgia? What motivates you to search your archive? The curious thing about rereading old text (even if it is just a few days old) is that it sounds different than it did the first time you read it. You see the previous communication in a new light or from a new perspective, or you notice nuances that you did not see before. You might discover that the emotions and meanings you previously detected were really your own projections and really nothing that the sender put there (i.e., your transference reaction). You might realize that your own feelings have distorted your recall of the history of the relationship.

We are tempted to think that a text archive is a factual record of what was said. In some ways it is. But saved text also is a container into which we pour our own psyche. We invest it with all sorts of meanings and emotions depending on our state of mind at the moment. Herein lies the therapeutic potential of encouraging clients to reread previous conversations, as well as the opportunity for the therapist to understand countertransference reactions.

An advantage of email conversations over those f2f is the ability to quote parts or all of what the other person said in the previous message. Hitting "reply" and then tacking your response to the top or bottom of the quoted email is a quick and easy rejoinder. In some cases it's a very appropriate strategy—especially when the other person's message was short, which makes it obvious what you are replying to. However, inserting a reply at the top or bottom of a long quoted message may be perceived by the other person as laziness or indifference on your part—as if you simply hit the reply button, typed your response, and clicked on "send." The person may not be sure exactly what part of the message you are responding to and also may feel annoyed at having to download an unnecessarily long file. Sticking a reply at the end of the lengthy quoted message can be particularly annoying because it forces the person to scroll and scroll and scroll, looking for the reply. All in all, quoting the entirety of a hefty message may not come across as a considerate and personal response. The impersonal tone may be exacerbated by those email programs that automatically preface a block of quoted text with a standardized notice such as, "On Saturday, May 28, Joe Smith said:". Whereas this automated notation may work fine for formal, businesslike relationships, or on email lists where multiple conversations are taking place, it may leave a bad taste in the mouth during more personal relationships.

The alternative to quoting the whole message is to select out and respond individually to segments of it. It takes more time and effort to quote segments rather than the whole message, but there are several advantages. People may appreciate the fact that you put that time and effort into your response. It makes your message clearer, more to the point, and easier to read. It may convey to your partner a kind of empathic attentiveness because you are responding to specific things that he or she said. Applying Rogerian reflection, you are letting the person know exactly what from their

communication seemed most important. Replying to several segments can create an intriguingly rich email in which several threads of conversation occur at the same time, each with a different content and emotional tone. In one multilevel email, you may be joking, explaining, questioning, recalling a past event, and anticipating a future one. To establish continuity over several back-and-forth exchanges, you can create embedded layers of quoted segments, with each layer containing text from an earlier message. However, too many layers result in a confusing message in which it is unclear who said what and when. Messages with multiple quoted segments need to be formatted clearly.

Usually, one quotes lines from the most recent message received from the email partner. If you have an email archive, you also can quote lines from earlier messages, including messages from long ago. This may have a dramatic impact on your partner. On the positive side, people may be pleased to realize that you are saving their messages—in a sense, holding them in your memory, even cherishing their words. On the negative side, they may feel uncomfortable seeing their words revived from the distant past—especially when they don't quite remember when or in what context they said it. It's a reminder that you have a record of them. The situation can be even more unnerving when they don't have a record of the message themselves, so they can't verify the accuracy of the quote. A slightly paranoid feeling seeps in. "Am I being deceived, held hostage? Why didn't *I* save that message?" Of course, all of these negative reactions are amplified when people use old quoted text in an accusatory or hostile manner.

Quoting segments can create other problems too. Divvying up the other person's message into numerous quotes, with your comments interspersed, may be experienced by other people as impatient, interruptive, or unempathically disrespectful of the integrity of their message. In flame wars you often see people citing more and more of what the opponent said, using it as ammunition to launch counterattacks. A series of point-by-point retorts becomes a verbal slicing up of the foe, almost as if it reflects an unconscious wish to tear up the person by dissecting his or her message. Often attackers want to legitimize their arguments by citing the opponent's exact words, as if the citation stands as concrete, unquestionable evidence. "This is precisely what you said." However, it's very easy to take sentences out of context, completely misread their emotional tone, or juxtapose several segments extracted from different parts of the other person's emails in order to draw a false conclusion from that forced composite of ideas. It's an attempt to create a contrived reality that Michael Fenichel has aptly called a "cut and paste reality."

