

# SHIFTING TO ONLINE

COVID-19 forced many people to re-think how they work. For many RCCs, that meant moving their practices online — and some are going to stay online.

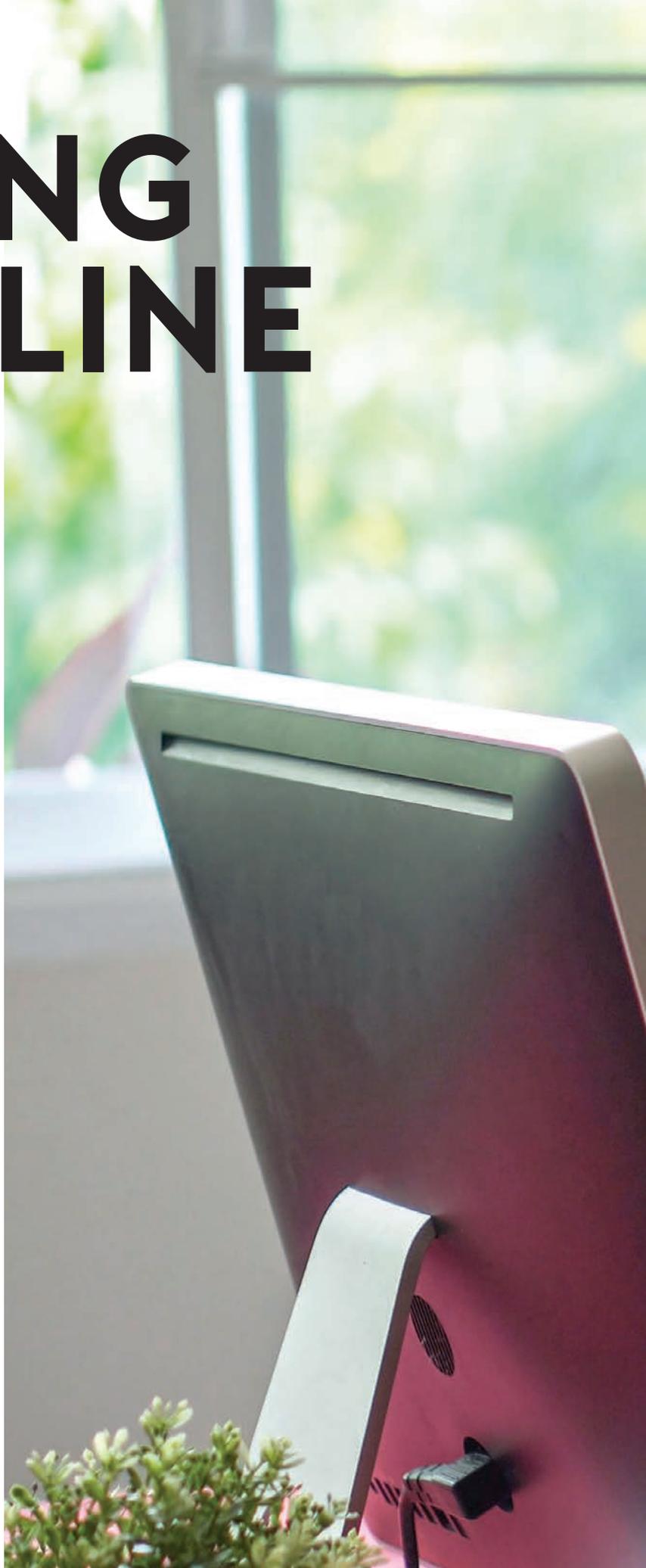
BY CAROLYN CAMILLERI

**W**hen Heather Pattison, RCC, first started working with her clients online, she didn't expect to like it. She works at a multi-disciplinary child-development centre in Kelowna that offers a range of programs, including clinical counselling.

"That's me four days a week," says Pattison, who has been in the position for nine years. "I take internal referrals from our centre, so if somebody else in the team identifies a family that could use some mental health support, then they send them my way. It might be focusing more on the child, or it may be focusing more on the parent or parents."

