



Southeast (HHS Region 4)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network

Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Staying Connected with Peers during Physical Distancing



Overview

While the phrase “social distancing” is widely used, “physical distancing” may communicate a less isolating prevention approach. The CDC recommends maintaining social connections and talking with trusted peers as a way of coping with mental and emotional stressors. In-person visits are not recommended during disease outbreaks, but phone calls, video calls, and messaging applications can be useful alternatives that avoid disease transmission. During difficult times these platforms can allow peers to continue supporting each other.

Technology Access and Acceptability

Most peer support workers and people with mental illness own smartphones and are willing to use them as a mode of communication for support or treatment. While individual preferences may vary, research suggests that many people are willing to use technology in the recovery process.



Video Calls

- Calls closely approximate in-person communication.
- Improved call quality accurately transmits non-verbal feedback.
- People may not be familiar with installing or operating applications.
- Be aware that many applications do not have HIPAA-compliant security specifications.

Telephone Calls

- People are very familiar and comfortable with the technology.
- Technology is standard and well-established.
- Be sure to follow HIPAA guidelines for keeping Protected Health Information (PHI) and Personal Identifiable Information (PII) secure.



Text Messaging

- Some peers may prefer to use text messaging applications to connect.
- Text may be discovered, causing an information breach.
- Text conversations are better suited for brief check-ins rather than in-depth conversations.



Important Considerations

- Many communication platforms are not designed for use with PHI and PII.
- Secure products are available, but they typically require a business associates' agreement (BAA).
- If you are unsure about your organization's policies please consult with your manager or information technology (IT) staff.

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