



Central East (HHS Region 3)

MHTTC

Tip Sheet: Burnout and Virtual Fatigue in Teletherapy

Strategies for Taking Care of Your Own Health and Well-being

The New “Virtual” Fatigue

Burnout and compassion fatigue have always been concerns for therapists and other helpers. Add to that modern-day “screen fatigue” and you get a situation in which providers need to be extra diligent in taking care of themselves to counter the stresses of providing therapy virtually in a period of ever-increasing demand. This tip sheet will help you

- Understand burnout and virtual meeting fatigue
- Implement strategies to counter their effects
- Learn more from our curated list of resources

practices, and allowed therapists and clients to remain engaged in a therapeutic relationship during times of physical distancing and state shutdowns.

However, videoconference-based psychotherapy can contribute to burnout due to the number of sessions held in a day, the extended time spent looking at a screen, the struggles that come with working with your clients in an online setting, and other challenges. Counselors get fewer breaks in the day, which was often time used to make calls, complete documentation, communicate with other providers, write reports, or just take a breather between sessions. The time available to address these essential tasks and needs has declined, while time spent sitting in front of a computer has increased. But there are some steps you can take to reduce the effects of these changes. Read on to learn how to prevent and address burnout and virtual fatigue related to teletherapy.

Taking Care of Yourself

With the significant shift to virtual meetings and workplaces, there has been a lot of buzz about stress and fatigue caused by spending days on end at home and interacting only with faces on a computer screen. For behavioral health providers, this experience can exacerbate the already emotionally draining work of providing behavioral health services, leading to burnout, negative thoughts, and physical and mental exhaustion.

Overall, teletherapy has been of great benefit to therapists and their clients: It has increased access, greatly reduced the no-show/late cancellation rate in many behavioral health

Resources

Compassion Fatigue: Additional Risks while Serving Vulnerable Populations During a Pandemic | Mountain Plains Mental Health Technology Transfer Center (MHTTC): <https://bit.ly/2C58Ut2>

Employees: How to Cope with Job Stress and Build Resilience During the COVID-19 Pandemic | Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): <https://bit.ly/2ZniC2M>

How to Avoid Counselor Burnout | William & Mary School of Education: <https://bit.ly/2AVHxkP>

Best Practices to Address Burnout

Use the following strategies to manage the challenges of videoconference psychotherapy and support your own health and wellness.

Allow yourself some buffer time between sessions and meetings. Use that time to complete something refreshing like taking a quick walk outside or getting a cup of coffee. You'll need to intentionally schedule this time into your calendar, as (anecdotally) there are far fewer no-shows each day in a teletherapy practice.

Practice self-care. Try to squeeze small activities that bring you joy, pleasure, or diversion into your day. Don't skip meals, and make sure to stay hydrated. Stay connected to friends, colleagues, and formal supporters who can help reduce feelings of isolation by being a listening ear and a connection to the world outside your practice. Treat yourself with the same respect and kindness you would treat your clients and that you would urge your clients to show to themselves.

Separate work from life. Many counselors use the same platform for both work and personal video meetings, which tends to blur the line between work and leisure time. As a result, it can feel like they're on duty all the time. Try to work in one area of your home and take your laptop or phone to another room or part of your home for leisure use. Try using different videoconferencing platforms for work and social/play interactions.

Set boundaries and stick to them. Home has become the place we go to socialize, work, educate our children, do our fitness routine, see a movie, and relax. When all these lines get blurred,

there is no mental transition and we don't get the shift in energy that comes from leaving one space and going to another. Establish boundaries that clearly distinguish work life from home life. These might include:

- At the end of your workday or on weekends, hide your workspace from view if possible (e.g., close the door, cover your desk with a sheet or towel so you don't have to look at it).
- Separate the technology you use for work from that you use for socialization or play. If possible, don't use your personal smartphone or computer for work-related activities. Don't work from your bed or couch.
- You can even experiment with tech-free zones in your home to help delineate between work and personal/family time.

Think of body mechanics. When you are on a video call, you may hold your head and body in the same position for a long period of time. Try alternating between sitting and standing in different sessions. Allow yourself to shift around in your seat as you would in an in-person meeting. At the very least, stand up and walk around between sessions; roll your wrists, neck and shoulders; stretch your legs; and take a few deep, cleansing breaths.

Take care of your eyes. All that screen time can result in eye strain, irritation, and dryness. You can reduce eye strain with the "20-20-20" technique: For every 20 minutes staring at the same screen, take 20 seconds to look at something 20 feet away. Set a timer or reminder in your calendar until it becomes a habit. During a session this can be accomplished by looking just above your camera without being noticed.

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