SWITCHING TO TELE-HEALTH COMMUNICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORKERS

The Bottom Line

Transitioning to tele-communications, which increased largely due to COVID-19, is a new experience for many. It is recommended to learn the system that works best for you,, including functionalities, limitations, security, and liabilities, and adjust to normalize the experience.

Information and Tips for Counselling Through Tele-communications

Planning

Emergency Plan: Keep in mind the history of mental health (and any potential suicidal ideation) of the person accessing your services. Know the individual's address, the name and number of an emergency contact, and have a safe word in case someone else walks into the room out of camera view that they do not want to hear the conversation.

Staging: For video chats, ensure you have good lighting by facing a window or light rather than having one behind you, having an eye-level camera setup, and a distraction-free background (e.g., no photographs, no triggering voices that are not yours in the background, etc.).

Normalize: Normalize and run with whatever happens during the call. For example, you can ask to meet the pets you have heard so much about to change a strange situation into a positive experience.

Software

Private paid networks offer better computer security as they are encrypted. If you are not tech savvy, you may want to pick a software with readily available tech support.

Agencies and social workers should ensure whatever system they choose meets their security and business needs.

Ensure you free up your bandwidth by not streaming or using excess Wi-Fi during your sessions.

- Email Software with Extensive Security: Hushmail; G Suite; Pronto Mail.
- Video Software: Examples of free and secure video softwares include Doxy; V-see; Microsoft Teams; G Suite; and Skype for Business. Medeo is a video platform made for physicians by physicians. Zoom (Healthcare) is made for healthcare workers with extensive privacy requirements. This costs $200 a month with up to 10 people able to join the plan.

Video and Practice Management Systems

If possible, choose a Canadian management system, as they will already operate by Canadian privacy laws. They are secure, able to share documents with clients, process any payments, send receipts, allow electronic signatures on consent forms, and are equipped with a video platform. Examples include Practice Management Systems: On Call; Noustalk; and Jane.

Privacy

Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act (PIPEDA) is the Canadian Federal Privacy Legislation that governs how personal information is collected, used and stored. This legislation will protect information stored online.

Clients should always be aware that no electronic system is ever 100% secure, and everything online can theoretically be hacked or compromised. Ensure both you and your client are using your own devices that are password-protected and updating your antivirus protection.

Agencies should update their consent forms to include the provision of tele-communications. You can refer to the National Association of Social Workers' template for more information:
https://www.socialworkers.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=fN67-dWQReM%3d&portalid=.

In the updated consent form, you may want to consider including the risks and benefits of online therapy; how the process of online practice will take place; how to appropriately set up technology for sessions; confidentiality and its limitations due to unpredictability of technology; social media policy/social contacts; rates, billing, and payments if this applies to your practice; and policies about contacting you.

Liability Insurance

It is important to be insured for online practice and in different jurisdictions if you extend your online services to other provinces. The Canadian Association of Social Workers' professional liability insurance service provider - BMS - can answer your questions, as can associations in other provinces such as:

- Alberta College of Social Workers: 1-800-661-3089
- Saskatchewan Association of Social Workers: 1-877-517-7279
- Manitoba College of Social Workers: 1-844-885-6279

Confidentiality

It is important that you have a secure internet connection and are not using public/free Wi-Fi. When you are setting up meetings with people accessing services, ensure you have security settings turned on, including the use of a password to gain entry into the conversation. Administrative controls on sharing screens and allowing others into the meeting should be limited.