



Telehealth

Counsellor Toolkit 2024

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Guidelines for Counsellors Using Telehealth in Australia

Telehealth for counsellors encompasses the delivery of counselling and therapy services remotely using telecommunications technology. This modern approach to care allows counsellors to connect with clients through various means such as video calls, phone calls, or secure messaging platforms. In Australia, telehealth counselling has emerged as a valuable tool for reaching individuals who face barriers to accessing traditional in-person therapy, particularly those in rural or remote areas where counselling services may be scarce. When considering telehealth the Australian Government has developed a checklist for telehealth services to assist with complying with privacy obligations

[Checklist](#)

Benefits of Telehealth in Counselling

The adoption of telehealth in counselling has brought numerous benefits for both counsellors and clients. For counsellors, it offers greater flexibility in scheduling appointments, reduces administrative burdens, and expands their reach beyond traditional clinic settings. Meanwhile, clients benefit from increased convenience, reduced travel time and expenses, and the ability to access counselling services from the comfort and privacy of their own homes. Telehealth also removes some of the stigma associated with seeking support, as it allows clients to engage in therapy without having to visit a physical office.

[More Information](#)

Limitations of Telehealth in Counselling: Privacy & Safety Concerns

One of the limitations of telehealth is the inability for the client to find a space that is confidential. This situation compromises the confidentiality of the therapeutic relationship, as clients may feel uncomfortable discussing sensitive topics or may be hesitant to fully engage in the therapeutic process. Consequently, this can impact the effectiveness of the counselling session.

Additionally, clients experiencing family violence may face significant challenges in accessing private spaces to engage in counselling sessions. In situations involving family violence, ensuring the safety and well-being of the client is paramount.

Ultimately, the decision on when to use telehealth services should be made collaboratively between the client and the counsellor, considering the client's safety concerns, therapeutic needs, and available resources. It's essential for counsellors to assess each client's situation carefully and provide personalised recommendations and support.

[More Information](#)

Privacy & Security Measures

Privacy and security are paramount in telehealth to protect client confidentiality and comply with regulatory requirements. Healthcare providers employ robust privacy measures, such as secure end-to-end encryption, to safeguard patient data during transmission. Additionally, they implement access controls and authentication protocols to ensure that only authorised individuals can access sensitive information. In Australia, healthcare organisations and private practise providers must adhere to strict privacy regulations, such as the Privacy Act and the Australian Privacy Principles to protect client privacy in telehealth settings.

[Privacy Act](#)

[Privacy Principles](#)

Challenges of Poor Internet Connection & Technical Issues in Telehealth Counselling

Poor internet connection or technical issues that compromise audio/video quality pose significant challenges for counsellors conducting telehealth sessions. These issues can disrupt the flow of communication between the counsellor and the client, hindering the therapeutic process. For example, a lag in video or audio transmission may lead to misunderstandings or interruptions during the session, making it difficult for the counsellor to accurately assess the client's emotions and responses. Moreover, technical glitches may cause frustration and anxiety for both the counsellor and the client, detracting from the therapeutic experience. In some cases, persistent connectivity issues may even necessitate the termination of the session, further impacting the continuity of care.

Counsellors must be prepared to troubleshoot technical issues proactively and have contingency plans in place to address disruptions in audio/video quality. Additionally, it may be necessary to provide alternative communication options, such as phone calls or secure messaging, to ensure continued support for clients during periods of technical difficulty.

Providing Technical Support for Patients in Telehealth

Many patients may be unfamiliar with the technology required for telehealth consultations, such as video conferencing platforms or secure messaging systems. Healthcare providers can offer technical assistance and guidance to help patients download and install necessary software, troubleshoot connectivity issues, and navigate the features of telehealth platforms. Providing clear instructions and support materials, such as user guides or tutorial videos, can empower patients to feel confident and comfortable using telehealth for their healthcare needs. Here's a guide to help you make an informed choice on the platform you use:

[Guide](#)

Telehealth Platform Selection

Check Compliance: In the process of selecting telehealth platforms, it is crucial to check for compliance with Australian privacy regulations, including the Privacy Act 1988 and the Australian Privacy Principles (APPs). Platforms that adhere to these regulations typically display privacy policy statements or compliance certifications on their websites. Additionally, it is recommended to ensure that the chosen system meets National Safety and Quality Digital Mental Health Standards. These standards ensure that the telehealth platform maintains high-quality standards in digital mental health services, prioritizing patient safety, confidentiality, and the effectiveness of care.