MEDIA DISRUPTION

With the exception of such things as laryngitis and noisy heating systems, we take for granted the accuracy and stability of the communication

channel during f2f conversations. Online, we need to be more cognizant of possible communication disruptions. There will be moments when software and hardware do not work properly, when noise intrudes into the communication, when connections break. Busy servers result in lag that drastically slows down a chat conversation. A server crashes, preventing everyone from getting to the message board. Our email that we carefully constructed with special indentations and different fonts of different colors may lose all that formatting as it passes through mail servers that don't notice our creative keyboarding—essentially, a problem in translation. There will even be moments in a text relationship when we receive no reply and no error message at all, leaving us wondering if the problem is technical or interpersonal. That lack of response opens the door for us to project all sorts of worries, anxieties, and fantasies into this black hole experience.

Some computer-mediated environments are more robust than others, a fact online clinicians need to take into consideration when choosing their tools. Even in stable channels, therapists might take measures to confirm that the mechanical translation of the message is accurate ("Can you see this font?") and to create backup communication procedures if the primary channel fails.

THE MESSAGE BODY

In email and message boards, the body of the message contains the meat of the communication. I like the metaphor of "the body" because it captures the connotation of the physical self—how people appear, move, their sound and tone, their body language, even the elusive and rather mysterious dimensions of "presence." The message body is the most complex component of the communication. Messages can vary widely in length, organization, the flow of ideas, spelling errors, grammar sophistication, the spacing of paragraphs, the use of quoted text, caps, tabs, emoticons and other unique keyboard characters, as well as in the overall visual "feel" of the message. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, the structure of the email body reflects the cognitive and personality style of the individual who creates it.

One interesting feature of the message body—not unlike the physical body—is the extent to which it is planned and controlled versus spontaneous and free. Carefully constructed text, even when intended to be empathic, may lack spontaneity. It is possible to overthink and micromanage the message to the point where it sounds contrived. Nevertheless, despite conscious attempts to present oneself exactly as one wishes, hidden elements of one's personality unconsciously may surface. On the other hand, completely freeform, loosely constructed text may confuse or annoy people. The most effective message is one that strikes a balance between spontaneity and carefully planned organization. Short messages with a few obvious spelling errors, glitches, or a slightly chaotic visual appearance can

be a sincere expression of affection and friendship—as if the person is willing to let you see how they look hanging around the house, wearing an old T-shirt and jeans. Or such a message can be a genuine expression of the person's state of mind at that moment. "I'm in a hurry, but I wanted to dash this off to you!" In the course of an ongoing text relationship, there will be an engaging rhythm of spontaneous and carefully thought out messages that parallels the ebb and flow of the relationship itself. Composition can become more casual, detailed, and expressive as the relationship develops and people feel safe to explore; it regresses when they feel threatened, hurt, or angry. In some cases chaotic, regressed text may indicate decompensation and psychosis.

Text construction reflects an important personality trait—text empathy. Is there just the right measure of organization so the reader understands, along with the right measure of spontaneity so the reader appreciates the writer's genuineness? Does the sender pay attention to and anticipate the needs of the recipient? Empathic people specifically respond to what their text partners have said. They ask their partners questions about themselves and their lives. They also construct their messages anticipating what it will be like for the recipient to read it. They write in a style that is both engaging and readily understood. With appropriate use of spacing, paragraph breaks, and various keyboard characters (. . . .///**) to serve as highlights and dividers, they visually construct the message so that it is easy and pleasing to read. They estimate just how long is too long. Essentially, they are good writers who pay attention to the needs of their reader. This is quite unlike people with narcissistic tendencies who have difficulty putting themselves into the shoes of the recipient. They may produce lengthy blocks of unbroken text, expecting that their partner will sustain an interest in scrolling and reading for seemingly endless screens of long-winded descriptions of what the sender thinks and feels. Paradoxically, the narcissistic person's need to be heard and admired may result in the recipient hitting the delete key out of frustration or boredom.

