

Getting Started with Online Therapy

A Basic Guide to Online Therapy by Tracy Wakeford, Clinical Psychologist

Online Therapy, otherwise known as Telehealth, or in the case of psychology, Telepsychology, has been evolving over recent years and in some countries, therapists are using this as standard practice.

Telepsychology refers to the provision of psychotherapy services remotely using telecommunication technologies such as video conferencing or telephone.

Now that New Zealand is at alert Level 4 due to COVID-19, all therapy services have been moved to an online format until the alert level is lowered. This is expected to be a minimum of four weeks.

Pros and Cons of Telepsychology:

The clear benefit of this form of communication is that we are able to continue our sessions uninterrupted during this period of time.

Once you get past the initial nerves about this, you will likely discover that it can work just as well as your therapy sessions at an office (although some preparation is needed as outlined below).

There are some potential risks that you should be aware about as part of your informed consent to change to this modality.

First, it is not as easy for us to read each other's body language and cues when we are not together in person. This may increase the potential for miscommunication and misunderstandings.

Second, technological issues may mean there can be unexpected delays and/or interruptions, including when we may be in the middle of an important or emotional discussion.

Third, there is always the risk when using the internet of security breaches from hackers or risks to confidentiality when sessions take place outside of the therapist's private office space.

Finally, it can be more difficult for me to support you through more emotional work, or if in crisis.

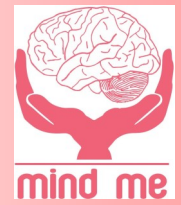


Coviu is the platform that I am using for online therapy. It is easy to log into by clicking the link I give you, and you do not need to download any software.

You will need a computer, laptop, smartphone, tablet or similar; the device you use will need to have a webcam or camera (preferably).

Once you follow the link just before your scheduled appointment time, you will be taken to my virtual waiting room, and I will be able to see you are waiting when I log on. We will need to stick to the allocated session times as we normally do at the office as likely other clients will be waiting after you.

Note: you do not have to agree to proceed with telepsychology if you are not comfortable with this, or if you do not have the technology, ability, or privacy with which to make it work. There are other options such as phone sessions, or other platforms that you may be familiar with including Skype, Zoom etc.



Further Tips for Getting the Most Out of Telepsychology ...

For every therapy session, a lot of consideration goes into optimising the physical and emotional environment in order to establish trust, stability and comfort. These are major considerations for every therapist when they set up their office space. With online therapy, the responsibility for creating an optimal therapy environment is shared between the therapist and the client.

Creating the Therapeutic Space

In a therapist's physical office, a lot is done to provide a stable and consistent environment each time. With online therapy this needs to be set up in the client's home or other environment. Try to commit to the same place each session—some clients have a preference for a specific couch or a place that they can use each time.



- Consider what is needed to be comfortable — have tissues, a glass of water or a cup of tea ready.
- Avoid eating or, drinking alcohol.

Safety and Privacy

Therapy sessions require privacy and confidentiality. Without this, we cannot feel safe enough to look deeply. Find a location where you can speak comfortably and freely—try to arrange a spot where you are alone and avoid locations where someone can walk into the room (you may need a sign on the door).

Confidentiality still applies so we need to agree that neither of us will record the session without the permission of the other person.

Distractions

In every home there are a number of things that provide comfort and distraction. These might include food in the fridge, a cold beer, a cigarette, animals that bark or attract our attention (sometimes because they can feel our distress) etc. The therapy environment shouldn't be so relaxing that it alters your ability to stay focused on the (sometimes) difficult conversation. Try to find that balance between feeling too comfortable/relaxed and feeling some tension (remember change does not happen when we are too comfortable). **TIP: Try to reduce background noise and use headphones (also useful for reducing voice distortion or echo).**

If you need to use a mobile phone for sessions, turn off notifications as these can be distracting and, if possible, place the mobile on a stable surface (this will stop movement on the screen).

T & Cs

All other terms and conditions we discussed in our initial setup, including notetaking, fees, your rights and the complaint process still stand. Please let me know if you have any questions.

CHECKLIST:

- Quiet and private location
- Limited distractions
- Place device on a stable surface
- Use headphones if possible