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The Therapeutic Container and how to create this for online psychotherapy sessions.

The therapeutic container is a space and a set amount of time during which a client is welcomed to freely share their experience whether that experience is an exploration of somatic organization, tears, or even anger.

The container refers to the holding place where an individual, in their present moment experience, can be seen, heard, and responded to in an attuned and regulating way, without judgment, and where there is a welcoming and an appreciation for the experience and the private material within.

The Routine and Cues of a Therapy Session

Most often, a person will prepare for therapy with a walk, bus, or a drive to the therapy location, and perhaps will have developed their own routine beforehand, e.g. picking up a coffee or a cold beverage, playing certain music, walking at a brisk pace, driving a certain route, or slowly meandering and summoning ideas and reflections to share.

Arriving to the therapy room, a client's system (mind/body) organizes cues in the environment, e.g. a painting, a vase, the lighting, the way their preferred chair feels as they ease into it; this can allow for some of the settling in, letting down, or down-regulation, as the client begins to embody the welcome and safety available. Even when a client is feeling quite anxious and distressed, the cues in the room can, over time, lend to a sense of safety available in these difficult emotional experiences.

During the session, the client continues to receive cues in the exchange, through vocal prosody of the therapist, eye contact, gesture, contact statements (statements that imply a shared or developing understanding of what is being explored), and the felt or palpable sense of connection in the room.






Following session, a client and therapist may have a ritual for containing, or holding, what has been shared, until next session and for moving back into the activities and routine of daily life outside the office, e.g. a visualization, a summary with suggestion, or a move into ordinary consciousness and brief, light chat about the day.

Therapy online means that often the pre- and post-session routines and cues that we come to expect to help move us into and out of therapy are less available as we are thrust from one activity or room in our personal homes into the therapy setting. During session, you may notice the cues of the 'room' may have changed; the art may look different, the proximity may feel different on screen, and there may not be the 10-30 minutes before and after session to allow material to bubble up or percolate, to integrate and to settle as a client may have while walking to the elevator, and driving or walking home.

How can we ensure a practice that can prepare you for therapy and honour your experience and needs immediately following? The considerations that follow are a list of suggestions. Allow for some gentle time to find a pattern for online therapy that works for you.



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- ☞ If you have a supportive other in the home, have a conversation to ask that (minimum) 70 minutes be allotted you're your care: 50 for session and 10 on either side for transition. Allow for 5-10 minutes before session and after to engage privately with your body awareness, mindful breathing, emotions and thoughts, and noticing your needs. 
- ☞ Allow for a routine such as preparing a calming tea or drink and using a cup or mug specifically for your therapy session. 
- ☞ Chose a sweater, blanket, or shawl to bring with you to either touch or wrap around you – an option for comfort that is dedicated to therapy or used in similar situations where this item is has a history as a resource for comfort.
- ☞ Notice focal points in your video set up, whether in the background of the therapist (feel free to take a moment to look around your screen to notice items or colours) and/or within your own room, where you can rest your gaze from direct eye-contact in or on a place that doesn't necessarily distract you.
- ☞ Allow for your phone to remain in a different room, or for calls and texts to be muted. 
- ☞ Ensure you have comfortable clothing on and that your chair offers you good support, if possible. Allow yourself to use pillows to support arms, back, or neck. And notice if your feet need a bolster.
- ☞ Ensure there is a glass of cold water with you, even if you are drinking coffee or tea; cool water can help regulate quite quickly when needed.
- ☞ Have a small snack prepared for immediately following session; this can help bring your energy up, as therapy requires energy from your body. 
- ☞ Before moving into and out from a therapy session, use a mantra that guides you into the session and a mantra that closes the session.
- ☞ And, move your body following the end of session, body movement helps integrate, empower, and state change. Stretch your limbs and your vision (out the windows or the front door), and notice if you need a bit of a rest or some moving about. 

You can get creative with how you organize your space and time, but know that not all of these suggestions may be options or available for you and **that is okay**. We work where and when we can with what we have and develop collaboratively along the way. If during one session you arrive with a wee one in your arms, shouting directions to another through the door, and feeling frazzled – that is real life and there is no shame or need to apologize. We build our container from there, **together**.