Text empathy includes an intuitive feeling for what the others might be feeling and thinking. Curiously, people report that even in the stripped-down sensory world of text relationships—even in the bare bones of chat communication—others sometimes sense what's on your mind, even when you didn't say anything to that effect. Did they detect your state of mind from subtle clues in what or how you typed? Are they picking up on some seemingly minor change in how you typically express yourself? Or does their empathy reach beyond your words appearing on the screen? Obviously, this intuitive insight into the message body is a skill crucial to the success of an online clinician. It's a skill that may be different than intuition in f2f communication.

Humans are curious creatures. When faced with barriers, they find all sorts of creative ways to work around those barriers, especially when those

barriers involve communication. Despite the auditory and visual limitations of text relating, experienced onliners have developed a variety of keyboard techniques to overcome some of the limitations of typed text—techniques that lend a vocal, kinesthetic quality to the message, that indeed create a metaphorical message "body." They attempt to make text conversations less like postal letters and more like an f2f encounter. In addition to the expressive use of fonts, colors, spacing, and indentations, some of these creative keyboarding strategies include the following:

Emoticons like the smiley, winky, and frown, which are seemingly simple character sets that nevertheless capture very subtle nuances of meaning and emotion. The smiley often is used to clarify a friendly feeling when otherwise the tone of your sentence might be ambiguous. It also can reflect benign assertiveness, an attempt to undo hostility, subtle denial or sarcasm, self-consciousness, and apologetic anxiety. The winky is like elbowing your email partner, implying that you both know something that doesn't need to be said out loud. It often is used to express sarcasm. The frown is used to express personal displeasure or sadness, or to show sympathy for an email partner who is unhappy.

Parenthetical expressions that convey body language or "subvocal" thoughts and feelings (sigh, feeling unsure here). It's an intentional effort to convey some underlying mood or state of mind, almost implicitly saying, "Hey, if there is something hidden or unconscious going on inside me, this is probably it!"

Voice accentuation via the use of caps, asterisks, and other keyboard characters in order to place vocal *EMPHASIS* on a particular word or phrase.

Trailers to indicate a pause in thinking. . . . or a transition in one's stream of thought. Combined with such vocal expressions as. . . . uh. . . . um. . . . trailers can mimic the cadence of in-person speech, perhaps simulating hesitation or confusion.

LOL, the acronym for "laughing out loud," which serves as a handy tool for responding to something funny without having to actually say "Oh, that's funny!" It feels more natural and spontaneous—more like the way you would respond in an f2f situation.

Exclamation points that tend to lighten up the mood of otherwise bland or serious sounding text. Text peppered lightly with exclamations, at just the right spots, provides a varying texture of energy that highlights mood and enthusiasm. Too many exclamation points may result in text that seems contrived, shallow, or even uncomfortably manic.

Expressive acronyms, such as imo (in my opinion) and jk (just kidding), used as shorthand expressions.

As with all things, practice makes perfect, so people tend to fine-tune and enhance their text expressiveness over time. As a relationship develops, the partners also become more sensitive to the nuances of each other's typed expression. Together they develop their own emoticons, acronyms, and unique communication techniques not immediately obvious to an outsider. They develop a private language that solidifies their relationship and the distinctness of their identity together. Usually that language crystallizes around issues that are discussed frequently and therefore are personally important to them. To understand and enhance the therapeutic relationship, clinicians might pay attention to—even encourage—the development of this private language with the client.

MESSAGE PERIPHERALS

Important features of interpersonal communication surround the message body in discussion board posts and especially email. Sometimes we overlook these peripheral features and head directly for the meat of the message. Nevertheless, as experienced online clinicians well know, these message peripherals can yield sometimes obvious, sometimes subtle, but always useful insights into the psychology of the other person and our relationship with that person. As seemingly insignificant aspects of the communication, they often become small gems of communication, deceptively packed with meaning. When they change over time they serve as signposts indicating changes in the relationship.

The Username

The username people choose reflects the identity that they wish to present online. The name chosen may be one's real name, a pseudonym, or a combination thereof. Using one's real name indicates a wish to simply be oneself. It is a straightforward presentation. Pseudonyms can be more mysterious, playful, revealing approaches. They may express some hidden aspect of the person's self-concept. They may reveal unconscious motivating fantasies and wishes (or fears) about one's identity. A change in username may reflect an important change in how a person wishes to relate to others and be perceived by others. Moving from a pseudonym to one's real name may express the wish to drop the "mask" (albeit a meaningful mask).

