



Cumann Síceolaithe Éireann

The Psychological Society of Ireland Guidelines on use of Online or Telephone Therapy & Assessment

PSI Guidelines on use of Online or Telephone Therapy & Assessment

The following Guidelines are being issued in the context of the extraordinary times we find ourselves in. COVID-19 has been declared a worldwide pandemic by the World Health Organisation and it has been recommended that we all engage in social distancing and self-isolation in some cases to reduce the risk of spread of the virus.

Guidelines differ from standards in that standards are mandatory and as such, they are intended to facilitate a continued high level of professional practice by psychologists. Guidelines are issued at a point in time and are subject to revision and improvement as new evidence of best practice emerges.

Psychologists may have clients that they are working with who will continue to require support during this difficult time. It is becoming increasingly common for psychologists when working with clients to make use of online technology to facilitate support. This support would include the types of interventions and services that would normally be provided by psychologists.

Potential advantages to online therapy and support are many. There are individuals who could experience great difficulty in contemplating attending a psychologist in a face-to-face session but might consider engaging with a professional online. Research has shown that some individuals are less inhibited in their online interactions, and this platform may lend the chance to express previously unexpressed thoughts and feelings.

The use of technology also makes geographical distance much less of an issue. Potential clients residing in remote areas where there are sparse services may benefit vastly from online therapy. Additionally, individuals with a complex or specialised type of problem may be able to access professionals who are more specialised in their specific problem. Potential clients with ill health, restricted mobility, severe anxiety issues, or other disabilities which make leaving home physically difficult may not otherwise be able to access therapeutic services.

Despite the clear advantages, many professionals have expressed reservations with providing therapy on online platforms for a variety of reasons. The great majority of therapists are trained in face-to-face methods. This includes conducting assessments and providing therapeutic interventions. Therefore, most professionals do not have training in providing these services on an electronic platform. Therapists may not have sufficient confidence, technology, or skills to effectively utilise this approach. In addition, therapists may feel that there is something lost in the therapeutic process

without being able to adequately perceive the nonverbal cues which are gleaned from a face-to-face session. There also may be legal issues surrounding providing therapy from one jurisdiction to an individual in another jurisdiction where law enforcement and ethical principles may differ.

The Principles of the [PSI Code of Ethics](#) should be to the fore irrespective of whether the delivery of the service occurs face-to-face or using online technology.

1. Respect for the rights and dignity of the person
2. Competence
3. Responsibility
4. Integrity

There are additional considerations that must be considered when utilising online technology to deliver psychological services:

Online Therapy

Psychologists engaging in online therapy with clients should at all times operate within the boundaries of their professional training and competencies as they would in face-to-face professional interactions.

Psychologists should obtain and document that they have the informed consent from their client in advance of commencing online technology. This should note that the client has a full understanding that there can be no guarantee of security when using online technology.

If the client is under 16 informed consent should be sought from their parent / legal guardian and assent from the young person before commencing this type of work. Consent may be sought from 17 & 18-year-olds but best practice should also be to involve parents.

The psychologist should explain to the client that they may find it an uncomfortable medium and are free to agree to bring it to a conclusion

Discuss with organisation / employer in advance of offering / commencing this work as to if they have specific policies governing this work.

If working privately check private indemnity insurance to ensure cover for this type of work.

It is recommended that the psychologist takes reasonable steps to ensure that the network used is as secure as possible and maintains privacy for their clients.

These Guidelines are designed to relate to therapy delivered via telephone or platforms such as Skype, Zoom or Attend Anywhere (*Platform used by HSE*). With Skype & Zoom it is possible to record sessions, this should only occur with the explicit consent of the client to do so. There should be an agreement and contract between client and therapist that neither will undertake to record any aspect of the session, directly or indirectly without the informed and clear consent of both parties.

In light of GDPR requirements, the client should be given precise information on what data will be kept, how long this will be stored for and how it will be disposed of and that they retain the right for it to be deleted.

Use of social media video messaging platforms such as Instagram or Facebook Messenger is not recommended at this time.

If not familiar with communicating via online technologies, it is recommended to take time to get familiar in advance of the scheduled online session. It may be helpful to have a practice run-through with a family member or friend.

It will be important to communicate to the client that the session will occur at the agreed time as it would in a face-to-face situation and that the psychologist will not be available via online technology outside of the agreed time.

It is recommended to build into your scheduled appointment time 5 minutes for getting the call set up as it can take a view minutes at the start to get speakers and video fully operational.

Agree that both will conduct the session in a private setting where there is no risk of being overheard. It may be helpful to suggest that both wear earbuds or headphones as this can help to make the conversation more confidential and improve sound quality.

