



Telemental Health Tip Sheets

Virtual Group Therapy

Using technology to deliver mental health services may be new to you. Below are some helpful tips to consider as you adapt to new telemental health technology solutions for service delivery. For additional resources and updates on how the COVID-19 public health emergency affects the delivery of behavioral health services in New York State, please visit <https://ctacny.org/covid-19-resources>.

1. Set aside time in the first session to **review the technology** with participants and address logistical questions and concerns. Establish a plan with the group for what to do if they get disconnected and discuss challenges that might be involved in a virtual therapy setting, such as finding a private, quiet place where they can participate in the video meeting. Confirm the location of each participant at the start of each group in case of an emergency.
2. Have **crisis contact information** for each participant on hand during sessions (for example, a family member, hospitalization information in their area, etc.). It may be helpful to have this information saved offline in case your internet connection is lost.
3. Establish **guidelines** before you get started. Will you allow group members to participate without video? Will you enable the “chat box” feature in the video conference system?
4. Discuss the **privacy and security** measures involved in the systems you use (video conference system, online discussion forums, etc.) with the group at the outset in order to address questions and concerns.
5. Privacy is a common concern for participants in an in-person and virtual setting. When conducting virtual group therapy, **video** sessions are recommended over phone sessions to increase members’ comfort with the privacy of the conversation because what’s going on in other members’ locations can be seen. Assess individuals’ physical location during the session and offer suggestions for changes if needed (i.e. encourage them to go to a private area if they can).
6. Be mindful of potential **safety issues** affecting participants at home. Ask them if now is a good time to talk, if they feel comfortable talking, if they want to move to another room, if they would prefer to wear headphones, etc. Be flexible about where participants are located during sessions if it increases safety, and be prepared to take initiative when it comes to addressing safety concerns. If you are concerned about safety issues, try scheduling time to talk with a participant one-on-one outside of the group or establish a “safety word” with participants to use if they are experiencing an unsafe environment during a session. Keep in mind that abusers may control access to technology at home. Be aware of your reporting duties and responsibilities, and have a response plan in case you encounter an immediate crisis.
7. Some people may feel less confident or more hesitant about participating in a virtual therapy setting than they would in person. Take note of participants’ involvement and ensure that all group members have an **opportunity to speak** and receive support during the session.



Remember to rely on your basic group facilitation skills to support the development of interpersonal dialogue and sharing. This means supporting cross-talk and interpersonal engagement with targeted use of skills, such as creating connection and meaning for group members.

8. Establish an **outline** for each session and circulate an agenda to group members before each meeting with a defined structure, specific goals, and discussion prompts. At the same time, be willing to adjust plans and goals based on the needs of the group and current circumstances. Especially in times of uncertainty such as the current COVID-19 pandemic, the group may want to focus on the crisis and how it's affecting them for a significant portion of each session. Striking a balance between flexibility and structure within meetings can be helpful.
9. Utilize the **home environment**, especially if working with children. Kids can use their own toys and games, participate in virtual show-and-tell, and introduce the group to toys or objects that are meaningful to them. 
10. If participants are having a hard time feeling comfortable participating virtually, try playing a **group game** to “break the ice” and help encourage involvement with the technology like “Simon Says” or “I Spy” using each other’s backgrounds. (This will only work if the group is interacting via video, not just audio.)
11. **Adapting** to the new virtual setting for group therapy together can build cooperation and trust within the group. Emphasize that the experience will feel different from in-person group therapy and that it’s understandable if it takes some time for everyone to feel comfortable with the new setup.

Resources

Padlet (<https://padlet.com/>): an interactive, online “bulletin board” that allows group members to collaborate in real-time and share photos, music, documents, and more.

Popplet (<https://popplet.com/>): an online tool for brainstorming, organizing your thoughts, and learning visually. Take notes using text, images, or a drawing tool, and then rearrange your ideas to visualize the relationships between different concepts in new ways.

References

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