ctac THE COMMUNITY TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER OF NEW YORK

Telemental Health Tip Sheets

Conducting Appointments Via Phone

Using technology to deliver mental health services may be new to you. Below are some helpful tips to consider as you adapt to new telemental health technology solutions for service delivery. For additional resources and updates on how the COVID-19 public health emergency affects the delivery of behavioral health services in New York State, please visit **https://ctacny.org/covid-19-resources**.

1. Before your first session decide what **phone number** you'd like to provide clients. Using a work number or app approved by your agency is ideal, but if you do provide your personal cell phone number, set boundaries that feel comfortable for you. If clients are leaving a voicemail to reschedule an appointment, direct them to use email, text, client portal, etc. Set an "off hours" voicemail greeting that includes what your hours are and which number to call in case of emergency. Some providers may find it helpful to include a supervisor on the first call to explain the system and set boundaries.

2. When working from home, it can be helpful to **limit distractions** (e.g. set phone to silent or do not disturb, turn off computer, etc.). Find a quiet place you won't be disturbed and make sure you can conduct therapy in private. Similarly, help clients to brainstorm where they can find a safe, quiet, and private place to engage in therapy. If there are topics that might be difficult to discuss if someone were to overhear, confirm they are in a space away from partners, roommates, children, etc.

3. Check in with clients to confirm they have a **working cell phone or landline** and ask if they have unlimited minutes. If they do not, they may qualify for a government subsidy. If your client is a New York City resident they may be eligible for the SafeLink Cell Phone Program—a government supported program that provides cell phones to low income people. If your client is a resident of New York State they may qualify for Lifeline which subsidizes phone bills (both for cell phones and landlines) for low income people.

4. Make sure to check your **state guidelines** on providing telemental health services. The New York State Office of Mental Health has recently updated their guidelines around telemental health to better serve providers and clients during the COVID-19 public health crisis. Visit our COVID-19 resources page to read more about the evolving news coming out of NYS OMH.

5. Contact the **insurers** that you work with to confirm that they will process telemental health claims. While doing this also confirm the appropriate billing codes for any telemental health services you plan to provide.

6. Don't put your phone on **speaker** unless you have to. Speaker can distort the client's tone, which can make it harder to pick up on vocal cues.

7. If a client is having a hard time adjusting to the new experience of a telephone appointment, ask them to **describe their surroundings**, and describe your own surroundings. Focusing on describing where they're sitting and then on imagining where you're sitting will draw their attention away from potential feelings of awkwardness or phone shyness, and will give them an opportunity to start speaking in detail about something straightforward, so that they become more comfortable with the new medium and are ready to engage in the therapeutic conversation. If you and the client both have access to video calling apps like Facetime and are comfortable using them, consider transferring the call to video.

8. Silences or pauses on the phone can feel much longer than they might in face-to-face appointments, where body language and facial expression can act as an additional form of communication. A pause or long **silence** may cause a client to feel self-conscious or uncertain, but sometimes maintaining a silence and allowing the client to return to their thought after a moment or dwell on your question can be beneficial. As always, the right approach depends on the situation and the client, and the provider should use their best judgement, but be mindful that a silence can feel more "loaded" on the phone than in person. If you're pausing to take notes, let the client know what you're doing so they don't assume you've become distracted. It's helpful to remember that you can have a healing holding environment on the phone by using transparency and support and building on your trusted relationship.

9. Explain to clients that having sessions over the phone can be a bit strange at first but that you will work together to become comfortable. Be kind to yourself if it feels like conducting appointments by phone does not feel the same as in-person. Conducting appointments by telephone takes **practice**, and it will become more intuitive with time. You and the client are both adjusting to this "new normal."

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