

Cyberculture in the workplace: a beginner's guide

Why do we behave the way we do in the virtual world? Dr Kate Anthony, leading expert in the use of technology in therapy, explores the disinhibition effect

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I'd like to introduce you to one of the core themes that applies to distance communication in whatever technology you are using. It's called 'the disinhibition effect'¹. You may well recognise it and have experienced it both in and outside of the workplace in your day-to-day communications. It is the reason that we hear such distressing stories in the media about suicide as a result of cyberbullying, or why online dating can be so successful, and why flamewars – heated arguments online with personal attacks occurring – spring up so quickly.

The disinhibition effect is what happens when we are not in the physical presence of another person, which is increasingly the case in our everyday communications, given the technology that we now have at our disposal. How often do you find yourself dashing off an email to a work colleague, texting your partner from your mobile, or updating your Facebook status these days? Whether you are an avid user of technology or not, it is unlikely that your sole means of communication is verbal and face to face. Whatever means of technology-mediated communication you are using, you are going to be less inhibited than you would be if you were in the physical presence of the other person.

The truth is that people behave differently online. The perceived distance in technology-mediated communication gives us a sense of safety: we perceive that we can say – and do – whatever we like, with little or no consequence. The insidious behaviour of bullies in the playground has a much broader scope when they have access to strangers (or friends) online, and the apparent anonymity the internet can give us creates a power dynamic that, to some, makes a personal attack seem more acceptable. The recent threats to high profile women in the media of rape and bomb-planting are a classic example of the worst side of disinhibited behaviour.

But in considering disinhibition in the context of therapeutic work with clients, we can also see huge benefits. The client who clams up the moment they are sitting in front of you or who 'feels fine' at the appointed 11am session but suicidal at 11pm, now has many venues and means of communication, literally at their fingertips. They can seek help however they need it, without having to look a counsellor in the eye when disclosing sensitive issues, and whenever they need it – the internet is open 24 hours a day. Without the constraints of polite society, they can access the parts of the psyche – the hidden thoughts that we keep to ourselves – and communicate those without inhibition.

As counsellors, our online presence is becoming increasingly important. We too are capable of being disinhibited online; for example, rashly disclosing personal information in an attempt to display empathy. And the client who doesn't Google their counsellor as a matter of course is becoming rare. There are entire online client forums dedicated to talking through the fall-out of seeing a counsellor's Facebook profile, including photos of weekend parties, their children, or partner and relationship status. The privacy of the counsellor is no longer sacrosanct or to be taken for granted in a continually connected world.

One of the early exercises our students undertake on our Cyber Facilitator course is to examine an experience they have had because of the online disinhibition effect. By reflecting on these occurrences, they stop conceptualising disinhibition as a theoretical element of online work and apply it to their work-based learning. We hear stories of relationships both made more concrete and broken, of clients who pour their heart out and hit the send button before disappearing into cyberspace altogether, or who ask for friendship on Facebook and are mortified at the rejection their counsellor then (rightly) gives them. Disinhibition has huge positives for the profession of counselling, such as shorter contracts as a result of the heightened levels of disclosure, the ability to explore and even act out the client's deepest fantasies, and fostering trust on the level playing field that the internet invites. But when it becomes negative the results are usually extreme. Conflict in the workplace is traditionally known to be a real possibility and the ways we communicate at work have changed. Where a defensive employee is experiencing issues with a colleague or line manager, it is easy to read negative or attacking material in the written word of an email and react instinctively to the perceived attack rather than the measured response one would give with the additional information provided by body language and tone of voice. Whether you are hitting the send button on an email, posting to an online forum, tweeting your followers or responding to colleagues on LinkedIn – it is worth pausing to ask yourself, 'Would I say this face to face to this person?'

Reference

- 1 Suler J. The online disinhibition effect. *CyberPsychology and Behavior*. 2004; 7:321-326.