

COVID-19 and Telebehavioral Health: Ethical Considerations During a Public Health Emergency

Introduction

In the face of a global pandemic, professional counselors are no longer limited to in-person, face-to-face interactions. Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is a highly contagious infectious disease that causes respiratory illness, much like the flu. COVID-19 is a new virus that appears to cause symptoms such as a cough, fever, and in more severe cases, difficulty breathing. Experts and media advise this virus spreads primarily through contact with an infected person, often when one coughs or sneezes. It also spreads one touches a surface or object contaminated with the virus, then touches their eyes, nose, or mouth.

Isolation, “shelter-in-place,” physical distancing, frequent handwashing, environmental hygiene, and other practices are efforts The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO) advise. Public health strategies are encouraged to lessen the spread of the virus.

Telebehavioral health, or distance counseling, is the use of a digital platform that provides secure, encrypted, audio-video conferencing to communicate with a client in real-time. Many professional counselors now find it necessary to conduct services via telebehavioral health because obstacles may limit or prevent clients from meeting in-person for counseling sessions.

All requirements for working with clients remain in place with telebehavioral health. The usual standards of care used by counselors when working with clients still apply. When using telebehavioral health, counselors must now consider additional issues along with having training and competency to deliver services through this means.

The context of providing counseling services has changed abruptly, and now telebehavioral health services (known as “distance counseling” in the 2014 ACA *Code of Ethics*) are central to the work of all practitioners. Many counselors-in-training, supervisors, and practitioners who are not yet competent in the delivery of this service have rushed to become knowledgeable about telebehavioral health and the use of technology resources in routine, daily practice.

Counselors must understand additional inherent concerns related to the use of telebehavioral health services. Specialized training to develop competency, awareness of regulatory and legal issues, and other concerns are crucial to explore. As our profession provides continuity of care during a pandemic, professional counselors also must continue to make every attempt to protect the confidentiality of clients and meet any legal and ethical requirements for the use of such resources. This remains constant even if confidentiality regulations, such as HIPAA or state regulations, are temporarily relaxed during states of emergencies.

Professional counselors should seek continuing education on telebehavioral health and emerging technologies. This pandemic exemplifies the need for counselors to learn current issues on technology and telebehavioral health. Additionally, counselors should understand the risks associated with their use. These risks may include threats to client confidentiality as well as legal and jurisdictional issues, especially when providing telebehavioral health services. Telebehavioral health and the technology should only after one learns about these resources.

Knowledge and Competency

Counselors who engage in the use of telebehavioral health and the use of technology must develop knowledge, skills, and competency regarding technical, ethical, and legal considerations to deliver services via technology. This may include special certifications, additional course work, and specialized training (§H.1.a). When a state, territory, tribal, or the Federal government declares a public health state of emergency, counselors must stay attentive to changes in regulations and laws of both the counselor's practicing location and the client's place of residence.

The Office for Civil Rights (OCR) at the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is responsible for enforcing specific regulations issued under the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA), as amended by the Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health (HITECH) Act. HIPAA and HITECH protect the privacy and security of protected health information (PHI) gathered by healthcare practitioners. Professional counselors should remember that states or territories may have higher standards designed to protect the privacy and security of PHI, and professional counselors must follow the laws and regulations of the licensing jurisdiction in which one practices.

The Office for Civil Rights (OCR) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services updated the *Notification of Enforcement Discretion for Telehealth Remote Communications During the COVID-19 Nationwide Public Health Emergency* on March 23, 2020. OCR exercised enforcement discretion and waived penalties for HIPAA violations against health care providers that serve clients in good faith using everyday communications technologies. The notification listed specific technologies, such as FaceTime or Skype, which might be used during the COVID-19 nationwide public health emergency.

Licensure and Scope of Practice Concerns

Counselors must regularly check the state, district or territory laws, regulations, and rules where one is licensed and practicing. OCR waivers do not release professional counselors from those rules and ethical obligations. Counselors must review the state regulatory boards' policies and other laws (see: <https://www.counseling.org/knowledge-center/licensure-requirements>) to determine your scope of practice and ability to offer telebehavioral health services. A declaration of Public Health Emergencies by a governor may impact the scope of practice in the state where one is licensed. Counselors also ensure that their clients are aware of pertinent legal rights and limitations governing the practice of counseling across state lines or international boundaries. Take the time to understand the requirements fully.