The Subject Line

The subject line is a tiny microcosm unto itself. Often people use it to simply summarize or introduce the major idea(s) contained in the text body. Experienced onliners understand the more subtle techniques for communicating meaning and emotion in the titles they bestow to their text. The subject line can lead into, highlight, or elaborate a particular idea in the text

body. It can ask a definitive question, shoot back a terse answer, joke, tease, prod, berate, shout, whisper, or emote. Sometimes its meaning may blatantly or discreetly contradict the sentiment expressed in the text body. A creative application of caps, commas, slashes, parentheses, and other keyboard characters adds emphasis and complexity to the thoughts and emotions expressed in the subject line. Here are some examples illustrating these ideas:

the solution is . . .
loved it!
Jim! help, Help, HELP!!
I'm so impressed (yawn)
Have To Do This
Things afoot . . .
Even more/sorry
????
OK folks, settle down
&**%$#))(*@#%%$
Bob/battles/techniques/bullshit
sigh. . . .

In an email archive, examining the list of subject lines across he development of the relationship is like perusing the headlines of a newspaper over the course of months or years. That list of titles reflects the flow of important themes in the history of the email encounter. These patterns or trends over time might reveal subtle or unconscious elements in the relationship. Even if online clinicians are reluctant to devote much time to rereading old messages, they can gain considerable insight into the progress of therapy by creating pithy subject titles, paying attention to the titles created by the client, and periodically scrolling through their archives to peruse those titles.

The use of "re:" versus creating a new subject title reflects an interesting dynamic interchange between text partners. Creating a new title means taking the lead in the relationship by introducing a new caption for the interaction. It is an attempt to conceptualize, summarize, and highlight what the person perceives as the most important feature of the conversation. Creating a new title calls into play the "observing ego"—that ability to step back and reflect on what is happening. It also reveals a sense of responsibility and ownership for the dialogue—in some cases maybe even an attempt to control the dialogue. In this fashion, some text partners "duel" with each other via the subject line. Simply clicking on reply without creating a new title may indicate less of an observing ego and more of a spontaneous reaction. It suggests a "I want to reply to what you said" mode of operation. Some people chronically fail to create a new title and persistently use "re:". They may be a bit passive in the relationship, indifferent,

lazy. They may not feel that sense of responsibility, ownership, or control. Even if none of this is true, their partner may still perceive them as being that way. Online clinicians might pay special attention to when and how they create new titles versus using "re:" to maintain the captioned continuity of the discussion.

The Greeting

Similar to writing letters or meeting someone on the street, the text conversation usually begins with the greeting. Different greetings convey slightly different emotional tones and levels of intimacy. It sets the mood for the rest of the message—and sometimes may contradict the tone of the message. Starting with "Dear Jane" is somewhat formal, reminiscent of writing letters, and rarely used among experienced text communicators. "Hello Jane" is more casual, but still polite as compared to the looser "Hi Jane." The more enthusiastic "Hi Jane!" or "Hi there!" may have quite a significant impact on the reader when it appears for the first time, as well as when later it defaults to a plain "Hi Jane," perhaps indicating indifference, anger, or depression. "Jane!!" conveys an even higher level of enthusiasm, surprise, or delight. On the contrary, a simple "Jane" as a greeting tends to be a very matter-of-fact, "let's get to the point" opening, sometimes suggesting an almost ominous tone, as if the sender is trying to get your attention in preparation for some unpleasant discussion. Of course, adding the person's name to the greeting as in "Hi Jane" rather than simply "Hi" always indicates a deeper level of intimacy—or, at the very least, the fact that the person made the small extra effort to personalize the message. Over the course of a batch of messages, the back-and-forth changes in the greeting become a revealing little dance—sometimes playful, sometimes competitive. Who is being polite, friendly, intimate, enthusiastic, emotional?