Pattison's work has always been face to face — until COVID-19.

"When we couldn't see people face to face, as an agency, we had to transition massively for everybody to work at home," says Pattison. "I would say that my work probably transitioned to home more easily than most people, because I could do so much work with parents. A physiotherapist really needs to see a baby or a younger child and do the work hands-on, but I can transition really easily to working with parents."





Turns out, she likes working online.

“I found the Zoom sessions to go really well and have been very successful, and the work gets done,” she says. “I feel comfortable connecting with even new clients, meeting them for the first time over Zoom. It just feels very natural. And I like working from home.”

So far, her clients mostly seem to like it, too, and are adapting quite well. “It’s interesting getting the feedback from clients. I just assumed clients wouldn’t like it as much, but when I ask, ‘How is this working for you?’ I’ve had a lot of clients say they even prefer it.”

Some clients commented that they find it easier to open up when they are at home, and others like the flexibility of being able to be in different locations, especially for those in couples sessions.

While Pattison did have some experience with Zoom previous to COVID-19 — as a participant in meetings and online courses — she had never been the person setting up the sessions.

“I didn’t find Zoom that challenging to figure out, and I think by the time I was contacting my clients, they had already figured out Zoom, because everybody’s life went on Zoom,” she says.

### **SO WHY DIDN’T WE DO THIS YEARS AGO?**

While the big push towards online counselling has come largely in the wake of the pandemic, many people hesitated to even try it until they had no choice.

“Uncertainty and fear of change are the main reasons I believe people avoid working digitally,” says Amanda Poitras, RCC. “I believe that with adequate

exploration and open mindedness, these fears can be addressed, and solutions can be found.”

Poitras is the director of Strength Counselling Services, a practice she built in 2010 in Alberta. When she decided to move to Victoria, she checked her ethical requirements, then invited her clients to join her online — and about 80 per cent agreed. That decision sparked a journey that turned Strength Counselling Services into a team of 14, including leadership, clinical, and marketing divisions.

Poitras says supervision is a key part of resolving fears about digital counselling.

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“For example, seeking supervision from a counsellor who is experienced in the field of digital counselling can help alleviate these fears and help people become familiar with this new way of offering therapy,” says Poitras, who specializes in eating disorders, addiction, and gender identity/sexuality issues.

Another holdback is the misconception that connection cannot be made the same way in a digital setting.

“I would encourage clinicians to look to the growing body of research out there demonstrating the effectiveness of digital services to help alleviate

their fears and, perhaps, some of the misconceptions of digital services,” Poitras says.

And she has had personal experience with those misconceptions: “I was told by mentors and colleagues that I would not be able to grow and sustain a digital practice.”

And yet, over the past 10 years, not only has she grown her practice, she and her team have become proficient at navigating the pros and the cons.

### **BOTH SIDES OF THE COIN**

On the pro side, Poitras says they have found that a digital relationship with a client offers much the same opportunity for connection.

“We have found the relationship between a clinician and their client is the foundation of a client’s ability to trust the process of healing,” she says. “Through this trust, the process then enables them to walk through the difficult emotions, decisions, and actions that could be vital for their growth. This relationship, without any doubt, has been cultivated hundreds of times within this company through digital channels alone.”

Poitras points out that, as a culture, we have all become more technology based, and digital services speak to that demand and comfort level.

Another positive is the convenience of attending sessions from home or work. “Removing the need for travel to a counsellor’s office allows our clients to have greater flexibility with their time,” she says.

Increased confidentiality and safety, the ability to acquire support when in remote communities, and the ability to choose a practitioner from a larger geographical area are other positives Poitras says their clients have come to appreciate.

“The strongest disadvantage that some clients have reported to us is the physical and geographic distance that occurs in an online practice,” says Poitras. “However, we have easily navigated this with the strong working relationships we build with our clients and the sense of connection that comes with that.”

Another area they have learned to navigate is that some clients do not have credit cards or use online banking, which can pose a challenge with payments.

“We believe there are always adaptable solutions, so we are continuously working with our clients to fine-tune and individualize our services to best meet their needs,” she says.

