WWP EN

Online Counselling for Violent Men – Necessary preparations and reflections

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Choosing the right tools

Video Calls

The most convenient program for online counselling is Zoom.

1. It has the most stable connection.
2. It is easy to use.
3. The program allows you to store session recordings on the cloud platform directly on the Zoom website, which is very convenient if you are working on a smartphone.

You should additionally have access to such services as Skype, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Google Hangouts, Viber, Signal or Telegram so you can quickly change the program if the signal is unstable for some reason.

All these programs run on your smartphone. However, you can only make calls from your computer using Skype, Zoom or Facebook Messenger. If you have a **MacBook**, you need to install the Google Chrome browser to do video calls via Facebook Messenger.

> **Remember:** To use messengers such as WhatsApp, you need to share your phone number. Since this is not always safe, you might consider having a second phone with an additional SIM card for your counselling.

Written correspondence

Desktop computers or laptops are more convenient for written communication. In the case of WhatsApp, Skype and Telegram you need to install a free application on your computer, while you can use Facebook Messenger directly through your browser.

Preparing for a call

Technical preparations

No matter which program you choose, you must **practice** before making your first call. At first glance, everything is easy, but when the session is on, and you do not remember how to turn on the video or sound, it affects the process dynamics badly.

Therefore, call someone in advance and make sure that:

1. You know how to turn on *and* off camera and sound.
2. You set up the camera so that there is nothing odd in the background. Take a closer look to make sure - it is very easy to miss something others might find distracting.

3. You have a [headset](#) (headphone and microphone) and it works. Ideally, you should have a second headset in case anything goes wrong.

4. You understand how to use the chat during a video/audio call.

5. The light source is located in front of you, not behind your back. If the light source is behind you, the client will only see a dark silhouette.

6. There is no potential source for noise near you (e.g. an open window).

7. You have an alternative internet source, e.g. making a hotspot with your phone if there is no electricity. Make sure the alternative internet source works for your purpose.

If you are doing the video call from a smartphone, make sure that you understand how to switch between the main and the front cameras. Otherwise, the client may see what is located in front of you in the room.

Remember: Be prepared for the fact that you will spend part of the first session, or even every session, setting up the internet connection with a client and explaining the technical nuances to him – something always goes wrong. Consider whether it is necessary to plan for longer sessions than usual due to potential technical difficulties.

Other necessary reflections before the call

Before the first call, make sure to discuss behaviour rules with your client. In these rules, you should address all unwanted behaviours and their consequences.

Nonetheless, it makes sense to think about how you will react in the following more or less likely situations:

- **Communication problems due to a bad internet connection:**
  A bad internet connection takes time to resolve and can cause frustration, aggression and other negative emotions. Will you extend the session? Will you discuss the feelings caused by the bad connection? Do you prefer to treat this only as a technical background and not address it further?

- **Problematic behaviour:**
  The client smokes a cigarette, seems drunk or starts drinking alcohol – How do you react? What are other behaviours that might happen and that you then have to react to?

- **Lack of focus/concentration, distractions & interruptions:**
  You see the client moving his eyes and realize he is reading something on the screen or somebody interrupts the conversation and comes into the room. You need to be aware of how you will react and what the strategies are for these situations. What are other distractions that could come up?

- **Interrupted internet connection:**
  The connection is suddenly interrupted and you cannot reconnect to the internet. Make sure to specify an alternative communication channel with the client in advance.

- **Recording the online session:**

You realize or suspect that a client is recording your conversation. How do you address this issue?

- **Any other issue that you think might become a problem**

Remember: It is important to reflect on these issues and to decide on strategies for dealing with them *before* meeting with clients online.

Preparing the client for the call

For preparing the client, it is a good idea to send some instructions before the meeting (no later than a day before). For example, if you agree on an audio/video call, it could be something like this:

Dear X,

We agreed to meet at 00:00 Moscow time 01.01.01

To make our conversation more productive and comfortable I would like to say a few words about the process and my concerns.