[More Information](#)

Encryption Standards: Ensure that the telehealth platform employs strong encryption protocols to protect the confidentiality and integrity of client information. Look for platforms that use end-to-end encryption (E2EE) or Transport Layer Security (TLS) encryption to secure data transmission.

Data Storage and Security: Investigate how the platform stores and handles client data. Choose platforms that store data in secure, encrypted servers located within Australia to comply with data sovereignty requirements. Additionally, assess the platform's security measures, such as access controls, user authentication, and regular security audits.

User Authentication: Look for platforms that implement robust user authentication mechanisms to verify the identity of both counsellors and clients. This may include multi-factor authentication (MFA) or secure login procedures to prevent unauthorized access to sessions and client information.

Comprehensive Features: Evaluate the features and functionalities offered by telehealth platforms to ensure they meet your specific counselling needs. Look for features such as video conferencing, secure messaging, file sharing, virtual waiting rooms, and appointment scheduling to facilitate effective telehealth sessions.

User-Friendly Interface: Choose a telehealth platform with an intuitive and user-friendly interface that promotes seamless communication and interaction between counsellors and clients. Ensure

that the platform offers technical support and training resources to assist users in navigating the system.

Reviews and Recommendations: Seek feedback from colleagues, professional associations, or online communities to learn about their experiences with different telehealth platforms. Consider reading reviews and testimonials from other counsellors to gauge the platform's reliability, performance, and user satisfaction.

Cost and Affordability: Compare the pricing plans and subscription options offered by telehealth platforms to find one that aligns with your budget and practice requirements. Consider factors such as subscription fees, usage limits, and additional charges for premium features.

The Australian Counselling Association (ACA) does not endorse any specific digital mental health care applications or providers. ACA supports the Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care's National Safety and Quality Digital Mental Health (NSQDMH) Standards, that aim to improve the quality of digital mental health service provision, and to protect service users and their support people from harm. ACA recommends clients ensure the health practitioner is registered when using digital mental health care applications.

Cyber Security

While developing your online presence as a counsellor, it is crucial to prioritise cybersecurity. The Australian Government has introduced a Cyber Security Assessment Tool aimed at identifying both the strengths and areas for improvement within your business. To access the Cyber Security Assessment Tool provided by the Australian Government, you can visit here:

[Tool](#)

This tool is designed to assist you in evaluating your business's cybersecurity posture, allowing you to enhance protection against potential threats and vulnerabilities.

Importance of Informed Consent in Telehealth

Obtaining informed consent from clients is essential in telehealth to ensure that they understand the nature of remote consultations and consent to participate voluntarily. Consent involves explaining the purpose of telehealth sessions, the types of services offered, and any potential risks or limitations associated with remote care. This includes outlining expectations for camera use, such as whether video is required or optional during sessions and setting boundaries for privacy and confidentiality.

By obtaining consent, counsellors demonstrate respect for patients' autonomy and empower them to make informed decisions. In Australia, obtaining consent is a fundamental ethical and legal requirement, emphasising the importance of patient autonomy and shared decision-making in telehealth practice.

[More Information](#)

Confidentiality Protocols for a Counselling Session

When discussing confidentiality, you might explain how certain actions and rules are in place to keep important information safe and emphasise the need for everyone involved to follow these rules to protect private data and maintain trust.

Before proceeding, it's important to obtain your agreement to adhere to the following confidentiality guidelines:

Respectful Behaviour:

"It's important to treat each other kindly and respectfully, just as we would in face-to-face sessions."

Communication Style:

"We'll aim for open and honest communication without interruptions. If there's ever anything you don't understand, please don't hesitate to ask for clarification."

Boundaries:

"Let's respect our session schedule and communicate in advance if there's a need to reschedule. If urgent"

assistance is required outside of our sessions, we'll discuss an appropriate course of action together."

Technical Considerations:

"Please ensure you're in a private location with a stable internet connection during our sessions. In the interest of maintaining the confidentiality of our discussions, let's mutually agree to refrain from recording sessions or taking screenshots without prior consent. Should either you or I wish to record a session for any reason, let's discuss and agree upon this beforehand."