Professional counselors should continue to practice in compliance with privacy and security rules. When exploring options to deliver services via telebehavioral health, it is still accessible and affordable to choose a vendor that will issue a Business Associate Agreement (BAA) (see <https://www.hhs.gov/hipaa/for-professionals/covered-entities/sample-business-associate-agreement-provisions/index.html>). The BAA outlines responsibilities to maintain protected health information (PHI) by both a professional counselor, counseling practice and the vendor. Select a vendor, such as SimplePractice, an ACA partner (see <https://www.simplepractice.com/acaaaffinity>), that allows one to continue to practice ethically and in compliance with HIPAA, HITECH, and any state confidentiality laws and regulations.

Even if regulations are temporarily relaxed during a public health emergency, professional counselors should follow the standards of care and best practices outlined by the 2014 ACA Code of Ethics when

conducting professional services via technology. If events prohibit the use of approved technology (for example, a client must use a mobile phone because of internet connectivity problems), a professional counselor should proceed with an ethical decision-making model, consult and document the rationale.

Professional Liability Insurance

Counselors should review liability insurance policies and websites of liability insurance carriers for guidance. HPSO, an ACA partner (see <https://www.counseling.org/membership/membership-savings/liability-insurance>) has a counselor case study that highlights effective risk management strategies for professional counselors using real-time, secure audio and video platforms to deliver counseling services. This case study is recommended for review and is available as a download in the resources area of this course.

Graduate Student Issues

Masters-level students insured by the HPSO group liability insurance offered by the American Counseling Association may be covered for telebehavioral health counseling sessions if they are a counselor-in-training (masters level intern) and if the graduate students meet the following conditions:

- 1) The scope of practice of the licensed site supervisor permits the practice of telebehavioral health,
- 2) The site supervisor is trained to provide both clinical services and supervision for this type of service delivery,
- 3) The counselor-in-training receives proper training to facilitate telebehavioral sessions,
- 4) The site supervisor is available for the trainee or client, as needed, and
- 5) Funding sources for each client session allows the trainee to provide counseling (i.e., the supervisor or agency should make sure the trainee is authorized to provide counseling services based on the funding source or contract).

Note that if items 1-5 above are met, and if supervision by both the university and site supervisors are fulfilled, the trainee would presumably be training within their “scope of practice” as an intern. Therefore, HPSO would likely cover their clinical work at an approved site. Volunteering at another unapproved site or “moonlighting” on their initiative, however, would not be covered.

Informed Consent

The informed consent process is an essential foundation for every counseling relationship, providing clients with essential and relevant information that assists them in making informed decisions about participation in the professional relationship. Sufficient information must be shared relevant to the nature of the services to be provided, alternatives available, relevant risks and benefits of each, and related issues of importance to clients prior to the services being provided. When considering telebehavioral health and technology-assisted service delivery, all elements of the informed consent process typically associated with counseling relationships remain relevant.

Additionally, counselors must address issues specifically relevant to telebehavioral health services that may affect the client. These may include, but are not necessarily limited to, the possibility of technology failure interfering with telebehavioral health counseling sessions and the procedures for continuing treatment should this occur. Each counselor should have a social media policy that informs clients of his

or her policies regarding interacting with clients via social media (e.g., the counselor's policy on responding to "friend" requests from clients) and should include this policy as part of each client's informed consent agreement, whether or not the counselor anticipates the use of social media in counseling practice.

Thorough training on informed consent procedures is part of the knowledge and competency needed to engage with telebehavioral health services. This article only provides an introduction to ethical issues. Briefly, counselors ensure informed consent documents, and discussions with clients are updated to reflect revisions in service delivery. Comprehensive training programs in telebehavioral health are recommended. Explore *Demystifying Ethics and Law for Telebehavioral Health* (see <https://aca.digitellinc.com/aca/lessons/26>) and other courses on ACA's Continuing Professional Development Center (see <https://aca.digitellinc.com/aca/>).

Remember, clients have the freedom to choose whether to use telebehavioral health services and technology within the counseling process and the right to select another provider if, at any point, they want different types of services than a counselor can safely offer during a public health emergency (§H.2.a). In addition to the usual and customary protocol of informed consent between counselor and client for face-to-face counseling, the following issues, unique to this service delivery are commonly addressed in the informed consent process:

- List the telebehavioral health counseling credentials, physical location of practice, and contact information of a counseling practice;
- Outline the risks and benefits of engaging in the use of telebehavioral health services;
- Discuss the possibility of technology failure and alternate methods of service delivery;
- Review anticipated response time;
- Clearly outline emergency procedures to follow when the counselor is not available;
- Review time zone differences;
- Discuss cultural and language differences that may affect the delivery of services;
- Review financial policies and the possible denial of insurance benefits;
- Discuss coverage and continuity of care plans in the event the counselor become sick or unable to work, and
- Review boundaries and social media policy of the counseling practitioner.

