

Guidelines for Clinicians New to Telehealth

The coronavirus pandemic has created the need for more counselors and psychotherapists to provide support to their clients via telehealth (also called teletherapy or telemental health). Telehealth allows therapists to meet clients where they are, eliminating direct contact while maintaining regular sessions with clients who are confined to their homes.

No specific legal certification is required to conduct telehealth sessions, but many professional behavioral health associations such as the American Psychological Association (APA), National Association of Social Workers (NASW), and American Counseling Association (ACA) offers guidelines and suggest adequate training in order to provide ethical services. Here are a few resources:

- **Telehealth for Mental Health Professionals: 2-Day Distance Therapy Training** (PESI) free training when you use code **TELEFREE**
- **Board Certified TeleMental Health Provider Credential** from the Center for Credentialing and Education: <https://www.cce-global.org/credentialing/bctmh>
- **Telemental Health Certification** from Person Centered Tech: <https://personcenteredtech.com/tmh/>
- **TeleMental Health and Digital Ethics Certificate Program** from the Zur Institute: <https://www.zurinstitute.com/course/certificate-in-telemental-health/>

Requirements and waivers are constantly changing, so we suggest visiting the following websites for the most up-to-date information:

- The American Psychiatry Association
<https://www.psychiatry.org/psychiatrists/practice/telepsychiatry/blog/apa-resources-on-telepsychiatry-and-covid-19>
- American Psychological Association
<https://www.apa.org/practice/guidelines/telepsychology>
- The National Association of Social Workers (<https://www.socialworkers.org/>)
- The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)
<https://www.samhsa.gov/>

Required Technology

Very little equipment is needed for telehealth services: desktop computer, laptop, tablet, or smart phone that contains both a camera, microphone, and video chat application. That being said, it is important to test your equipment thoroughly to make sure that it is giving your clients a consistent high quality experience.

HIPAA Compliance for Video Chat Applications

HIPAA requirements, best practices, state requirements, and ethical guidelines apply to telehealth just as they do to in-person sessions. It is important to ensure confidentiality and

protect your clients' information. On March 17, 2020, the Department of Health and Human Services announced any widely available video chat app used for everyday communication, such as FaceTime, Skype, or Google Hangouts, can be used to meet with clients virtually during the COVID-19 public health emergency. *During non-emergency situations, only HIPAA-compliant mobile platforms, such as VSee, Doxy.me, and Zoom, are acceptable for teletherapy.* You should obtain a business associate agreement (BAA) from your telehealth platform vendor. BetweenSessions.com has created this form – free for members.

Licensure Requirements

During the public health emergency, the clinician must be licensed in the state where he/she resides and the state the patient resides. If the patient is located in a different state, the clinician must have dual licensure. *An exception to this applies to patients who receive Medicare. See Billing and Payment (below).*

Refer to the rules of your licensing board and the ethical standards of the associations you are affiliated with. You might want to review: **To Practice Telemental Health, Am I Required to Receive Training?** <https://personcenteredtech.com/2016/07/28/practice-telemental-health-required-receive-training/>

Video vs. Telephone Therapy

While the elderly and disabled may initially find video conferencing challenging, a caregiver or family member is often able to help them get set up properly.

Because clients can share and express more with their facial expressions and body language, video chat is considered to be more appropriate to therapy and counseling than phone calls.

Clear audio and responsive video are important, and one current issue to consider is telehealth platforms are experiencing unprecedented traffic since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic - resulting in connectivity issues. One workaround is to mute the audio of your telehealth software and call your clients on the phone to maintain clear, consistent audio during sessions.

Billing and Payment

- **Medicare:** On March 17, 2020, Medicare issued new guidelines that allow for reimbursement for telemedicine. The 1135 Waiver enables clinicians to provide teletherapy to any client located anywhere in the U.S., regardless of where the clinician is licensed. *This waiver applies only to Medicare patients.* Visit the website of the U.S. Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services for more details.
- **Private and commercial insurers:** A number of changes have been made since March 19, 2020, in which numerous insurance companies will accept teletherapy services. Reimbursements, billing codes, and imposed requirements vary by insurance company, so be sure to visit the website of your insurance provider(s) for the most accurate and current information.

Safety Issues

For all patients receiving teletherapy, notes and documentation should include a patient's home address, cell phone number, and emergency contact information.

If you are working with someone in another state who has threatened self-harm or suicide, keep them online and call the patient's local police. Remember, if you simply dial 9-1-1, you will call your local emergency responders.