Confidentiality:

"Anything shared during our sessions is strictly confidential. Your privacy is paramount, and information will not be disclosed to others without your explicit consent."

Process for Breaching Confidentiality

"There are specific situations where confidentiality may need to be breached, such as when there's a risk of harm to you or others, when required by law, or when there's a court order or subpoena."

Process for Breaching Confidentiality:

"If confidentiality needs to be breached, we will follow a specific process. This includes informing you whenever possible and seeking your consent unless doing so would endanger you or others. We will strive to minimise any potential harm resulting from the breach of confidentiality."

[More Information](#)

By obtaining clients agreement to adhere to these guidelines and or similar, counsellors can reinforce the importance of maintaining privacy and confidentiality during remote consultations. The Australian Counselling Association (ACA) has established the Code of Ethics and Conduct that emphasise the importance of confidentiality and privacy in counselling practice. These codes outline the ethical responsibilities of counsellors to protect client confidentiality and maintain privacy in all aspects of service delivery, including telehealth sessions.

[Code of Ethics](#)

Client's Contact Information & Signature

Collecting the client's contact information and signature is standard practice in telehealth to maintain accurate records and facilitate communication. This information enables counsellors to schedule appointments, send reminders, and follow up with clients as needed.

Additionally, including emergency contact details is crucial. In the event of a disconnection or emergency, having access to emergency contact information enables counsellors to take immediate and appropriate action to ensure the safety and well-being of the client. For instance, if a client disconnects from a session after discussing sensitive issues such as suicidal ideation, having someone to contact allows counsellors to intervene promptly and provide necessary support or assistance.

By obtaining the client's signature, counsellors confirm that the client has received and acknowledged the telehealth policies, including consent to participate in remote consultations and adherence to session guidelines. In Australia, maintaining comprehensive client records, including emergency contact details, is essential for continuity of care and regulatory compliance, reflecting the commitment to quality and accountability in telehealth practice.

[More Information](#)

Considerations for Developing a Telehealth Consent Form

This form is used to obtain consent from clients specifically for engaging in telehealth sessions. It outlines the nature of telehealth services, including the benefits, limitations, and potential risks involved. Counsellors should consider including the following components in their telehealth consent form to ensure clarity and comprehensiveness:

Components of a telehealth consent form may include:

- Explanation of telehealth services offered.
- Description of the telecommunication technology used.

- Discussion of privacy and security measures implemented.
- Consent to participate in telehealth sessions, acknowledging understanding of the risks and benefits.
- Agreement to adhere to session guidelines and confidentiality protocols.

- Client's contact information and signature.

This form ensures that clients understand and agree to participate in telehealth sessions, thereby establishing informed consent for remote counselling services.

Example Consent Form

I, [Client Name], hereby consent to participate in telehealth sessions provided by [Counsellor Name] using telecommunication technology.

I understand that telehealth involves the use of video conferencing or other remote communication methods to conduct counselling sessions.

I acknowledge that while telehealth offers convenience and accessibility, there may be limitations and risks associated with this mode of service delivery, including potential disruptions to technology.

I understand that [Counsellor Name] utilises a secure platform with encryption and other security measures to mitigate these risks to the best of their ability.

In the event of a technological emergency during a session, such as a sudden loss of connection, I understand that [Counsellor Name] will provide instructions on how to reconnect or alternative contact methods if necessary.

Confidentiality means that everything we talk about during our sessions will be kept private and secure. However, there are times when I may need to share information, like if I'm worried about your safety or if the law requires it.

I understand that I have the option to withdraw my consent for telehealth services at any time and may request in-person sessions if available.

Client Signature: _____

Date: _____

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The document was written with the assistance of ChatGPT, an AI language model developed by OpenAI (OpenAI, n.d.).

"Disclaimer: While the information provided in this fact sheet is current as of the date written, it is essential for counsellors to stay updated with the latest regulations, resources, and practices specific to their state within Australia. It is the responsibility of the counsellor to ensure compliance and effectiveness in their work. Seeking guidance from a supervisor is advised to navigate regional requirements. This disclaimer underscores the counsellor's responsibility to stay informed and adhere to relevant standards and guidelines."



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ACA acknowledge and respect the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the country's first peoples and nations, and recognise them as traditional owners and occupants of land and waters.