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How to Transition to Seeing Your Therapist Online (during COVID-19 and beyond)

Seeing a therapist used to imply being in the same room with them, but not any longer. Teleconferencing has made it possible to see a mental health professional from a distance. With recent requirements for social distancing, many therapists and clients have had to either pause their work or make other arrangements, including meeting by video conference. I've been providing teletherapy services for about five years now and find it a powerful resource for psychotherapy. Here are some common questions and issues that come up when thinking about making the transition.

Will My Therapist Agree to Online Sessions?

Some therapists (myself included) are enthusiastic about using teletherapy. Some won't use it at all, and a large number of therapists approach it with some reservations. I've been surprised how many therapists are now moving to it with the COVID-19 outbreak and resulting social distancing. Most therapists generally seem to find that it's a very beneficial approach. Even among therapists I know who were skeptical about online sessions in the past, the majority have opened to the idea. They seem to recognize it as a good option to avoid an untimely break in the therapy relationship, and to provide continuity of care and therapeutic support.

Will It Seem Strange at First?

If you're generally comfortable with communicating through a screen (e.g., Zoom, Skype, FaceTime or Phone), you'll probably be comfortable moving to online therapy. If you can't stand this form of communication, you'll likely have a harder time with it. Of the dozens of clients I've treated through teletherapy, most seem to find the transition to be smoother than they expected. Therapy tends to be intense, and quickly enough you're likely to forget about the medium and focus on the work. Surprisingly, the phone is a powerful medium for in-depth psychotherapeutic work.

That said, expect some differences with teletherapy. It's different when you're not in the same room with someone, and you're experiencing them in two spatial dimensions instead of three. It can also be harder to pick up on body language through a video. And while most of my clients seemed to be comfortable with making the switch, a few were not, or found the transition to be quite challenging. Occasional tech issues come up (like a delay in the audio and video), but typically can be handled with a little patience and humor.

Is Telehealth Effective?

Research suggests that therapy by video conference can be very effective, which has also been my clinical experience. It depends on you and your therapist, of course, but in general you should expect it to be helpful if you were finding in-person therapy helpful. Personally, some of the most powerful clinical experiences I've witnessed have occurred through teletherapy. In my own practice, I've seen it work for people dealing with things like depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, insomnia, relationship issues, grief, and trauma.

Will Insurance Reimburse Me?

Yes. They'll probably require the standard things for reimbursement: your identifying information, the provider's license and so forth, a diagnostic code, and a session (CPT) code. Check with your insurance provider before starting your sessions if you'll depend on reimbursement to cover the sessions. I am an "Out-of-Network Provider" and will provide you with a "super bill" to give to your insurance company along with your claim form. I can either email or text you this form after payment is received for the session.

How Should I Prepare for My Sessions? Some important and finer points about the logistics of teletherapy:

- Do a test of the software beforehand for your own peace of mind and to be sure it will work, and verify that you have your therapist's contact information (e.g., username for correct contact information).
- Find a private place in your home where you'll have as much privacy as possible. This could be a challenge if kids are out of school or other family members are always home (or work from home).
- Along those lines, I recommend ear buds for privacy and also better sound quality. That way your therapist's voice won't feed back into your microphone and out their speakers.
- Make sure you're sitting somewhere you'll be comfortable for the length of your session.
- Have your screen on a stable surface, since excessive movement can create a feeling of seasickness for your therapist. If they're new to teletherapy and their screen is bouncing around, ask them to do the same.
- A finer point: try to have the top of your head near the top of your video screen, rather than in the bottom half of the screen. That way when they're looking at your face they'll be looking more or less into their camera (assuming it's at the top of their computer), so it will feel like they're looking at you.
- Be sure to close email and turn off notifications that could be distracting and dilute the experience for you. You'll want to have your full attention focused on your session.
- Also close programs that could slow down your computer's processing ability and interfere with the quality of the video.
- You may also need to work out payment arrangements with your therapist if you generally

pay in person. I can keep a credit card on file for you for payment after each session or many clients prefer Zelle which works from your bank to my bank via my email (robertapughe@gmail.com). Payment must be made before session or immediately after each session.

Are There Other Advantages to Online Therapy?

One plus of online therapy you'll notice right away is that there's no travel time involved, so your sessions will probably take up much less of your day. With that in mind, you may want to build in some transition time into and out of therapy, since travel time often provides a buffer before and after your session. It might be challenging, for example, to return directly to childcare after an emotional session. Even a 10-minute break to process and digest the session can make a big difference and allow time for “settling”.

You'll also never have to cancel for weather (assuming you have electricity and Internet), and there are no concerns about whether you could pass along a sickness to your therapist (or vice versa) if you're well enough to meet but possibly contagious. It's also possible to see your therapist when you're traveling, just as I've been able to see clients when I've been on the road.

What If My Therapist Won't Do Online Sessions?

If your current therapist isn't open to doing teletherapy, you might consider speaking with a new therapist who does offer online sessions. Obviously, it's not ideal to have to start over with someone new, especially if you've been seeing your therapist for a while. But it may be your only option if you're committed to continuing therapy with as little interruption as possible.

If you don't want to start with a new person, consider other resources during the hiatus from seeing your therapist (and work with them on the plan, if possible). For example, there may be books, brief online courses, or other resources that will help you to continue the work. Your therapist might be open to having brief phone check-ins during this time.

Seek out additional support from loved ones, as well, and be sure to take care of your basic needs like sleep, nutrition, and movement to keep your body and mind healthy. You might find journaling to be helpful during this time, as it's been shown to be an effective way to process thoughts and emotions.

The Bottom Line

If you're considering teletherapy, talk it over with your therapist and see if it's worth giving a try. You don't have to know in advance if it's the right decision for you—you can always plan to do a limited number of sessions to see how it goes as “experiment”. If it works well, it could be a convenient and time-saving way to continue the important work of therapy.

References

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