Coronavirus and digital spiritual direction

Spiritual direction, counselling and supervision are traditionally people-centred services; face-to-face, and in-person activities and the Coronavirus and lockdown threatened to place more pressure on people in need of these very human services.

For six years I have been working at developing and enhancing a digital and in-person practice, mainly for people I accompanied who moved interstate or transferred overseas, or those with a disability and who found the travel awkward; the tyranny of distance made it impossible for us to meet.

While I was attracted to the concept of connecting with my long-distance companions, embracing this new approach was quite daunting; I am not a digital native.

Clients too need to be comfortable.

From a business practice perspective, like many others lockdown here in Australia would prove challenging.

Prior to the pandemic, I met with between 5-10% of people through digital technology, these were mainly people with disabilities who were housebound, or people living in rural Australia or overseas.

However, times changed very quickly in the last month or so.

Now about 85% of those whom I previously met face-to-face have switched to meet through digital technology.

I am very pleased for the sake of my clients and the practice that I sought help and can offer people a flexible approach to counselling, supervision and spiritual direction.

**Videoconferencing**

For some years Telemedicine practitioners, some teachers and business people regularly used videoconferencing professional life and it prompted me to re-imagine how I might do likewise.

As a country, we are technologically advanced with computers, devices and ADSL internet connections, but it is the recent introduction of the fibre internet which made it really possible to digitally accompany people.

**Global is the new local**

Several years ago, as I began to re-image how I might offer a dual practice; both digital and in-person I turned to a Kiwi colleague who opened my eyes to see that “the global is the new local” and that I no longer needed to be physically limited by time and place in which I meet with clients.

“Global services are as accessible as local services,” the colleague said, and that living in Western Australia, I can easily meet with people in different countries but in the same or similar time zones.

Suddenly my small Perth practice was conveniently able to be in downtown Hong Kong, Singapore, Seoul, Tokyo, Bangkok and Manila, and even despite the 4-hour difference, I also meet New Zealand clients.

As I became more familiar with accompanying people in a virtual environment, for me the digital meeting space was very much like meeting in person.

**On-line confidentiality**

While appreciating the convenience of accompanying people in a digital environment, I was concerned about how to protect their confidentiality.

Many popular and generally free videoconferencing options may be convenient, but questions linger about their security and privacy measures.

I was advised to be sure that signing up with a service did not give the service permission to mine my or my client’s data and on-sell it.

My colleagues sobering words were, “If it is free, you are the product.”

His advice prompted me to sign up to a paid secure, encrypted service. And for six years, applying secure procedures I have been using www.zoom.us

I selected Zoom after extensive inquiries and testing a range of similar services. I conducted these tests in rural Australia and international settings.

Zoom is not a panacea for all ills, however, with proper security settings applied, I found the video and audio quality to be excellent; as someone listening to people and looking for visual signals both the audio and video quality is very important to me.

Zoom is also easy for clients to use and while ease of use is one thing, I am very pleased to learn that Zoom recently put increased emphasis on their security and improved it somewhat.

As well as features such as a virtual waiting room, password protection and locking the meeting, Zoom’s new version 5 now offers robust security enhancements; adding AES 256-bit GCM encryption. This encryption improves the user’s audio and video privacy while the data is in transit.

Optionally, on a paid account, I can select the countries the data is sent through, making it possible to avoid certain countries.

**In summary**

As a practitioner, if you are yet to offer spiritual accompaniment digitally, I warmly invite you to consider using this outreach and use a quality solution that is safe, secure and simple to use.

As a client, if you know someone you would like to see for supervision or spiritual accompaniment and they are not local, my advice is two-fold.

* Firstly, consider using video conferencing technology.
* Secondly and most importantly, ask the practitioner what video conferencing platform they use and what security measures it has.

Living in Australia in Coronavirus times I appreciate I am far more protected than in some other countries.

Part of adjusting to the ‘new normal’ means working from home and being able to meet the vast majority of my clients and indeed attract a few new ones.

Having developed a digital approach supported by suitable procedures, I hope digital technology continues to help me serve my clients and support them in their lives. At the end of it, whenever that maybe, I will be interested to see how many digital clients switch from the convenience of their place to in-person appointments.

**Source**

* **Stephen Truscott** SM, PhD is the Director of the Fullness of Life Centre (Inc.) Perth, Western Australia [www.fullnessoflife.org](http://www.fullnessoflife.org).
* Stephen assists individuals, groups and organisations through counselling, spiritual accompaniment, professional supervision, retreats, organisational reviews and vocational assessment.