Another more obvious challenge is internet quality during a session.

“We have had to troubleshoot countless times to arrive at standards of practice to avoid operational challenges due to internet issues,” says Poitras. “Given that many clients become deeply vulnerable in sessions, it can be detrimental to the flow of a session if the internet connection is poor.”

Sometimes internet functionality is out of your control, and you need to be prepared for that.

“For example, during a session, a storm cut the power from my home, so not only did I lose the internet, but I was also unable to power my computer,” she says. “Instead of leaving the session and simply rebooking, we completed the session over the phone. The client reported that she was able to receive what she hoped for from the session despite the consequences of the power failure.”

But aside from power and internet glitches, RCCs shifting to online have a few other factors to consider.

## ONLINE TIPS

### AMANDA POITRAS, RCC, HAS SOME KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR COUNSELLORS SHIFTING TO AN ONLINE PRACTICE.



#### **1** Ensure you are fully familiar with the digital platform you choose to use.

In the event of a disruption in the session, you need to know how to resolve the issue immediately to maintain session integrity. New clients may move on if they find the digital process challenging, or if they feel the counsellor does not know how to operate digitally despite their clinical abilities.

**2** Ensure you have tested your internet connection (via speed tests and test calls with friends/family) to be certain your internet will be reliable during sessions.

**3** At times, internet connection issues will be out of your control, so it is vital to be aware of how to troubleshoot connectivity issues rapidly.

**4** Ensure your camera and microphone offer quality picture and sound, and that you are in a location with little to no background noise as this could cause disruption.

**5** Ensure you are regularly accessing supervision from a supervisor who understands digital service delivery, because not only do we have an ethical duty to monitor the content that travels through our sessions digitally, but we also ought to be monitoring how we are delivering this content.

**6** Understand the needs of the demographic you work with. For example, offering digital services tends to work well with younger generations. Older generations, notably those who have not grown up in the digital era, tend to require more assistance navigating online platforms. Furthermore, older clients tend to request in-person services when offered a choice. Counsellors working with an older demographic may need to consider these factors and the suitability of digital services for their practice. Counsellors must be knowledgeable enough about the online service platform to be able to teach clients how to navigate the platform successfully.

## ONLINE FUNDAMENTALS

Pattison is quick to point out that the agency she works with managed the critical background details of working online — details RCCs in private practice need to manage on their own.

“It is vital for the clinician to understand the security measures in place for whatever digital platform they are utilizing to deliver their sessions,” she says.

Gaining that understanding means doing your homework and getting some training. Pattison, who is a member of BCACC’s Ethics Committee and very familiar with discussions on technology standards for practice, highly recommends Lawrence Murphy’s webinar on online counselling, which is available to BCACC members. In addition to covering how to manage online sessions, Murphy’s webinar includes information on critical topics

such as privacy, encryption, and server locations, as well as things you may not have even considered — from positioning and lighting, emergency contacts and safety, and consent to issues around who might not be an appropriate online client, where your clients are when you see them online, and who else might be in the room with them.

“I have clients who, if there are family members in the other room, are more inhibited,” says Pattison. “You sometimes have to look at scheduling at different times or be more flexible, because sometimes they’re talking about their spouse, who’s in the next room.”

Don’t forget insurance, which is provided through BCACC.

“It is important to ensure that the insurance one acquires clears the clinician to work in a digital capacity,”

says Poitras. “There are also legally binding restrictions to consider when working with clients in different provinces and/or countries. An RCC can consult with [BCACC] and their insurance provider to ensure they are permitted to see clients digitally and further consult governing bodies of other provinces and countries if they wish to work with clients who reside in those provinces and countries where counsellors are regulated.”

## EXPANDING HORIZONS VIRTUALLY

While COVID-19 may have been the reason to try online therapy, many counsellors may not go back to in-person sessions even when it becomes possible.

