COMMUNICATING & RAPPORT BUILDING ONLINE (SHORT VERSION)

FIACHRA Ó SÚILLEABHÁIN, SIMONE MᶜCAUGHREN & KENNETH BURNS

University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh
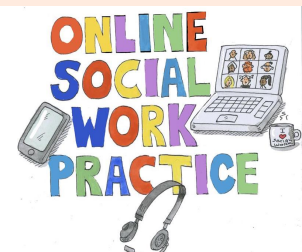
ONLINE SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

@UCCsocialwork

STEPS FOR ENHANCING COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR E-SOCIAL WORK

1.**Demonstrate you are listening**. Listening skills are conveyed by being attentive to the speaker and therefore our body language becomes even more important when using online video platforms. The use of non-verbal minimal encouragers (nod of head, open facial expression, smile) become essential in conveying that we are listening.

2.**Avoiding distractions** (such as reading emails or looking at your phone) is key to remaining 'present' during e-communication and engagement.

3.**Avoid the use of too many verbal minimal encouragers** (um/ah/ok) as they can become more of a hinderance than a help and can cause audio 'interference', interrupting the flow of conversation.

4.**Take note of your physical position in front of the camera**. It is important to notice your height in relation to the camera. It is a good idea to do a camera check before the video call so that adjustments can be made before and not during the call (e.g. raise a laptop to eye-level by putting a few books under it). The chair you sit on is important and ideally is not a swivel chair which can be distracting.

5.**Nuances of communication such as the use of silences are highlighted.** Pauses in the form of transmission delay can be a feature of online video-conferencing and can provide unwanted and awkward intervals that can sometimes impede progress. Therefore, there is a need to be consciously aware of the appropriateness of silences for online working.

6.**Make eye contact.** Many of us wonder how to make eye contact: camera or screen? Looking through the camera lens will allow you to look straight at the other person. While it might feel unnatural you could look straight into the camera just when you are talking to the other person.

7.**Your facial gestures and responses will be amplified** due to the nature of video-conferencing and e-social work. Be aware that the camera is now on you: you see your client/colleague *and* yourself. This can be very off-putting as we are not used to looking at ourselves in our normal day-to-day professional face-to-face interactions. There are two approaches to this: (i) turn the camera function off or, (ii) use it to 'check in' with yourself and evaluate how others might see you. Make any necessary changes.

8.**Show empathy,** even though this may be more difficult online. The camera lens acts as a tactile barrier and while you might ordinarily reach out to somebody in distress to touch their shoulder etc., you cannot do this with e-practice. You can, however, compensate for this by paying more attention to your tone and body language.

9.**Be genuine.** When using new forms of communication, we do not become experts overnight. It is OK to acknowledge that communicating in new and uncharted ways can be a steep learning curve for everyone.

10.**Be self-aware of the things you do habitually**. Fine and gross body movements will become more heightened and observable during e-practice meetings.

University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

STEPS FOR BUILDING AND MAINTAINING RAPPORT FOR RELATIONSHIP-BASED E-SOCIAL WORK

1.**First impressions are important!** Proof-read any e-communications. Take time to carefully explain your process, schedule and contingency plans if connectivity fails. Your professional approach in communication and preparation will demonstrate competence to the service-user.

2.**Be warm and welcoming.** While in-person contact may be your first choice, it is still possible to provide some stability to service-users through e-social work practice. Your professional input can be a source of stability amidst a crisis.

3.**Emotionally engage** with service-user's experiences and their time with you. Empathise with the service-user's emotions.

4.**Take care to convey interest and regard** for service-users through your facial expression.

5.**Your tone of voice is very important.** Rapport-building can be helped when the pace and volume of the social worker and the service-user are similar.

6.**Soften your overall approach during online interactions.** E-communications and telephone conversations can be experienced as too abrupt and direct sometimes. Allow for sessions to proceed at a slower pace and allow time for substantive topics to be discussed.

7.**Demonstrate your active listening skills** by making sure to summarise and reflect back what the service user says. This helps to convey to the service-user that you are taking them and their views seriously.

8.**Invite the person you are with to talk.** Use open-ended questions to evoke narrative responses from service-users.

9.**Careful use of self and self-disclosure can help rapport-building.** E-social work does not allow for service-users to learn about practitioners in the same way as in-person interactions. Share appropriate information about yourself, your practise and your experience. Unintended self-disclosure can happen when a household member unexpectedly joins an online call! These things happen and are part of the new norm of working remotely. There is only so much you can do to control the environment.

10.**Find some common ground or shared interests,** but practise authentically: do not pretend to know more about something (particularly about hobbies, sports or music).

11.**Use humour appropriately.**

12.**Anticipate service-user's needs by planning** each session beforehand. Take time to review files and case-notes from the previous session. Prepare possible readings or tasks/exercises which can be done between sessions (for example with children, you could watch a video clip, do a piece of artwork, play a game). Ask for feedback on what works. You may have noticed that much of the advice about e-communication and rapport-building is the same as best practice advice for face-to-face professional interactions.

University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

ABOUT THIS SERIES

The **ONLINE SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE** series was created by [Dr Kenneth Burns](#) and [Dr Fiachra O'Súilleabháin](#), School of Applied Social Studies (social work), University College Cork, Ireland. The full series of resources are available on our [Padlet with free resources](#) with information on online meeting platforms, practice advice, GDPR (data protection), and so on. The Padlet is open access and anyone can contribute links and resources. Original artwork by [Harry Venning](#).

TOOL 4, VERSION 1

Ó SÚILLEABHÁIN, McCAUGHREN AND BURNS (2020)

[*Click here*](#) for access to the full tool