Important Considerations

Develop an informed consent process for use with every client that addresses any potential uses of various technologies, whether they are currently the primary treatment modality or just an occasional augmentation to in-person treatment. During a pandemic and public health emergency, counselors may be able to provide in-person services one day and may need to use contingency plans (for example, telebehavioral health service delivery) the next.

Do not assume that the informed consent procedures discussed during traditional in-person counseling are sufficient for use when offering telebehavioral health services. Remember to confirm the physical location of a client at the start of each counseling session and address emergency contact procedures in the informed consent process. Consider the potential impact of time zone differences and counselor availability.

Also, remember to thoroughly discuss potential technological limitations and procedures for responding so that clients receiving telebehavioral health counseling services will not experience significant interruptions in counseling services should a technical problem arise. Develop and share with clients the steps to take should technology failures occur (e.g., loss of Internet connection during a distance counseling session), such as the telephone number to call to continue the session. Openly discuss with clients the effectiveness of various technologies (e.g., telephone, email, text messaging, and audio-video communications) as well as any potential drawbacks. Spend adequate time at the outset of counseling to ensure that clients understand how to use any technologies to be incorporated in counseling; provide any training necessary for clients to use them appropriately. Be particularly attentive to the potential barriers of culture (e.g., lack of exposure, comfort, or access to technologies) and language.

Understanding Health Insurance

A review of financial obligations is an integral part of the informed consent process. Professional counselors should thoroughly understand the potential benefits, contraindications, and limitations. Additionally, counselors must consider their relevance and appropriateness for each client based on his or her unique circumstances. Counselors who provide counseling services across state and national borders must be cognizant of licensing laws and other legal requirements relevant to offering professional services to individuals in other jurisdictions.

Many clients will need to use health insurance for telebehavioral health sessions during the pandemic and declared a public health emergency. Professional counselors must review all local health insurance waivers and policy changes.

Insurance plans may or may not cover telebehavioral health options. Contact the health insurance plan of each client to verify coverage, and then work with each client to clarify what is needed to bill insurance accurately. Call the “member services” telephone number, found on the back of an insurance card, before the first counseling session. Calling is essential because online databases are sometimes out of date. Also, confirm the following:

- Collect information about the “insured” (the policyholder) and the “client” (including demographic information, insurance cards, client verification information, and so on using a secure and encrypted method of communication),
- Make sure the health insurance benefits are active,
- Ask the client if there is a second health insurance plan (if yes, the counselor must determine which plan is a primary plan and which is secondary, and then submit claims appropriately),
- Ask if the client needs an “authorization” and if there are any limits, copayments or deductibles associated with providing “outpatient” behavioral health care,
- Confirm (again!) what portion of the payment for the session the client will need to pay at the time of service,
- Ask how the insurance plan wants the practice to document the session on a claim (for example, clarify the CPT code, any modifier needed by the insurance company for this clients’ plan, place of service codes, and so on), and
- Ask if there are any “medical necessity” issues you should note,
- Explore issues about deductibles because a counselor might “share deductibles” with other behavioral health providers (for example, you need to know when the deductible is “used up,”

how much of a deductible has been used thus far in the policy year if the deductible threshold “resets” mid-year during the policy, and so on),

- Confirm the Usual, Customary and Reasonable (UCR) fee if the counseling practice is an “out-of-network,” provider (some insurance companies will not share this information),
- Confirm the “out-of-pocket” maximum (this is the amount the client is required to pay before the policy pays one-hundred percent),
- Document this information and receive the name or identification number of the member service associate who provided assistance, and
- Review the information and specific amounts the client is contracted to pay the practice at the time of each service because a client may have different amounts due at different points during the course of treatment. Have the client electronically sign or confirm they agree to their financial responsibilities. If a copayment, co-insurance, or cost-sharing fee is due at the time of the visit, make sure the practice collects this payment at the start of each session.