No greeting at all is an interesting phenomenon that cuts two ways. In some cases, it may reveal that the sender is lazy or passive, or that he/she lacks any personal connection to you or any desire for a personal connection. In some messages I've received of this type, I felt almost as if the sender perceived me as a computer program ready to respond to his or her needs—with no identity or needs of my own. On the other hand, no greeting may indicate the exact opposite motive. The sender indeed feels connected to you—so much so that a greeting isn't required. She assumes you know that it's you who's on her mind. Or he never felt like he left the conversation and the psychological "space" he inhabits with you, so why inject a greeting into the message? In an ongoing, back-and-forth dialogue, there may be no greetings at all throughout a string of exchanged text. In the f2f world, you don't say "hello" in the midst of an energetic discussion. In cyberspace, the same principle holds. Although each email message looks like a letter that, according to tradition, should start off with a greeting, it isn't. It's a segment of an ongoing conversation.

The Sign-off Line

Whereas the greeting is the way people say hello and "sign in," the sign-off line is the way they exit from their message. As with the greeting, the sign-off is a fingerprint revealing the status of the person's mood and state of mind—sometimes obvious, sometimes subtle. "Here's where I'm at as I say good-bye." A contrast between the greeting and the sign-off may be significant, as if writing the message altered the person's attitudes and feelings. Across a series of messages the sign-off lines may be a string of repartees between the partners that amplifies, highlights, or adds nuance to their dialogue in the message bodies. The progression of exchanged sign-off lines may itself become an encapsulated, Morse-code dialogue between the partners. "Sincerely," "Regards," or other similar sign-offs are rather safe, all-purpose tools borrowed from the world of postal mail. They are formal, polite ways to exit. Some avid email users use them sparingly because they suggest a snail-mail mentality and a lack of appreciation for the creatively conversational quality of email. Here are some examples of sign-off lines that are a bit more revealing of the person's state of mind and his or her relationship to the email partner:

HUGZZ,
an unusually annoyed,
just my 2 cents,
stay cool,
still confused,
sheesh . . .

Almost invariably, the person's name follows the sign-off line, which demonstrates how intrinsically connected the sign-off line is to his or her identity. Simply typing one's real name is the easiest, most straightforward tactic. Some people creatively play with the sign-off name as a way to express their state of mind, some aspect of their identity, or their relationship to the text partner. Usually this type of play only feels appropriate with friends, or it indicates that one wishes to be friendly, loose, and imaginative.

Leaving out the sign-off line and/or name may be an omission with meaning. It might suggest a curt, efficient, formal, impersonal, or even angry attitude about the conversation. The ending could appear especially bureaucratic or impersonal if the person inserts his signature block and nothing else. On the other hand, friends may leave out a sign-off line and name as a gesture of informality and familiarity. "You know it's me." They may assume that the conversation is ongoing as in an f2f talk, so there's no need to type anything that suggests a good-bye.

Many email programs offer the option of creating a signature block that automatically will be placed at the bottom of the message, unless that feature is turned off. People usually place factual or identifying information into that file—such as their full name, title, email address, institutional

affiliation, phone number, etc. It's a prepackaged stamp indicating "who, what, and where I am." What a person puts into that file reflects what they hold dear to their public identity. Some programs offer the feature of writing alternative signature files, which gives the person the opportunity to create several different fingerprints, each one tailored for a specific purpose. For example, one block may be formal and factual, another more casual and playful. Each one is a slightly different slice of the person's identity. Because all signature blocks have a nonspontaneous, prepackaged feeling to them, friends often make a conscious effort to turn this feature off when writing to someone who knows them well. In a sense they are dropping their formal status and title. The message in which the signature block first disappears may reflect the sender's move toward feeling more friendly and casual in the relationship. As with the sign-off line and name, a change in a person's signature block reflects a shift in his or her identity or in how he or she wishes to present his or her identity.

Some email users place an ASCII drawing or a quote into their signature block. Sometimes the quotes are serious, humorous, intellectual, tongue-in-cheek, famous, or homespun. Whatever people use can reveal an important slice of their personality, lifestyle, or philosophy of life. In online counseling the clinician might consider talking with the client about the meaning of the drawing or quote and any changes the client makes in them.

