



Mental Wellness During COVID-19

Virtual Care and Support

Things to Consider when Providing Mental Wellness Virtual Care & Support

Telemental health is a mental health service which provides virtual care using various technology such as; email, video chat, online messaging or telephone. It allows clinicians and other mental health professionals to connect with their clients using technology despite distance, remoteness or a client's inability to leave their home. It also offers clients a way to get the treatment and support they require with the convenience and flexibility they need.

Telemental health care can provide effective and flexible solutions. While being comparable to face to face, in-person services, Telemental health also has many advantages especially in isolated and remote communities. Findings indicate that Telemental health care is cost effective, efficient and offers adaptable solutions for the care and support of clients with promising outcomes.

Considerations Prior to Implementing Virtual Care

- Be aware of standards and guidelines concerning Telemental health, including privacy, security, and consent, within your organization, province/territory and/or professional college and online prescribing (if applicable).
- Know the records management system in place for your community and/or client system.
- Consider client's willingness; Are they comfortable with technology? Will there be confidentiality issues?
- Examine client's available resources; Do they have access to a smart phone, tablet, laptop/ computer? If not can one be temporarily provided?
- Reflect on your comfort level with technology; Does technology make you nervous? Do you require any training or upgrading of technology?
- Understand jurisdiction between provinces; Could there be a conflict of jurisdiction if close to borders or client travels?

Available Technologies for Virtual Care & Support

1. Videoconference, Telephone & Messaging Systems: Due to limited transportation and access to distant geographic locations, and the cost involved, videoconferencing and telephone messaging can facilitate client access to mental wellness services.
2. Web-based Interventions: Web-based interventions can be offered as text, audiovisual or animated programs. In some cases, the interventions have interactive tools for feedback and supervision of the therapy sessions, and for enhancing the client's learning experience.
3. Mobile Phone Technology: Mobile phones provide clients and clinicians with an excellent communication means. They can send and receive text, voice and video messages, facilitating many forms of clinical interactions.
4. Networking via Social Media & Group Discussions: Networking refers to the use of digital, web-based technologies and mobile phones to promote information transfer and communication among clinicians and clients.

Benefits of Providing Mental Wellness Virtual Care & Support

Studies have suggested Telemental health care has promising potentials to fill the existing gaps between the current needs and innovations for future within the expected constraints. Telemental health care is particularly beneficial for clients living in isolated and remote communities (with adequate broadband internet/cell access) where mental wellness care and support may be limited or not readily available locally. In the current context of COVID-19 Telemental health care can provide ongoing access to support and care while remaining safe in our homes and community. For providers and clients alike, in addition to the positive health effects of receiving mental wellness care & support, there are numerous benefits to virtual care & support:

Ease and convenience: clients and clinicians simply need a computer, webcam, smartphone or tablet and broadband internet access.

Increased access: clients who live in isolated and remote areas, who are housebound, who have trouble lining up childcare, or are just too busy, now have access to flexible and easy mental wellness care options.

Fewer missed appointments: clients are less likely to miss an appointment because they forgot, may not want to leave their house or something unexpected came up. They can now meet from wherever they are.

Reach new clients: clinicians who offer services virtually can expand their reach to new clients and across communities with greater ease.

Customize care: leveraging a virtual platform, clinicians wish to examine how care is delivered through appropriately timed assessments and tracking trends and progress over time.

Reduced costs: for both clinicians and clients. Decreased travel costs, no office overhead or large equipment set up required for clinicians, no need for childcare or time off work for clients or missed appointment fees.

Virtual Care in First Nation Communities

- Be aware of cultural practices of community and Nation of your client.
- Ensure knowledge of client's culture and language.
- Understand the level of comfort of culture/language for community and clients you serve.
- Be aware of the client's level of comfort using virtual care
- Provide resources and knowledge of practices through email to prepare client for consultations.
- Understand what your role is within the Mental Wellness team environment.
- Be aware of policies and procedures of community regarding virtual care.
- Ensure there is a coordination of services with all clients.
- Be aware of potential technological challenges such as client's access (or lack of) to broadband internet or access to devices such as smartphones, laptops, tablets and other devices
- Be considerate of privacy and confidentiality challenges that the client may encounter as a result of overcrowding, violence in the home, lack of respite, etc

Ethical Considerations for Providing Mental Wellness Care & Support

Clinicians who are regulated should check local licensing board rules for limitations and guidelines. Laws vary greatly and change quickly, so it's important to consult a reliable source in your province.