Issues to consider

Counselors who are themselves intrigued by technology or too eager to try telebehavioral health services, without proper training, may offer services that are not well suited to the particular client’s counseling needs. Consider the appropriateness of the technological medium being used (e.g., telephone, email, audio–video communications) for each particular client based on his or her ability to effectively utilize the technology as well as its appropriateness for addressing the client’s presenting problems.

Counselors may offer services before receiving training on potential limitations of the specific technologies and practices. Use care not to inadvertently violate state laws when providing counseling services across borders.

If a professional counselor seeks to continue the practice of offering telebehavioral health services after the pandemic and state of emergency subsides, it is imperative to obtain ongoing continuing education. Counselors must remain current on the growing literature on the uses, effectiveness, and limitations of technological innovations in counseling practice. The American Counseling Association has multiple resources to train counselors seeking to learn and respond as quickly as possible.

Security and Confidentiality

Counselors understand that despite the many potential benefits of electronic communication with and about clients, this medium brings with it threats to clients’ confidentiality. Counselors need to take precautions to help minimize threats to clients’ privacy and inform clients of the potential for others to have access to these communications. Counselors must educate themselves about Internet security measures such as viruses, malware, and firewall protection as well as the use of encryption for electronic communications. Counselors should be aware of laws, such as HIPAA/HITECH, as well as state laws and follow the privacy and security rules to help ensure the protection of each client’s privacy when electronically transmitting confidential information. All potential threats to client confidentiality and steps taken to address them should be shared with clients as part of the informed consent process. Updated informed consent must be completed, even during a pandemic.

Counselors also acknowledge the limitations of maintaining the confidentiality of electronic records and transmissions when working with clients (§H.2.b). It is critical to inform clients that individuals might have authorized or unauthorized access to such records or transmissions (e.g., colleagues, supervisors, employees, information technologists).

Counselors inform clients about the inherent limits of confidentiality when using technology and urge clients to be aware of authorized or unauthorized access to information disclosed using this medium in the counseling process (§H.2.c). Include a discussion of threats to privacy in each informed consent discussion and always inform clients of other individuals (e.g., computer system administrators) who may have access to electronic communications.

Use current encryption standards within their websites and/or technology-based communications that meet applicable legal requirements. Counselors take reasonable precautions to ensure the confidentiality of information transmitted through any electronic means (§H.2.d). Encrypt all email communications and ensure that clients are aware that without encryption, email communications are not secure. Know whether HIPAA and other laws apply to practice, and ensure compliance with all legal requirements for protecting each client's privacy when electronic transmissions of confidential information occur.

Common Dilemmas and Conflicts

Counselors who do not regularly update their Internet security software may be vulnerable to unauthorized releases of confidential client information. ACA continuing professional development videos, such as *Counselor Risk Management: Counselors and Technology – A Two-Edged Sword*, *An APPLE a Day Keeps the Lawsuits at Bay* and *Private Practice: The Ethics and HIPAA of Technology* provide in-depth training to safeguard practitioners against cyberattacks and other risks (see <https://aca.digitellinc.com/aca/packages/1703/view>). Counselors who assume that Internet transmissions are confidential and secure, without enabling updated internet and computer security measures, place clients' confidentiality at risk.

Failure to be aware of relevant federal laws and its privacy and security requirements and relevant state and provincial statutes may jeopardize client privacy rights and place the counselor at risk for violating these laws. When utilizing commercially available security precautions, counselors may view these steps as being 100% secure and fail to understand ongoing threats to privacy and thus overlook additional precautions they should take.

Client Verification

Integrating the use of various technologies into counseling practice brings with it many potential benefits, such as enabling individuals who might not otherwise have access to needed care to receive valuable counseling services. Counselors must verify the identity of the recipient of the counseling services. Verification can be especially tricky when communicating with clients through means that do not allow the counselor to see the client, such as by telephone, email, and text messaging. It may be challenging to verify the identity of the client initially as well as during subsequent contacts. Counselors must ensure that the client has the legal right to consent to treatment and that the client is not seeking mental health care under false pretenses (e.g., a minor who has access to a parent's credit card). Counselors can require proof of the legal right to consent to treatment, keeping a scan of the client's

driver's license or passport in the client's file, and having the client use an agreed-upon password at the beginning of each contact can help to ensure the client's identity.

Counselors who engage in the use of telebehavioral health to interact with clients take steps to verify the client's identity at the beginning and throughout the therapeutic process (§H.3). Verification can include but is not limited to, using code words, numbers, graphics, or other nondescript identifiers.

