Basics for Starting Teletherapy and Teleanalysis During the COVID-19 Pandemic
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INTRODUCTION

The patient-therapist dyad risks being torn apart by the shelter-in-place national and international policies to halt the spread of the corona virus that causes the COVID-19 pandemic. Beginning analytic teletherapy and teleanalysis can help manage that risk. But combined with having to relocate to your home office at the same time this can be a very stressful time. Here are ways to prepare yourself and give distance-mediated treatment the best chance of succeeding as a viable alternative to your in-office practice.

PREPARING YOURSELF FOR TELETHERAPY AND TELEANALYSIS

- Take a course in best practices
- Review the Telepsychology and Telehealth Practice Guidelines
- APA https://www.apa.org/practice/guidelines/telepsychology
- APA https://www.apa.org/practice/programs/dmhi/research-information/telepsychological-services-checklist
- ATA https://www.integration.samhsa.gov/operations-administration/practice-guidelines-for-video-based-online-mental-health-services_ata_5_29_13.pdf
- IPA https://www.ipa.world/IPA/en/News/coronavirus.aspx,
- AACAP   https://www.jaacap.org/article/S0890-8567(17)30333-7/pdf
- Videos on Zoom.us and at Psychotherapy.net psychotherapy.activehosted.com@s4.csa1.acemsd4.com
- Check the regulations for your professional association, licensing board, insurance reimbursement policies, and state and federal laws.
- Check your state laws on the ASPPB website for Temporary Interjurisdictional Telepsychological Practice & COVID-19 at https://www.asppb.net/page/covid19 The federal government has recently relaxed several requirements related to the provision of telehealth services to federal health program beneficiaries, such as
  - Medicare and Medicaid patients. However, these federal waivers relate to government payment only. The laws of each state still control whether a license is required to treat patients in that state. In terms of state licensure waivers, there has been some movement although limitations still exist.
- Read some articles or chapters such as *Psychoanalysis Online* volumes 1, 2, 3, and 4.

- Consider joining a peer supervision group where therapists study the teletherapy experience
- Read postings about teletherapy and teleanalysis on your professional listserv
- From the "app" store, download the app, titled, "Telemental Health Laws" produced by Epstein, Becker and Green (2019). Note: it is not necessarily updated to the current moment but it is a useful place to begin when considering licensure requirements.
- Research and select a videoconference (VTC) platform that complies with HIPPA and relevant state laws. To ensure you are using a secure VTC, it is essential to have a "Business Associate Agreement" with the system vendor.

PREPARING YOUR OFFICE FOR TELETHERAPY AND TELEANALYSIS

- Good lighting, a lamp in front of you, shaded windows
- Place yourself
    - With head and shoulders on the screen
    - Look at the camera
    - Remove distracting objects and noises in the background
    - Try a swivel desk chair for flexible positioning at the screen
- Test the technology by connecting to a colleague
- Make sure you are not muted and that your video is on
- Equip yourself with a good quality headset
- Orientate the camera position so that your eyes appear to be 1/3 down from the top of the screen
- Utilize a consistent office setting to ensure a secure frame for the patient

PREPARING YOUR TECHNOLOGY PLATFORM

- Check that you have adequate internet connectivity for video-conferencing
- Turn off all other WiFi connections to unused devices to optimize internet connectivity
- Ensure you have a password-protected, secure internet connection—not a public or unsecured WiFi
- Download a technology platform consistent with HIPAA-compliant practices
    - Such as Zoom, Vsee, Doxy business versions
    - Sign a Business Associate Agreement (BAA) with that technology vendor
- Update your anti-virus/malware to prevent being hacked (Eg. a good malware app for Mac users is https://Malwarebytes.com)

PREPARING FOR INTERRUPTIONS AND EMERGENCIES

- Prepare for an interruption to the continuity of a videoconference session.
    - In case of a dropped call or lost sound, give the patient your phone number.
    - In case of a dropped call or lost sound, write down the patient's cellphone number

- When connectivity is poor, you can close the video to potentiate the sound quality
- You can use a landline (or an iphone) for the audio component (if long-distance costs are not prohibitive), and the computer (or ipad) screen for the video component. When doing so, the clinician mutes the audio for to offset any feedback signal.
- Prepare for an emergency
  - Familiarize yourself with the resources available at the patient's location in the event of an emergency. (Providing teletherapy requires that the therapist provide the same level of care to the patient.)
  - Be sure to have the contact information for the parents of any child/adolescent patient.
  - Write down the patient's home address. Always ensure that you know where the patient is actually located during the teletherapy session to be prepared for any potential emergency.

PREPARING THE PATIENT FOR TELETHERAPY AND TELEANALYSIS

- Consider the indications and contraindications for conducting teletherapy and teleanalysis in terms of
  - the patient's cognitive and emotional competence to deal with the lack of physical presence
  - the patient's pattern of handling stress, including level of self-destructiveness
  - access to family support, Emergency Room, and psychiatrist back-up
  - comfort with technology
  - ability to set up a private space
- Discuss the potential risks/benefits of telehealth sessions with the patient(s)
- Discuss prior experiences using telehealth
- Acknowledge that teletherapy is still controversial, and inform the patient that working online is not the same as on site, but it is an effective treatment modality, once you both get used to it
- Be open to new insights about the patient, and about the patient-therapist/analyst dyad that may emerge as a result of working remotely
- Advise the patient to check with their insurance provider about reimbursement for teletherapy
- Discuss with the patient how to login and use the technology
- Offer to use the phone if the patient cannot manage technology (but some insurance won't cover teletherapy without visual connection)
- Emphasize the patient's responsibility to set up a private space
- Remind the patient to turn off all apps, notifications, and tabs on the computer or smartphone during the session (especially disabling Siri)
- Tell the patient to safeguard privacy by alerting family members or room-mates to stay outside the room where the session will occur
- Ensure that nobody will record the session without permission
- If you are doing family therapy, remind the patient that all those present for the virtual

session must be within view of the camera

- If you are doing child/adolescent therapy, determine where the adult will be at that location and establish a way to access the parent urgently, if needed
- Work with the parent to set up the connection, and give the child privacy thereafter
- Ask for a signed consent form if necessary
- Discuss how patient will be billed if late/no-show
- Discuss how will you accept payment
- Discuss how this session will be billed and coded for that patient's insurance
- Practice your technology set-up with a colleague before the first visit with a patient

IN THE FIRST TELETHERAPY/TELEANALYSIS SESSION

- Say hello
- Can the patient see and hear you?
- Can you see and hear the patient?
- Make sure nobody is muted
- Look at the camera to maintain good eye contact
- Speak to the microphone and speak clearly
- Turn off all apps and notifications on your computer or smartphone
- Verify the patient's identity if a new patient
- Confirm that the patient's location is private
- Relax. Listen. Respond. Ask for clarification. Interpret as you would in the office
- Notice all references to the technology and look for symbolic meaning
- Resistance, defense, and negative transference will be projected onto technology