Agree in advance a procedure if the technology should fail mid-session, e.g. try to re-connect or speak via telephone.

Management of risk online can bring with it different considerations e.g. a person can disengage from an online session abruptly which brings with it additional challenges if there is risk to be managed. Agree in advance about what steps might need to be taken in the event that there is concern about imminent risk (e.g. phone parent / GP).

Ensure in clinical notes to document how the session was conducted (via telephone or online platform).

Online Group Therapy

Online Group therapy is not a new endeavour but may pose an additional challenge to therapists who are inexperienced in delivering group therapy through this modality. In comparison with individual therapy online, group therapy potentially poses additional concerns that should be considered prior to undertaking this form of support. As you would in a traditional face-to-face group setting it will be important to outline group rules from the beginning and intervene when members violate these rules. It may be helpful to circulate these rules to the group in advance of it commencing.

It should be recommended to group participants that they should only access the group from a home network vs public Wi-Fi setting so as to respect and protect the privacy of the other group participants.

Informed consent must be sought from all participants before proceeding with a clear understanding of the additional privacy concerns that could arise from conducting group therapy in an online setting. As with individual therapy, there should be an agreement and contract between all participants and therapists not to record any aspect of the session, directly or indirectly without the informed and clear consent of all parties involved.

It is a reality that for some online video group therapy could pose significant anxieties for some clients especially in relation to the video aspect of it. There is an important balance to be achieved between the need to respect the wishes / concerns of the individual client who may be understandably anxious about video-based therapy alongside the requirement to know that the client joining the session is who should be present.

During the group, it will be important to monitor the time spent supporting each group member and ensure each group member gets clinical support during each session. Given that on many online platforms it is custom for participants to remain on mute when not speaking it will be even more important to pay close attention to reading non-verbal and other subtle cues which can be difficult resulting it being more challenging to assess individual well-being and group dynamics. In light of this, it is not recommended that group therapy be undertaken by one therapist as it would not be feasible for one therapist to deliver the content and simultaneously monitor the input and well-being of participants concurrently, especially when the participants may be presenting to the therapist as small tiles on a screen.

Online Assessment & Testing

Most of the guidance into the provision of psychological services online has focussed on the delivery of therapeutic services. Less guidance is available regarding conducting psychological assessment in an online format.

This guidance is intended to focus on a number of principles should it be necessary for a psychologist to engage in testing with a client given the current need for physical distancing.

There is currently no clear evidence to substantiate that online or remote testing is equivalent to a traditional face-to-face format.

Prior to engaging in online assessment or testing it is important for the psychologist to weigh up whether it is the best interest of the client to proceed or to wait until face-to-face services are again feasible. There should be a clear justification for why online testing must be completed at that time. If that justification cannot be substantiated it is recommended that testing wait until it can be safely completed in more traditional formats.

Specific informed consent should be sought from the client before commencing online assessment or testing that clearly documents that the client is aware of the limitations of this format of assessment.

Prior to COVID-19, some test publishers had already established web-based platforms for administration, scoring and interpretation of psychological tests. These may be used within your scope of practice as the tests were specifically adapted by the test publisher for administration in an online format. You should be familiar with the administration & scoring of any web-based platform prior to commencing assessment with a client.

Psychologists should not use or adapt a psychological test in a manner for which it was not designed or validated unless approved by the test publisher.

It may be possible to complete some verbal based tasks of ability via video conferencing platforms. However, several considerations must occur prior to engaging in this type of testing.

1. The quality of the connection during video conferencing. Is there a lag or time delay because of the quality of the connection.

2. If visuals are being used can the person being assessed see the visual prompts clearly and are, they on a screen of sufficient size so they are not blurred.

Regarding self-report measures that would have been completed previously in the presence of the psychologist, video conferencing platforms may prove helpful in current circumstances to assist with the pre-test taking instructions and monitoring of the self-report completion.

Any psychological reports produced where online assessment or testing was a feature must clearly specify that it was undertaken online, the circumstances and justification for why this occurred and the inherent limitations of this method vs face-to-face assessment procedures. It is important to be clear about the altered circumstances under which the assessment was conducted and the potential limitations that would occur regarding the interpretability of the findings.

For some specialisms in Psychology, e.g. Neuropsychology, more specific considerations are required. For more information in this area please consult the Psychological Society of Ireland Division of Neuropsychology Remote Neuropsychological Assessment in the context of COVID-19 Pandemic document.

Psychologists should also use caution and clinical judgement when interpreting data from online testing and should always integrate that data with other collateral sources of information to make conclusions and inform recommendations.