

Immediate Post-Counselling Session Time and Space Periods (IPCPs)

An Exploration of Client Experience and Therapeutic Value

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Introduction and Background:

There is a large amount of counselling and psychotherapy literature available on themes of time and space in relation to therapy sessions. Such literature spans length of sessions (Greenson, 1974; Goleman, 1984; Shapiro 2000), frequency of sessions (Bruijniks et al., 2015), time of day of sessions (Meuret et al., 2016), final minutes of sessions (Gans, 2016), physical environment (Lecomte et al., 1981; Pearson & Wilson, 2012), and the temporal dimension in sessions (Craciun, 2017; Wright, 2020). The time period immediately after counselling sessions appears to have received little formal attention in the literature. A previous client of the author mentioned that they wrote notes immediately after face-to-face counselling sessions to help with remembering and processing. The particular client engaged well in therapy, which prompted the query of if the time immediately post-counselling session might be important and if a therapeutic opportunity may be overlooked by clients being back to their daily lives/the outside world so quickly after counselling sessions. Leaving the therapy room after a face-to-face counselling session, by its very temporal, spatial, and motional nature, is a relatively quick transition. The transition is more instant after an online counselling session. Within seconds a client is outside of the counselling environment and back into the outside world/daily life. Considering the special uniqueness of the counselling environment and the potential personal depths of work in sessions one might ponder the usefulness of dedicated transitional time and space immediately post session to allow time for 'coming down' from a counselling session, the gathering of one's thoughts, and for processing/reflecting prior to returning to daily life. Wright (2020) describes the therapy session as a unique temporal experience and explores how it fits in and interplays with the rest of people's time. She also describes interplay between clock time and the subjective experience of time that can be experienced in sessions (past, present, and future), pointing to the deep nature of work that can occur within the 'therapeutic hour'.

Aim/Purpose:

The period immediately following a counselling session might be important in terms of client processing and experience of therapy. This work explores if a therapeutic opportunity is overlooked by clients immediately going back into the 'outside world', back to their daily lives, after counselling sessions.

Design/Methodology:

Four participants from a person-centred counselling private practice took part in immediate post-counselling session time and space periods (IPCPs) by remaining in the room they used for their online counselling for 30 minutes immediately after each of three counselling sessions. The emphasis of the IPCPs was dedicated time and space alone for processing and reflection. Semi-structured interviews to explore participant experience of the IPCPs were conducted and interview transcripts were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

Results/Findings:

Three superordinate themes were identified, along with 8 subordinate themes as presented in Table 1. Associated participant quotations are also presented.

The findings suggest that the IPCPs were useful, in particular during Covid-19 lockdown, and were felt to have therapeutic value. They helped participants reflect on and process their counselling sessions and facilitated a "checking in" with themselves, by themselves. They also acted as a transition from counselling sessions back to daily life. All four participants reported that they found the IPCPs therapeutic and said they would continue doing them in some manner going forward.

Table 1. Superordinate and Subordinate Themes for the IPCPs

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes
Time and space for me	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Useful for processing and reflecting on the counselling sessionsA meeting of self – without influence from othersImportance of the environment
The immediate factor	<ul style="list-style-type: none">A break and transition timeStriking while the iron is hot
I don't have time for this	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Fitting the IPCPs inIndulgent, worthwhile?Lockdown versus normal time

"Writing stuff down right after the therapy session was interesting because then you get no, there's no filter, it's just like pure emotionality. it's like there's no bias actually like, unfiltered you really had to sit there and contemplate everything and there is no space for like lies ... it's just very real and very raw"

"Even if I don't take you know 30 minutes, but even if I want to take at least 15 afterwards to actually yeah just sit there and think everything through rather than you know going to the other room and hangout with my housemates immediately, because I feel like I wouldn't, I wouldn't give myself the right space"

"Because I guess that is what I've had in the past ... pre-covid, was the walk home was kind of my decom, my kind of time to decompress and relax and take in what had been said, and that was, that's been missing over the past, well, this past 12 months nearly now"

"Just like a bit of solitude, and silence and peace to just think"

"I think to begin with like the first 5 minutes I just was sitting there thinking is this worth doing? Amm so, instantly I was thinking that I don't need to do this, if that makes sense"

"I found it really useful ... it was kind of nice to have time to actually sit back and take in what had been discussed during the session ... rather than just going straight into something else and not having time to think about it"

"While I feel like if you actually have the time to just sit through it like afterwards, you actually, it's not that like you understand what you've been saying but it actually sinks in ...and it maybe makes more sense and like because you actually spend time thinking about it and analysing it and being introspective while otherwise it is just up in the air ... if I actually think about it afterwards then I feel like I can internalise it better and I can actually, you know I remember what we say"

"I mean lockdown actually almost helped it, but the practicality of it in, shall we say in normal times [i.e. pre-Covid], I don't know if it would be that practical. So, but then in saying that even like I say even 5 minutes would be better than nothing ... I think it is really useful, but I don't know how practical it is. But then who knows, the way the world, I think if anything comes from this pandemic it's kind of taught us all a little bit to slow down, which is kind of a good thing from it. It gives you more space, so maybe"

Discussion and Conclusion:

The 'time and space for me' theme captures what the participants experienced, opportunity to reflect by themselves on their counselling sessions, to let it all sink in before moving on with daily life. Having this time and space for reflecting went together with a deeper connecting with self (and selves). The time alone without distractions from others at a 'ripe' temporal moment just after a counselling session seemed to help with this. Overall, a deeper connection with self, enhancing the therapeutic process, was the main element emerging from the IPCPs. Regarding the 'the immediate factor' theme, all participants valued the immediate nature of the IPCPs relative to the counselling sessions. This value was both in relation to the benefit of 'fresh memory'/striking while the iron is hot, and also the break/transition opportunity provided by the IPCPs. This feels important in relation to all counselling sessions, however particularly important during times of Covid-19 lockdown for online counselling which has an increased tendency for clients to be back to their daily life activities and interactions even more immediately after counselling sessions, at the click of a button. From the findings, an immediate return to daily life seemed to have a 'stopping/reducing effect' on processing. The experience of fitting the IPCPs into daily lives was an important consideration for all participants. Some participants had resistance initially at the beginning of the first IPCPs, however all participants reported value in doing them. This raises a sense of a battle between time and self with participants valuing and getting a lot from the IPCPs however also feeling that they do not have time for them. The 'I don't have time for this' theme highlights this and the busyness of lives and perhaps people being unaccustomed to taking meaningful time for themselves by themselves. Formalising IPCPs may prove useful therapeutically for therapists and clients engaged in relational therapeutic work. This appears to be true for after both online counselling and face-to-face counselling sessions.

Research Limitations and Implications for Practice:

The study had a small sample size and larger sample sizes in future work would be useful to corroborate and build upon these findings. Investigating across client groups, counselling modalities, counselling organisations, and counselling services in different settings would also be useful. Raising awareness of IPCPs feels important for online and face-to-face counselling. IPCPs can be discussed with clients, bringing mindful awareness to client's activities/schedules after counselling sessions. Consideration of spaces/opportunities that may be available for IPCPs such as the counselling room, other rooms in organisations, nearby amenities (e.g. coffee shops, parks, faith buildings, museums, galleries etc.), or journeys home may also be useful.

Considerations given to issues of equality, diversity and inclusion:

The participants were one female and three males, with an age range of 26-36 years old (mean age of 30). All resided in London, UK, and were counselling clients at the author's private practice.

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