



Psychotherapy & Counselling
Federation of Australia

The basics of delivering online therapy

This document only covers basic considerations needed in delivering therapy online in a safe and ethical manner.

This is a basic guide and is not a replacement for the in-depth training provided by PACFA in "How to provide Counselling and Psychotherapy using Online Technologies". PACFA is scheduling more sessions of this course to support members who are delivering online therapy.

The equipment you need to deliver therapy online

- An online delivery platform (Zoom and Skype are well known and easy to use). You will need to get an account for your platform if you find the free version is too limited for your services. A monthly account for these platforms is inexpensive (less than \$20 a month).
- High quality internet connectivity and reliability (**this is the most important consideration of all**). Make sure you have sufficient bandwidth to run the technology – video must not be choppy, or audio stilted and stuttering. Wi-Fi channels must not be congested. Time of day may impact speed and reliability.
- A secure connection – must have secure Wi-Fi.
- Connection back up plan (know how to hot spot to your phone if the Wi-Fi becomes unstable)
- Encryption (the platform you use must have this – Zoom has an encryption setting which you need to turn on. Skype uses encryption automatically, but this will not work if someone is coming in via a mobile or landline).
- Quality audio (use a headset)
- Clear picture (Create good lighting by using a reading lamp and avoid silhouettes – use a blind or curtain if you have your back to a window)
- Notice what is behind you in the video – make sure you remove what is not appropriate.
- Test everything before you start. Practice with friends and family to make sure everything works and that you have good connectivity

Counsellor's groundwork before starting

- You must have a safe, **private** and **uninterrupted** space.
- Agree on a crisis plan with the client – a plan of what they will do if they become too distressed.

- Have a plan in case of disconnection – e.g. Prearrange that the client rings you and continue with the session until they, or you, can reconnect – or reschedule another session. If you don't hear from the client within 5 minutes you will ring them.
- Business contract – work out what you need your clients to agree on in order to build in safety, as the client needs to be responsible for their own environment.
- Is online delivery appropriate for this client? (Are they stable enough? Do they have the equipment, tech skills and safety they need? Do they have a disability which would make use of the tech too difficult? Do they have a safe environment or is there a DV/FV issue?)
- Payment - how will your clients pay, and will you require them to pay upfront?
- Initial counselling contract – Explaining to the client what to expect from working online and that security is not 100% perfect.
- Supervision – make sure you have access to a supervisor who has experience with working online
- Which digital modes do you offer? You need to decide before you start whether you will deliver just video, or also audio, chat, email, text modes.
- Have several emotional regulation strategies ready to use.

Boundary considerations

- Think about how you will manage communication between sessions. Availability – you do not need to be available 24/7. Make sure you are clear with boundaries and give yourself 24 hours to respond to any communications. You are not running a crisis service. Make sure you have crisis phone numbers available on your website, emails etc.
- Think about the hours that are OK for you to work online.
- Self-care – what will you need to be mindful of when working online? Posture, breaks, working hours, exercise, time between session?
- Is online delivery appropriate for this client? This mode won't suit all clients.
- Intake – is the client suitable for online work (do they have the equipment, tech skills and safety they need?)
- Cancellation policy and lateness to session
- Recording – no recording of sessions unless otherwise agreed by the counsellor and client
- Support Contacts – get at least 2 support contacts for each online client. They need to have checked that each support is OK to be on your records. They must be in the same geographical area and accessible.

Equipment the client will need for online counselling

- Access to a device (phone, tablet, computer) which has secured and reliable internet connectivity and has a working mic and camera. Phone is not recommended as the screen is too small.
- Secure connectivity - If using Wi-Fi, make sure it is secure.

- Audio – a mic that works
- Clear picture – clean camera lens
- Headset or ear buds
- Good lighting - so you can see their face clearly

What the client needs to do

- Have a safe, **private** and **uninterrupted** space
- Have time for a normal length session (at least 1 hour)
- Outside? Online therapy cannot be in a public area, such as a café or park (audio outside is often a problem if it is windy)
- Support in the client's environment – the client needs to have asked support contacts if they can be available and have provided the counsellor with their contact details,
- Payment – agreed to the payment method
- Online counselling contract – the client has agreed to and signed and returned the counselling contract

Ethical issues and mitigating risk

Contracting before you start is the first step!

Have the following in place:

- Reliable equipment
- Confidentiality and security (ensure encryption on your platform is turned on)
- Risk assessment of the *client's suitability* for online therapy
- Crisis plan
- Plan for disconnection
- Client contact details and location
- Client support details
- Time set aside for the session