When providing counseling services other than in person, always require proof of the client's legal right to consent to treatment and maintain a record of this proof in the client's record. Counselors who naively assume that a potential client has the legal right to consent to treatment may find themselves providing counseling services to minors and others (e.g., noncustodial parents) who are not authorized to consent to enter the professional relationship.

Create passwords or other means of confirming the identity of the client, and verify that it is the same individual during each subsequent professional contact. Just because a client can provide credit card information for billing purposes does not mean that the client is authorized to use this credit card or has the legal right to consent to his or her treatment.

Include an identity verification process in ongoing counseling policies and procedures for use with every client when electronic communications are used as the primary means of providing counseling services or merely as a means of communication between counseling sessions. Verifying a client's right to enter treatment and the client's identity at the beginning of treatment does not guarantee that it will be the same individual participating in electronic communications during subsequent interactions.

Counseling Relationship when using technology

The use of technology in counseling practice may bring with it a wide range of benefits. Clients who are homebound, those who live in remote locales, individuals who travel out of town during treatment, and others all may benefit from counseling services provided utilizing various technologies. Various computer and smartphone applications may enhance the effectiveness of counseling services, but not all technologies are appropriate for all clients in all situations. Potential limitations should be openly discussed during the informed consent process and then on an ongoing basis as needed. Document the rationale for the use of each technology, and ensure each is relevant to the client's treatment needs and best interests.

Counselors inform clients of the benefits and limitations of using technology applications in the provision of counseling services (H.4.a). Such technologies include, but are not limited to, computer hardware and software, telephones and applications, social media and Internet-based applications and other audio or video communication, or data storage devices or media. Assuming that all electronic media and means of communication are equivalent and appropriate for each client can easily result in clients not receiving relevant and appropriate counseling services. Failing to consider commonly used technologies such as telephones, cell phones, and email in one's informed consent process may result in clients being misinformed about threats to their privacy within the counseling process.

Counselors understand the necessity of maintaining a professional relationship with their clients (§H.4.b). Counselors discuss and establish professional boundaries with clients regarding the appropriate use or application of technology and the limitations of its use within the counseling relationship (e.g., lack of confidentiality, times when not appropriate to use). Counselors who regularly

communicate and maintain relationships through various electronic media in their personal life may fail to realize how doing so with clients will alter the professional tone of interactions and affect professional boundaries. Give thoughtful attention to how using various technologies and media may affect the professional relationship and boundaries with clients. Be particularly cautious about casual between-session contacts with clients via these media.

Counselors who utilize commercial vendors to store client records electronically may erroneously assume that all such vendors' services are equally secure and fail to critically assess the appropriateness and limitations of different record storage technologies.

Technology-Assisted Services

When providing technology-assisted services, counselors make reasonable efforts to determine that clients are intellectually, emotionally, physically, linguistically, and functionally capable of using the application and that the application is appropriate for the needs of the client. Verify that clients understand the purpose and operation of technology applications and follow up with clients to correct possible misconceptions, discover appropriate use, and assess subsequent steps (§H.4.c).

Effectiveness of Services, Access, and Other Issues

It is important not to assume that each form and use of technology will be appropriate for each client. Counselors need to assess each client's capabilities and facility with the technology being considered prior to utilize it. When it is clear that the use of these technologies is not appropriate for a client, the counselor instead offers in-person counseling services. When this is precluded by distance or accessibility, referrals to other appropriate professionals are made. When the use of different technologies and applications would enhance a client's treatment, counselors provide clients with relevant information so the client can access them, such as providing the client with clear information on how to download an application that will be used in treatment. When considering the appropriateness of various technologies for communicating with clients, counselors carefully consider the implications of the absence of verbal and visual cues with some technologies. Misunderstandings and miscommunications may result, so active steps should be taken to prevent such misunderstandings.

When distance counseling services are deemed ineffective by the counselor or client, counselors consider delivering services face-to-face. If the counselor is not able to provide face-to-face services (e.g., lives in another state), the counselor assists the client in identifying appropriate services (§H.4.d).

Counselors provide information to clients regarding reasonable access to pertinent applications when providing technology-assisted services (§H.4.d). Additionally, professional counselors consider the differences between face-to-face and electronic communication (nonverbal and verbal cues) and how these may affect the counseling process. Counselors educate clients on how to prevent and address potential misunderstandings arising from the lack of visual cues and voice intonations when communicating electronically (§H.4.f).

