

Ontario Psychological Association

**Guidelines For Best
Practices in the Provision
of Telepsychology**

OPA Communications and Member Services Committee
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Preamble

These Guidelines have been designed to highlight best practices in the provision of psychological services via telepsychology. The expanding role and continuing development of technologies that may be incorporated into psychological practice present both opportunities and challenges. Technology does, for example, provide the opportunity to improve access to psychological services by removing the limitations of geographic location, health status, financial constraints and other barriers to participating in traditional treatment. The use of technology, however, requires that we consider ethical principles, practice standards, policy development, laws and regulations, and the need for continuing education to keep pace with advances and changes in platforms.

OPA determined that Guidelines were necessary given the increasing use and interest in telepsychology, and that CPA has put the revision of their 2006 *Ethical Guidelines for Psychologists Providing Psychological Services via Electronic Media* on hold pending the upcoming revision of the *Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists* (see Appendix A).

It should be noted that, in December 2011, the College of Psychologists of Ontario (CPO) adopted the *Model Standards for Telepsychology Service* developed by the Association of Canadian Psychology Regulatory Organizations (ACPRO). The *Model Standards* have not been incorporated into the CPO *Standards of Professional Conduct*, but are considered an *Advisory for Psychological Practice* (see Appendix B).

The *OPA Guidelines for Best Practices in the Provision of Telepsychology* have been informed by relevant College of Psychologists of Ontario *Standards of Professional Conduct (2009)*, the Canadian Psychological Association's *Code of Ethics for Psychologists (2000)*, and reviews of guidelines developed by other healthcare organizations (see selected references) and relevant literature and legal positions.

Definition of Telepsychology

Telepsychology is defined, for the purpose of these Guidelines, as follows:

The provision of psychological services using telecommunication technologies that allow for the preparation, transmission, communication or processing of personal health information by electronic means. These technologies may include telephone, mobile devices, videoconferencing, email, text, chat and internet-based services (e.g., social media).

For more information on the use of email, please refer to the *OPA Guidelines on Best Practices in Electronic Communications*.

For more information on the use of social media, please refer to the *OPA Guidelines on Best Practices in the Use of Social Media*.



Guidelines

Competence

As psychologists and psychological associates have an ethical obligation to provide professional services within the boundaries of their competence based on education, training, consultation, study or professional experience, and given that recognized standards for telepsychology have yet to be developed, psychologists and psychological associates should apply the same standards to developing competence in the use of telepsychology technologies.

Psychologists and psychological associates using telepsychology as a practice modality assume responsibility for assessing and continuously evaluating their professional and technical competencies, training, experience and risk management practices. This may be accomplished through accessing continuing education opportunities, reviewing relevant literature, or seeking consultation from colleagues or other professionals.

Psychologists and psychological associates should also consider whether patients will be able to fully engage in telepsychology (appropriate familiarity with the technology), and that they are aware of the risks and benefits of providing services via technology.

Psychologists and psychological associates should make a reasonable effort to understand whether the effectiveness of telepsychology may be impacted by a patient's cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic, health, or other characteristics.

If providing services to patients in a different geographic region, the psychologist or psychological associate must become familiar with emergency and crisis services and other resources in the patient's area. If necessary supports are lacking, psychologists and psychological associates should have a plan in place in case of an emergency. They should discuss the plan with the patient, providing clear instructions, and document this in the patient file. It may also be necessary to become familiar with the laws of the jurisdiction in which patients reside, if they differ from those of the jurisdiction in which the clinician is practicing.

When considering discharge, the psychologist or psychological associate should be familiar with available services in the patient's local area.

If, at any time, it appears that a patient would benefit from more traditional service provision, the psychologist or psychological associate should take reasonable steps to secure an appropriate referral.

Standards of Care in the Delivery of Telepsychology Services

The delivery of psychological services via technology should meet the same ethical and professional standards of care as in-patient services. Psychologists and psychological associates should continually evaluate the appropriateness, efficacy and safety of telepsychology practice.

When providing telepsychology services, psychologists and psychological associates should carefully consider the benefits of telepsychology (e.g., access to care, convenience, accommodating client special needs, etc.) relative to risks (e.g., information security, emergency management, etc.) on a per patient basis.



Potential risks and benefits should be communicated to the patient, with documentation in the clinical file.

Ongoing assessment of the appropriateness of telepsychology intervention should take into consideration patients' medical conditions, mental status and stability, psychiatric diagnosis, current or historic use of substances, treatment history, and therapeutic needs.

Psychologists and psychological associates should discuss with patients the environment in which they will be participating in telepsychology to ensure privacy and comfort, and address potential distractions that might result in interruption of services.

Informed Consent

Psychologists and psychological associates must make reasonable effort to offer a complete and clear description of the telepsychology services they intend to provide, including costs, benefits, and limitations, and seek to obtain and document informed consent.

Confidentiality of Data and Information

Telepsychology services may require different considerations for, and safeguards against, potential risks to confidentiality and information security. Psychologists and psychological associates should develop policies and procedures to address potential threats to the security of patient data and information when using specific telecommunication technologies and review them with patients. Policies and procedures should consider what data and information will be stored, how it will be stored, how it will be accessed and by whom, and any technology-related vulnerabilities.

