

Ethical Practice in a Virtual World: Ethics and Use of Technology in Healthcare Service Delivery

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Learning objectives

- Upon completion of this educational activity, learners should be better able to:
 - Identify ethical concerns specific to virtual service delivery in their clinical practice
 - Identify ethical responses to challenges associated with the use of virtual technologies
 - Identify & mitigate limitations in the use of technology and virtual platforms in their work



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How are virtual technologies used in healthcare?

“The use of electronic information and telecommunication technologies to support long-distance clinical health care, patient and professional health-related education, health administration, and public health.”

- US Health Resources & Services Administration, 2022



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Multiple technologies, platforms, & modalities

- Video conferencing, phone calls, emails, & texts
- Entering data into a web-based assessment platform
- Sending recordings, photos, or documents
- Synchronous, asynchronous, remote patient monitoring, & mobile health
- Streaming media, virtual patient education



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Why use virtual technologies in your practice?



- Accessibility & reach
- Availability of specialty providers
- Convenience
- Cost savings
- Health & safety



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Common concerns with using virtual modalities in clinical practice

- Ability to use the technology easily
- Technological problems that interfere with treatment
- Security & confidentiality
- Reimbursement
- Engaging my clients effectively
- Quality of assessment or treatment
- Boundaries



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Overview of ethical considerations

- Licensure & qualifications
- Competence
- Quality of work product
- Bases of opinions
- Confidentiality & information security
- Boundaries & multiple relationships
- Informed consent
- Justice & access to care
- Documentation
- Location of records
- Enduring record
- Emergency services & ensuring client protection
- Insurance & reimbursement
- Logistical factors
- Technological difficulties



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Competence & Virtual Service Delivery

- Knowledge of laws, standards of implementation of various telehealth platforms
- Uses & limitations of available technologies
- Client competence in using available technologies
- Individual variability in comfort with technology, virtual interaction
- Impact on efficacy of assessment & intervention
 - Strategies to mitigate that impact?
- Logistics
 - Lighting, sound, camera angle, security settings & features



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Competence & Virtual Service Delivery

- Are some forms of clinical practice more impacted than others?
 - Example: Group therapy
- Are some of our populations more suited than others?
 - Example: Adolescents (aged 13-17) send an average of six text messages per waking hour (see further Bath et al., 2018; Tolou-Shams et al., 2019)



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Privacy, Security, Confidentiality, & Informed Consent

- Understanding HIPAA in the context of telehealth practice
- Mitigating risks to unwanted disclosure or breaches in confidentiality
- Privacy: Your setting & theirs
- Ability to screen for sensitive information
- Security of technological platforms
 - Ensuring secure access
 - Recording



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Privacy, Security, Confidentiality, & Informed Consent

- Informed consent
 - Many jurisdictions *require* an informed consent process uniquely tailored to telehealth
 - Documentation of informed consent
 - Confirmation of client's identity
 - Specific elements
 - Parameters of technology use
 - Increased security & privacy risks
 - Measures taken to mitigate risks
 - Backup plans
 - Emergency procedures



Justice in Virtual Spaces

- Telehealth & technology may mitigate some barriers
 - Access to care
 - Access to specialty providers
 - Transportation
 - Social anxiety
 - Safety concerns



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Justice in Virtual Spaces

- Accessibility of virtual platforms
 - Secure broadband internet
 - Technology & associated equipment
- Who is lacking in access?
 - Older adults
 - Newly-independent young adults
 - Rural residents
 - Marginalized racial & ethnic minority groups
 - Those with more limited financial resources



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Engaging with Clients Using Virtual Technologies

- Multiple relationships
 - More casual feel, setting
 - Seeing into others' homes (and them seeing into yours)
 - Understanding client boundaries in new way
- Beneficence
 - Establish sense of connection
 - Isolation & loneliness still occur despite virtual contact



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Assessment

- Ethical concerns specific to assessment via telehealth
 - Are instruments able to be given virtually?
 - Issues of copyright & test security
 - Quality of observations
 - Quality & basis of conclusions
 - Can one establish optimal testing environment in home?
 - Lack of established validity for virtual administration
 - Connectivity issues with timed tests
 - Nature of virtual interaction



Impact on Business Practices

- Record keeping
 - Obtaining real signatures still required in some jurisdictions
 - Documentation of modality, any disruptions in service
 - Emergency contact information on file
- Fees
 - Online payment systems
 - Business Affiliation Agreement
 - Reimbursement for telehealth services



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Virtual Training & Supervision

- What are some of the advantages of using technology in training & supervision?
- Important considerations
 - How virtual use impacts supervisee's needs
 - Licensure & jurisdictional concerns
 - Assessing learner & supervisee competencies
 - Technology access
 - Use of best practices in online training



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Interprofessional Practice

- May increase access to specialty consultation, collaboration
- Can allow for more flexible meetings or conversations across providers
- But...
 - Might limit some aspects of forming interprofessional relationships
 - Can encounter differences of opinion in utility, effectiveness of telehealth
 - Institutional uses of technology differ



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Wrapping Up

- Virtual service delivery – range of advantages, ethical challenges
- Best practices are evolving as more providers & clients use virtual technologies to facilitate service delivery
- Unique challenges for some clients, agencies using telehealth modalities
- Planning ahead can mitigate many of these ethical considerations



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