Consider these recommendations:

- Ensure that counseling services provided via various technological media are consistent with the client's clinical needs, abilities, and relative comfort with the use of these technologies.

- Verify that clients have access to needed technologies; for those who do not, offer and, if needed, provide assistance in acquiring or downloading them.
- Provide clients with any necessary training prior to offering counseling services via technological media to ensure facility and comfort with their use.
- When counseling services provided via technological media are not in the client's best interests, are not the most appropriate means of providing treatment, or are not what the client prefers, offer in-person treatment or provide referrals for appropriately trained professionals in the client's local area.
- Carefully address how the absence of visual and verbal cues may result in miscommunications that adversely affect the counseling process. Openly discuss this possibility with clients, and take steps to minimize misunderstandings and address them when they occur.
- Thoughtfully consider the salience of verbal and visual cues in light of an individual client's cultural, linguistic, and functional presentation before deciding which media to incorporate in counseling.

Records and Web Maintenance

In storing records electronically, either in one's computer or online such as "in the cloud," counselors use appropriate security measures to protect confidentiality and inform clients of this information. Counselors inform clients of the length of time records will be maintained before possibly being destroyed in keeping with relevant state and federal laws. Clients are provided with website addresses or links for the counselor's state licensing board, and any relevant certification bodies should clients wish to file a complaint or confirm laws and regulations relevant to the practice of counseling in their state. When electronic links are provided on a counselor's website, these links should be tested periodically to ensure they are current and in good working order. Websites should be developed in a manner consistent with accessibility requirements so that individuals with disabilities and language barriers may access the information posted on the website.

Counselors maintain electronic records in accordance with relevant laws and statutes. Counselors inform clients on how records are maintained electronically. This includes, but is not limited to, the type of encryption and security assigned to the records, and if/for how long archival storage of transaction records is maintained (§H.5.a). Ensure the security of electronic record storage and may inform clients that records are stored in this manner. To learn more about electronic health records, review *Private Practice: Choosing a Best-Fit EHR* (see <https://aca.digitellinc.com/aca/products/view/12067>).

Issues to consider:

- Clients who store records on their computer may falsely assume that merely deleting the records is a secure way to destroy them permanently. A counselor should provide informed consent on this issue.
- Clients may be naive about precautions they need to take on their end when participating in counseling via various technologies and may need to be educated about appropriate precautions to take to preserve their privacy.
- Assuming that links included on one's website will remain functional may prevent clients and other visitors to the website from accessing needed information.

- Failure to construct one's website in compliance with the needs of individuals with disabilities and those with language barriers can result in numerous individuals not having access to needed information.

Virtual Presence for Counselors and Clients

Counselors who participate in social media sites in their personal life keep these sites separate from those used in their professional roles. Privacy settings should be used on both personal and professional sites to reduce the risk of inappropriate sharing of personal or confidential information. Care should be taken to maintain professional boundaries when considering what online postings should be accessible to clients. Address the use of social media in each client's informed consent agreement. Counselors should be respectful of clients' privacy and not search for clients online or access their social media sites without their clients' permission. When utilizing social media, counselors should be cautious about posting or disclosing confidential information that may identify their clients.

Do not use social media platforms to facilitate client communication or telebehavioral health services. Do not conduct case consultations or seek referrals to other providers by divulging any information which might inadvertently reveal the identity of a client.

In cases where counselors wish to maintain a professional and personal presence for social media use, separate professional and personal web pages and profiles are created to clearly distinguish between the two kinds of virtual presence (§H.6.a). Clearly explain to their clients, as part of the informed consent procedure, the benefits, limitations, and boundaries of the use of social media (§H.6.b).

Respect the privacy of clients' presence on social media unless given consent to view such information (§H.6.c) and help clients understand how to use a confidential context when conducting telebehavioral health services.

Summary and Conclusion

In the face of a global pandemic, professional counselors are no longer limited to in-person, face-to-face interactions. Turbulent times require many professional counselors to change how professional services are delivered. Counselors transitioning to telebehavioral health services, for the first time, need to plan the transition to this service delivery carefully.

Telebehavioral health, or distance counseling, is the use of a digital platform that provides secure, encrypted, audio-video conferencing to communicate with a client in real-time. This review of ethical standards, as outlined in the 2014 ACA Code of Ethics, provides an introduction to the practice of telebehavioral health. This lesson provides a general overview for practitioners. Counselors are strongly encouraged to seek more training from resources, such as those offered by ACA.

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