TEXT TALK IN REALTIME

The synchronous forms of text communication—as in instant messaging and chat—have evolved into a style of relating quite different than the asynchronous methods. The exchange of text usually involves only short sentences and phrases, what I like to call staccato speak. Some people find that experience too sparse. They feel disoriented in that screen of silently scrolling dialogue. Other people enjoy that minimalist style. They love to see how people creatively express themselves despite the limitations. They love to immerse themselves in the quiet flow of words that feels like a more direct, in the moment, intimate connection between one's mind and the minds of others. Some clinicians also prefer this point-by-point exchange of ideas. They feel it creates a greater sense of presence and a more full interpersonal influence "in the here and now."

Staccato speak influences communication in a variety of ways. The terse style works well for witty social banter and sometimes elicits that type of relating. Conversations may involve very short, superficial exchanges, or very honest and to-the-point discussions of personal issues. One doesn't have the verbose luxury of gradually leading the conversation to a serious topic, so self-disclosures sometimes are sudden and very revealing. To make conversations more efficient experienced synchronous communicators develop a complex collection of acronyms, which accelerates the develop-

ment of a private language. In public chat settings, when people are meeting for the first time, they often quickly test the waters to determine the characteristics of the users around them and whom they want to engage. Questions that would be considered less than tactful in f2f encounters are a bit more socially acceptable here. Terse inquiries tossed out to a fellow user, or the entire room, might include "Age?", "M/F?", "Married?"

Synchronous communication in groups is considerably more challenging than one-on-one discussions—a fact the clinician interested in group work might consider. Chat room banter can seem quite chaotic, especially when many people are talking, or you have just entered a room and attempt to dive into the ongoing flow of overlapping conversations. There are no visual cues indicating what pairs or groups of people are huddled together in conversation, so the lines of scrolling dialogue seem disconnected. If people don't preface their message with the other user's name, it's not easy to tell who is reacting to whom or if someone is speaking to the whole group. Messages appear on your screen in an intermixed, slightly nonsequential order. The net result is a group free association where temporality is suspended, ideas bounce off each other, and the owner and recipient of the ideas become secondary.

You have to sit back and follow the flow of the text to decipher the themes of conversation and who is talking with whom. Consciously and unconsciously, you set up mental filters and points of focus that help you screen out noise and zoom in your concentration on particular people or topics of discussion. Often, you become immersed in one or two strings of dialogue and filter out the others. With experience, you develop an eye for efficiently reading the scrolling text. Some people may be better at this specific cognitive-perceptual task than others.

Saved transcripts of chat sessions often are more difficult to read after the fact than reading the text when you are there at the time the chat occurs. In part, this is because during a post hoc reading of a log you read at the pace you usually read any written material—which is quickly, but much too quickly to absorb the chat conversation. While online, the lag created by people typing and by thousands of miles of busy Internet wires forces the conversation into a slower pace. And so you sit back, read, wait, scan backward and forward in the dialogue (something you can't do in f2f conversation), and think about what to say next. There's more time for those perceptual/cognitive filters to operate. There's also more time for a psychological/emotional context to evolve in your mind—a context that helps you follow and shape the nuances of meaning that develop in the conversation.

Quite unlike f2f encounters, people can send private messages to others in a chat room—a message that no one else in the room can see. There may be very few or no messages appearing on your screen but people may be very busy conversing. In f2f encounters the equivalent would be a silent room filled with telepaths! If you are engaged in one of those private

discussions, as well as conversing with people out loud, you are placed in the peculiar situation of carrying on dual social roles—an intimate you and a public you, simultaneously. Even more complex is when you attempt to conduct two or more private conversations, perhaps in addition to public ones. You may be joking privately with Harold, conducting a serious personal discussion with Elizabeth, while engaging in simple chitchat out loud with the rest of the room. This complex social maneuver requires the psychological mechanism of dissociation—the ability to separate and direct the components of your mind in more than one direction at the same time. It takes a great deal of online experience, mental concentration, and keyboarding skill (eye–hand coordination) to pull it off. A clinician needs to be aware of how these complex communication patterns might be affecting the group's dynamics, as well as hone the skills of conducting public and private conversations simultaneously. Most important is the ability to coordinate efforts with a co-therapist via private messaging while also speaking to the group.