1. All that we discuss will remain between us. I guarantee confidentiality (except the cases of technical impact on our devices).[1]
2. The meeting will last X minutes.
3. Please, find a place where you feel comfortable to talk and are alone. The topic of conversation is complicated and you may want to speak loudly or use obscene language. You should be somewhere where you feel free to express yourself honestly.
4. Use a headset and a stable Internet connection (at least 128 Kbps, both for receiving and transmitting). You can check your internet connection speed [here](#).
5. Please prepare for a video call and make sure that your camera works. Please check if there is anything in the background that you don't want to share in the video.
6. Just before the meeting please make sure that:
   a. You are alone in the room (animals are out, the door is closed, and no one will suddenly come in)
   b. All applications and websites are closed, and notifications are silenced.

See you!

Remember: The better you prepare your client for the online meeting, the more comfortable he will feel, enabling a good and honest conversation.

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[1] During the first meeting, it is important to discuss the information sharing and confidentiality rules, e.g. that you will be sharing information relevant to the safety of your client's partner or in the context of supervision.

Moving from *offline* counselling to *online* counselling

Available formats

During COVID-19 it is very likely that it is necessary to move the work with a long-term client from face to face meetings online.

There is a variety of different formats available to do work online. Some of them are:

1. Video calls
2. Audio calls
3. Chat
4. E-Mails
5. Voice messaging
6. Video messaging

At first glance, it seems that a video call is the most convenient solution, which is true when we have ideal conditions. However,

- the client might be living in a very small apartment that doesn't have any private spaces to have phone or video calls,
- the pandemic has caused internet quality to decrease,
- unemployment has caused financial strains and unlimited internet is more expensive than limited contracts,
- if the client has a smartphone, he still might have limited internet on it,
- and while most people have a phone, not everybody has a laptop or desktop computer.

Accordingly, it makes sense to consider compromises that are less ideal but ensure the intervention takes place.

Audio calls, as well as video/audio messages are more or less understandable formats, while written correspondence has more hidden nuances.

> **Remember:** It is central to evaluate the resources available to your clients before suggesting an alternative to offline meetings.

Working via e-mail

E-Mails are not ideal for working with clients, since you will not be able to see direct reactions to your words and should rather be used for stress relief, e.g. as a sort of daily journal or diary for the client. Beware of the danger that a perpetrator might choose to misinterpret your words and use them as a justification for violent behaviour.

When working via e-mail, facilitators should pay special attention to the wording and structure of their messages. Ideally, each e-mail should be an answer to the one before or at least contain references to the previous e-mail(s). This helps reduce the client's stress and enables facilitators to lead the client through a chain of thought that aims at decreasing violence and ensuring the safety of the partner and children.

It is important to acknowledge and discuss all feelings that the client brings up in his e-mails. Ideally, the facilitator will offer actions and advice that support the client in finding non-violent solutions to his stress.

Working via chat

Chat support can be easier, since responses are much quicker and allow the facilitator to direct the process of reflection more immediately. However, facilitators must be able to type fast enough to allow for a flowing conversation and be good at responding spontaneously in writing to diverse situations and provocations. Alternatively, facilitators can use voice recognition software to "type" on their phones, which can allow for faster and more spontaneous responses. However, again facilitators must be very aware of wording in their messages.

Additional to regular punctuation, emojis can help with expressing emotions and adding two to three spaces between words highlights thoughts and enhances the influence of the text.

If it will take longer to respond to a chat message, it is helpful to let the client know that you are thinking by e.g. telling him "I am thinking".

Remember: You must make sure that you have a strategy on how to store written correspondence, which is in line with your national data protection laws.

Conclusions

Online treatment for violent men is more than just offline treatment in a different space. As outlined above, using online tools for working with violent men needs preparation and reflection on the possible dangers and risks posed to survivors and their children. Especially in written correspondence, the danger of misunderstandings is high, which puts a lot of pressure on finding the right words.

A detailed risk assessment is necessary to ensure that online interventions do not increase the risk for violence. Additionally, the current situation is especially stressful and might cause many triggers for violent behaviour. Accordingly, it might become necessary to stop the normal way of doing violence interventions and moving to a more crisis management focused approach.

Some further input on risk assessment and potential intervention options can be found in the WWP EN "Guidelines to ensure responsible perpetrator work during COVID-19": https://www.work-with-perpetrators.eu/covid-19