Some general ethical guidelines that can help include:

- If you use a teletherapy app, know the app's policies. Ensure those policies comply with laws and with your own practice norms. Only work with apps that can fully secure client data and endorse treatment approaches that are evidence-based and ethical.

- Take proactive steps to secure client data. Only provide therapy across a secure connection. Inform clients about the privacy risks inherent to virtual therapy. It is especially important for them to know that the people they live with who can gain access to their computer may be able to gain some information about their therapy sessions-especially if sessions are recorded or if session notes are stored anywhere on the computer.
- Be mindful of scope of practice issues. People using virtual care, like other clients, may present with a range of issues. If a client reveals an issue which you are not equipped to treat, refer them to another clinician.
- Practice good informed consent. Be clear about goals, expectations, and your privacy policies. If you treat children or adolescents, follow your rules for permission to treat and informed consent.
- Know your clients. Get basic information such as their name and contact information, and explain how you will use this information. Depending on the facts of the case and the province in which you practice, you could be held liable for harm to a client or the harm a client causes if you do not follow your ethical obligation to report abuse and warn of danger

Challenges of Providing Mental Wellness Virtual Care & Support

Although communication technologies can widen the scope of mental wellness care and support, certain concerns still remain and many considerations to examine:

- Ensuring both the clinician and client have the skills required to use the technology.
- Availability of the equipment and periodic upgrades for the client.
- Lack of internet services and stable signals.
- Regular evaluation of the service and its efficacy.
- Insurance coverage for the services provided by registered clinicians
- Unclear quality control and standards
- Comfortable level by both the clinician and client.
- Concerns about marginalized clients' capacity and access. For example, individuals with physical and cognitive disabilities who are unable to use the equipment properly, or those who don't have financial means to access equipment or internet, making in-person services as the only feasible choice.
- Ethical and regulatory concerns exist about the use of web-based services, since the client's privacy might be at risk, and the clinicians may not be sure who else may be hearing the conversation.
- Video-conferencing omits the full-scale physical presence and some of the behavioral cues.
- Telephone excludes visual cues, and text messaging omits both sound and visual cues
- E-mailing eliminates synchronous (real-time) communication

Risks of Providing Mental Wellness Virtual Care & Support

- Data can be breached
- Technology may not work
- Client may not engage in session by video
- Confidentiality can be breached inadvertently

How to prepare clients for Mental Wellness Virtual Care & Support

- Survey clients by telephone to determine their technology needs.
- Ensure clients that care will still be provided and their wellness is a priority.
- Provide resources and links/videos to help clients learn new technology.
- Practice the technology with the clients in advance.
- Client consent will need to be obtained by following appropriate procedures.
- Set times and dates with client that are within reasonable working hours.
- Set clear boundaries and provide client with hours and times that care is available.
- Ensure all technology is in working order before working with client.
- Advise client to: use a room in their home that can be without interruptions during the session, use headphones to help with sound and aid with keeping the conversation confidential, set up a fan or radio outside the door to assist with creating a confidential space and put up a “DO NOT DISTURB” sign on the door during the appointment.
- Discuss risks and benefits with the client and address any concerns they may have so they can make an informed decision about using the virtual care.

Liability Insurance

For regulated health professionals, considerations for liability insurance needs must be attended to.

These considerations include:

- Contacting your insurance provider, they will tell you if you are covered, if applicable.
- Practice in scope, limits of competence.
- Practice in your jurisdiction.
- Contact your insurer if you think there is a potential for a complaint.
- Most insurers have a practice support line or legal line you can call.

References and Acknowledgment

1. A special Thank You to Dr. Chris Mushquash who shared his experience and knowledge on using virtual technology on May 1, 2020 during our Promoting Wellness & Providing Support virtual gathering.
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5. The Right Path Counselling & Prevention Services- Guide to Tele-Therapy

First Peoples Wellness Circle

www.fpowc.ca

Nipissing First Nation, 857 Yellek Trail North Bay, ON P1B 8G5

Tele: (705) 313-4942 To IFree: 1-833-311-fpowc