INTEGRATION: CROSSING THE TEXT BOUNDARY

If there are any universally valid principles in psychology, one of them is the importance of integration: the fitting together and balancing of the various elements of the psyche to make a complete, harmonious whole. A faulty or pathological psychic system often is described with terms connoting division and fragmentation, such as *repression*, *dissociation*, and *splitting*. Health, on the other hand, is usually specified with terms that imply integration and union, such as *insight*, *assimilation*, and *self-actualization*. Integration—like commerce—creates synergy. It leads to development and prosperity. The exchange enriches both sides of the trade.

Even though I've devoted this chapter to a discussion of text relationships, I cannot emphasize enough the importance of the clinician considering the therapeutic possibilities of moving beyond the text relationship, of crossing the text boundary into other modes of communication. People learn by reading and writing, but they learn more by combining reading and writing with seeing, hearing, speaking, and doing. The integration of different modes of communication accelerates the process of understanding, working through, and assimilating psychological change. The clinician might consider the therapeutic possibilities of embedding graphics, audio, and video files into the text relationship. The clinician might also consider if, when, and how speaking with the client on the phone or in-person might enhance the progress of therapy.

The developmental path in most online relationships leads toward becoming more and more real to the other person—a process accelerated by bringing the relationship into new channels of communication. At first the companions may converse only via email or chat. If they try chat in

addition to email, or vice versa, they often experience that move as a deepening of the relationship. Crossing any communication boundary often is perceived as reaching out to the other in a new way, as a gesture of intimacy. The big move of crossing the text boundary into phone and later in-person contact often becomes an important turning point in the relationship.

Hearing the other's voice on the phone and especially meeting f2f, you have the opportunity to test out the image of the other person that you had created in your mind. While conversing via text, how did you accurately perceive this person and where did your perceptions go astray? By answering those questions, you may come to understand how your own mind-set shaped your online impressions. You may have wanted or needed the person to be a certain way. Steered by your past intimate relationships, you may have expected them to be a certain way. You may have completely overlooked something in the text relationship that couldn't be ignored in the real world encounter. Afterward you may together discuss, assimilate, reminisce, and build on the encounter. You can share the ways in which the meeting confirmed and altered your perceptions of each other. But the in-person meeting doesn't always enhance the relationship for some people. They may be disappointed after the meeting. The other person was not what they had hoped. This unfortunate outcome may indicate that their online wishes were strong but unrealistic.

Some people choose not to phone or meet in-person their email companion, even though such meetings could be arranged. They prefer to limit the relationship to cyberspace. Perhaps they fear that their expectations and hopes will be dashed, or they feel more safe and comfortable with the relative anonymity of email contact. They may be relishing the online fantasy they have created for themselves. Or they simply enjoy the text relationship as it is and have no desire to develop the relationship any further. In all cases, choosing not to increase f2f contact with the text companion is a choice not to make the relationship more intimate, well-rounded, or reality-based.

The implications of these ideas for online counseling and psychotherapy can be profound. Although therapists sometimes may choose to communicate with a client only via text—given the needs of that client or perhaps of the therapist—they might keep in mind the therapeutic possibilities of using different modes of communication and, especially, of crossing the text boundary. Combining different modes, or progressing from one mode to another, offers opportunities for a more robust understanding of the other person, for deepening intimacy and trust, and for exploring transference and countertransference reactions.

An important dimension of what I call the integration principle is the process of bringing together one's online lifestyle with one's in-person lifestyle. Encourage clients to discuss and translate their f2f behaviors within the text relationship. Encourage them to take whatever new,

productive behaviors they are learning via text and apply them to their in-person lifestyle. Encourage them to talk to trusted friends and family members about their online text relationships, including their therapy. If you are working with someone via text and in-person, help them discuss the text relationship when meeting in-person and the in-person relationship when online. This will prevent a dual relationship in which certain issues are isolated to one channel of communication (probably text) and never fully worked through. Encourage clients to communicate via online text with their in-person family members and friends, while also encouraging (but not forcing) them to meet in-person or via phone the people they know online.

