

Telehealth Tips for Mental Health Clinicians

Amy E. Ellis, Ph.D.

As a mental health clinician practicing telehealth, there are several key considerations and requirements to ensure that you can provide effective and ethical online therapy. Here are some important aspects to consider.

Licensing and Legal Requirements

Familiarize yourself with the laws and regulations regarding telehealth in your jurisdiction (state and/or country). Ensure that you are appropriately licensed to practice psychology and provide telehealth services in the relevant locations where your clients reside.

Establish an Address

Though you're technically trying to avoid having a physical address, you'll need one for a variety of reasons. You'll need somewhere to receive mail to list for your business entity (e.g., LLC or practice license), and to post on your website. But keep in mind the difference between a virtual mail address and a virtual mailbox. A virtual mail address is a *real* address. You'll need this if you intend to accept insurance as most panels will only reimburse if you have a physical address. A virtual mailbox, by contrast, is simply a way to receive your snail mail in digitized format; your mail is received and scanned in. Besides some of the confidentiality implications of this, it would not be a "real" address, and as such, not useful for anyone intending to submit to insurance.

Malpractice Insurance

Update your malpractice insurance to confirm that you are covered for conducting telehealth sessions. Some states may offer additional protections.

Technology and Infrastructure

Acquire the necessary technology and infrastructure to conduct telehealth sessions effectively. This includes a secure and reliable internet connection, a computer or device with a webcam and microphone, and HIPAA-compliant teleconferencing software or platforms.

Privacy and Security

Ensure that you are utilizing secure platforms or software that protect client confidentiality and meet relevant privacy regulations, such as the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) in the United States. Familiarize yourself with the platform's security features and take necessary steps to safeguard client information.

Informed Consent

Obtain informed consent from your clients for engaging in telehealth services. Explain the benefits, limitations, and potential risks associated with online therapy. Discuss confidentiality, data storage, and the limitations of technology in ensuring privacy.

Competence and Training

Develop competence in conducting therapy remotely. Familiarize yourself with best practices for conducting online sessions, including managing technological issues, maintaining therapeutic rapport, and addressing emergency situations remotely. Consider participating in training programs or workshops specifically focused on telehealth.

Ethical Guidelines

Adhere to professional ethical guidelines for providing psychological services. Many professional associations, such as the American Psychological Association (APA), have specific guidelines for telepsychology. Familiarize yourself with these and ensure that your telehealth practice aligns with ethical principles.

Documentation and Record-Keeping

Establish procedures for documentation and record-keeping that are consistent with professional standards. Determine how you will securely store electronic records and comply with applicable regulations regarding record retention and client access.

Update Paperwork

Revise your current and/or create a new informed consent that spells out the risks and benefits of conducting telehealth and policies around who is appropriate for telehealth. Determine administrative issues like how individuals will complete paperwork or submit payment.

Emergency Protocols

Develop clear procedures for handling emergencies that may arise during telehealth sessions. Establish protocols for assessing and managing crises remotely and collaborate with clients to create safety plans.

Billing:

Understand the reimbursement policies of insurance companies or third-party payers regarding telehealth and ensure proper billing practices. Note current policies for including a location specifier on your superbills and/or insurance submissions.

Ongoing Evaluation and Improvement

Continuously evaluate the effectiveness and outcomes of your telehealth practice. Seek feedback from clients and make necessary adjustments to optimize the quality of care you provide remotely.

Remember, telehealth has its unique benefits and challenges compared to in-person therapy. It is important to stay informed about evolving telehealth practices and regularly update your knowledge and skills in this area.

The practice of your dreams can be your reality. If you're looking for personalized guidance or more on this topic, consider a one-on-one consultation with a TPI consultant. Contact us at support@thepracticeinstitute.com to arrange a convenient time.

TPI members have access to our expanded checklists, guides, and tips; a free one-on-one consultation; access to our on-demand Answer Desk; and free small group discussions on a variety of practice needs.

<https://thepracticeinstitute.com/join-tpi/membership-options/>

Last updated 1/23/23 (AEE)