“Offering online services does not just provide for greater flexibility for clients but also for the clinicians who provide the service,” says Poitras. “It

# ONLINE **TEACHING**



**Lisa Mortimore, PhD, RCC**, has a clinical practice focusing on the reparation of early attachment injuries through a framework that weaves together attachment theory, trauma studies, affect regulation, interpersonal neurobiology, interpersonal/relational practice, somatic psychotherapy, and deepening connections to the sentient world. Collaborating with Stacy Jensen, M.Ed., Mortimore also teaches workshops, two-year trainings, and advanced practices programming for graduate-level therapists, many of whom are BCACC members.

When COVID-19 struck, Mortimore had to make some changes to how she teaches and find ways to adapt.

“We’ve been really fortunate to move all of our teaching online,” says Mortimore. “One difference is the lack of impromptu connections that happen while training. Those are difficult to replicate — that beautiful way that community is built and connections and safety are created. We’ve had to find ways to build those opportunities into the training structure.”

Previously, Mortimore never needed to think about teaching her courses online.

“When COVID-19 hit, I thought about the isolation and overwhelm for therapists as we all navigate the shared trauma of this pandemic,” says Mortimore.

is a fun and effective way to deliver services.”

For Pattison, the transition to online has allowed her to continue her work through the agency but also to expand her private practice.

“I found I really quite liked working this way [online],” says Pattison. “A former colleague and I are going into business together to do an online counselling practice.”

She and her colleague have been talking about it for years, but there were always barriers such as working around her agency schedule, finding suitable office space for just six hours a week, and covering the expense of that office space.

“I was procrastinating and just never really got there, but this seemed like an opportunity to start that private practice,” says Pattison. “[Online], I can do as much or as little as I like, I can

do it on my day off, I can do it in the evening.”

Pattison acknowledges that she is still in transition with the private work and says there is a whole other level of responsibility

“And I’m still in the process of learning about that,” she says.

For counsellors considering making the leap to online, Poitras says some good resources are available.

“One I would recommend would be the *Guidelines for Uses of Technology in Counselling and Psychotherapy* published by the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association,” she says. “Additionally, I would recommend anyone interested in exploring digital practice to consult with others who have ventured down this road.”

Maybe a Zoom session to discuss it? ■

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Their first thought was to connect their training community.

“We offered several ‘teach ins’ to orient folks to transition their somatic attachment practice online,” says Mortimore. “It also gave us an opportunity to teach online and see how it felt and landed.”

The response from participants was positive.

“Our next hurdle was a four-day advanced practices training which sealed my belief in the potential of online training,” she says.

The biggest barrier was keeping the integrity of their relational pedagogy in a virtual teaching space.

“Once we recognized that we had to plan and make space in the curriculum for explicit opportunities to connect, my heart rested, and I could

## **The first four-day clinic was a wonderful surprise as so many gems that we hadn’t anticipated emerged.**

further sink into online as a viable venue,” she says.

In sorting the technology, they spent hours consulting with different online providers to determine regulatory compliance and find a platform that performs in ways they need.

“This was probably the most difficult piece as there really wasn’t anyone offering clear guidance, and it came down to us to decipher the route forward,” she says.

“The first four-day clinic was a wonderful surprise as so many gems that we hadn’t anticipated emerged,” she says. “We shifted our days,

offering longer breaks to mitigate online fatigue, and people took that opportunity to connect with their families, walk their dogs, do art or yoga — do what they needed to regulate their systems and integrate the material. This ultimately supported a deepening of our work together.”

Mortimore says participants were surprised at how comfortable, workable, and depthful the online clinics have been, as well as at the group connection and benefits of learning in the comfort of home.

“Viewing demonstrations in

split screen, which allows them to view the client just as I do and see my face as if they were the client, affords another new rich learning opportunity,” she adds.

Mortimore and Jensen are also offering a two-year training online, starting in March 2021.

“As we increase our online offerings, I anticipate it will open opportunities for folks where travel and other obligations are a barrier,” she adds.

Mortimore offers some final advice: “Flexibility is key as you move online, as there will be unforeseen glitches with student’s internet stability, connectivity, and technological misfires that disrupt and call us to stay regulated and think outside the box to find solutions.”