Psychologists and psychological associates should consult with technology experts, as required, to augment their knowledge of telecommunication technologies to ensure security measures are undertaken to protect and maintain the confidentiality of patient data and information.

Security and Transmission of Data and Information

The use of telecommunication technologies in the provision of psychological services presents challenges in maintaining security and confidentiality in the transmission of patient data and information. Potential threats may include computer viruses, hackers, theft of devices, and damaged, malfunctioning or out-dated hardware or software.

There is also concern that third parties (e.g., videoconferencing provider, internet service provider) may have access to confidential information.

While there are currently no provincial or federal restrictions on using platforms like Skype or FaceTime for telepsychology, it should be noted that a growing number of states in the US are taking the position that these technologies do not meet HIPAA requirements and implementing fines for their use. It is imperative that psychologists and psychological associates carefully review user agreements for any program or application they intend to employ (when accepting the terms of Skype's user agreement, for example, access to conversations is permitted).



It is recommended that only platforms offering bank-grade, end-to-end encryption are used for the provision of telepsychology (i.e., Medeo, livecare). The Ontario Telemedicine Network (OTN) is also considered to be secure (it is AES 128 encrypted, which is the standard adopted by major healthcare organizations to protect patient privacy).

Psychologists and psychological associates may also want to consider whether their telepsychology platform provider stores data in Canada, given concerns around the more invasive US electronic communications surveillance measures.

Disposal of Data and Information and Technologies

Psychologists and psychological associates are encouraged to create policies and procedures for the secure destruction of data and information and the technologies used to create, store and transmit the data and information to preserve patient confidentiality and privacy.

Psychologists and psychological associates must securely dispose of software and hardware used in the provision of telepsychology services in a manner that insures that the confidentiality and security of any patient/client information is not compromised.

Psychologists and psychological associates should document the methods and procedures used when disposing of data and information and the technologies used to create, store, or transmit the data and information, as well as any other technology utilized in the disposal of data and hardware. They also routinely monitor their computer systems for malware, clear cookies (which save their browsing history and log-in information) and empty their recycle bin.

Assessment

When a psychological test or other assessment procedure is conducted via telepsychology, psychologists and psychological associates should ensure that the integrity of the psychometric properties of the measures (e.g., reliability and validity) and the conditions of administration indicated in the test manual are preserved. There is some risk to having patients complete psychometric measures without supervision or proctoring, and this should be taken into consideration during scoring if compromised results are suspected.

Psychologists and psychological associates are also encouraged to consider other possible forms of distraction which could affect performance during an assessment and which may not be obvious or visible (e.g., sight, sound, and smell) when utilizing telecommunication technologies.

Psychologists and psychological associates should be cognizant of specific issues that may arise when providing services via telepsychology and make appropriate arrangements to address those concerns (e.g., language or cultural issues, physical or cognitive impairment). It may be advantageous to engage a proctor to assist patients with psychometric measures and guard against compromise of the assessment process.

It will be important, particularly in insurer and legal contexts, to verify the identity of the patient being assessed. This can be accomplished by obtaining a copy of the patient's driver's licence or health card and comparing the photograph to the individual presenting for services. If a proctor is being used, identity can be verified in person.



Interjurisdictional Practice

Provision of telepsychology may involve patients who reside, either temporarily or permanently, in a different jurisdiction than the clinician. Psychologists and psychological associates must be aware of relevant laws and regulations that specifically address the delivery of psychological services between different jurisdictions. See the *ACRO Model Standards for Telepsychology Services* in Appendix B for more information about interjurisdictional practice.

Continuing Education

Given the rapid development of telecommunication, psychologists and psychological associates should stay informed with respect to changes in technology, practice standards and interjurisdictional practice requirements.

Videoconferencing

There is increasing use of videoconferencing for meetings with other health providers, funders or supervisees. Whenever patient data and information is being discussed, it is important to follow guidelines for ensuring security and confidentiality. Participants in the videoconference should, for example, confirm that they are in a secure environment where discussions will not be overheard. Wherever possible, a platform specifically designed for secure and protected videoconferencing (e.g., OTN, Medeo) should be employed.

References

APA Guidelines for the Practice of Telepsychology (2013)

<http://www.apa.org/practice/guidelines/telepsychology.aspx>

ACPRO Model Standards for Telepsychology Services (2011)

<http://www.acpro-aocrp.ca/documents/ACPRO%20Model%20Standards%20for%20Telepsychology%20Service%20Delivery.pdf>

Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists (Canadian Psychological Association, 2000)

<http://www.cpa.ca/cpsite/UserFiles/Documents/Canadian%20Code%20of%20Ethics%20for%20Psycho.pdf>

Draft Ethical Guidelines for Psychologists Providing Psychological Services via Electronic Media (2006)

<http://www.cpa.ca/aboutcpa/committees/ethics/psychserviceselectronically/>

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