If a goal of life is to "know thyself," as Socrates suggested, then it must entail knowing how the various elements of thyself fit together to make that Big Self that is you. Reaching that goal means understanding and taming the barriers between the sectors of self. Barriers are erected out of the need to protect or out of fear. Those barriers and anxieties too are a component of one's identity. Sequencing, combining, and integrating different modalities of communication help us explore the different dimensions of self that are expressed in those modalities and also helps us understand our resistances to communicating in new and perhaps growth-promoting ways.

SUMMARY

The Internet makes text relationships more accessible than ever before in history. The unique aspects of text relationships open up new possibilities for online clinical work: reading and writing skills shape the communication; there are minimal visual and auditory cues; communication is temporally fluid; a subjective sense of interpersonal space replaces the importance of geographical space; people can converse with almost anyone online and with multiple partners simultaneously; conversations can be saved and later reexamined; and, the environment is more susceptible to disruption. Several of these factors cause social disinhibition. Although we tend to focus on the body of the message, the peripheral components of a text communication—such as the username and message title—also enhance meaning. As effective as text work can be, we should not overlook the therapeutic possibilities of moving outside text and integrating other communication modalities into our work.

KEY TERMS

24-hour rule: The principle indicating the value of waiting one day before sending off a message related to an emotional situation.

Anonymity: A partial or complete invisibility of one's identity.

Black hole experience: A situation in cyberspace when one receives no response from either a computer or a person.

Creative keyboarding: The use of keyboard characters to convey emotion, body language, and subvocal thinking.

Cut and paste reality: A term coined by Michael Fenichel that refers to the distortion of the meaning of a person's text message by quoting excerpts of it out of context, or by inappropriately juxtaposing excerpts.

Delayed reactions: In asynchronous communication, the postponing of a reply to someone's text message.

Disinhibition effect: The tendency for people to do or say things in cyberspace that they normally would not say or do in their f2f life.

Dissociation: The process of isolating components of one's self or identity from each other.

Dual relationship: Somehow relating to someone differently online as compared to the in-person relationship with that person.

Emoticons: Keyboard characters that mimic facial expressions, such as the smiley, winky, and frown.

Integration principle: A principle stating the salutary effects of bringing together one's online and offline lifestyles.

Invisibility: Also known as "lurking," the condition of being unnoticed or unseen in an online environment.

Media disruption: A situation in which technical problems interfere with effective communication in an online environment.

Message body: The actual message written by a person in an email.

Message peripherals: The additional features of an email surrounding the message. body, such as the subject, username, greeting, and signature block.

Parenthetical expressions: In text messages, expressions in parentheses that indicate body language and underlying thoughts and feelings.

Presence: The sensation of actually being present in an online environment, or of another person being present in an online environment.

Private language: The idiosyncratic patterns of conversing that develop over time between people in text communication.

Recordability: The ability to save text messages.

Social multiplicity: The ability in cyberspace to establish relationships with numerous and different types of people.

Solipsistic introjection: In text relationships, the tendency to perceive the other person. as a character or voice within one's own internal psychological world.

Staccato speak: The terse style of communicating in chat and instant messaging.

Subject line: The title of an email message or discussion board post.

Synchronicity/asynchronicity: Online communication that occurs in realtime as in chat and instant messaging, or outside of realtime as in email and discussion boards.

Temporal fluidity: The flexible quality of when to respond to other people in asynchronous communication.

Text empathy: The intuitive ability to sense another person's thoughts and feelings in text communication.

Trailers: A string of periods to indicate a pause in speech or a transition of thought in text communication.

Transference reactions: The distorted perception of a person based on one's wishes, needs, and emotions stemming from past relationships with other people.

Voice accentuation: The use of capital letters and asterisks to emphasize words in a text message.

Zone of reflection: The period of time one can reflect on a message before replying to it.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What makes text relationships unique compared to in-person relationships?
2. How do writing skills and styles interact with the text relationship?
3. What are the pros and cons of absent f2f cues?
4. What are the factors that contribute to the disinhibition effect?
5. How can clinicians therapeutically use temporal fluidity, spatial fluidity, and recordability?
6. What are the basic creative keyboarding techniques?
7. How do message peripherals add to the meaning of text communication?
8. How can crossing the text boundary and integrating communication modalities be therapeutic?

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