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TIPS FOR MENTAL HEALTH WORKERS

MANAGING RISK IN TELEHEALTH

Telehealth, including the use of phone or videoconferencing technology, is becoming a standard tool in youth mental health. The benefits of telehealth are well-established, however research on the safety risks associated with telehealth is still emerging. Delivery of telehealth youth mental health services can be similar to face-to-face delivery, however there are certain aspects unique to this approach that require mental health workers to adapt their practices. In some young people, telehealth may not be an appropriate tool for the delivery of mental health care. However, for many young people, telehealth can offer an accessible avenue for mental health care.

A range of considerations can support the safe use of telehealth for mental health and wellbeing care.(1) This tip sheet has been designed by mental health workers, young people, and researchers as a quick reference tool to support clinical risk management in telehealth. It will outline some key issues around using telehealth for youth mental health and provide quick tips for avoiding and addressing each.

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THIS TIP SHEET INCLUDES INFORMATION ON:

- **Safety planning** – considerations for creating or updating a young person's safety plan via telehealth.

- **Privacy and confidentiality** – how to support privacy and confidentiality in a less controlled environment.

- **Handling technical disruptions** – tips on how to prepare for and manage technical glitches.

- **Adapting communication styles** – how telehealth might change communication and considerations for working with linguistically diverse young people via telehealth.

- **Managing workload** – considerations for how telehealth can impact your workload and how to manage changes.

- **Getting support for yourself** – through supervision and peer support.

- **Additional resources** – including further information on working with interpreters, managing confidentiality and privacy, supporting self-guided adjuncts to telehealth care, and more.

For young people accessing care via telehealth, Orygen has developed the resources **Getting the most out of telehealth: tips for young people** and **Staying safe on telehealth: tips for young people**.

SAFETY PLANNING

Not being in the same physical location as a young person can have implications for their safety. It might change access to local personal or professional supports, or it might change access to means. It's important to have a clear process for activating a young person's safety plan, including when, how, and with whom a plan might be used or shared, and how this might change for care delivered by telehealth compared with face-to-face.

To support effective safety planning, consider the following:

- Be mindful that the telehealth format could change the likelihood of a young person disclosing risk to themselves or others. For some, not being physically present in a room with someone might make it easier to share where they're at, but for others it might make it harder. Even if you have an established relationship with a young person from face-to-face care, consider the impact that phone or video communication might have on the likelihood of them talking openly. You may even be able to talk directly with the young person about this, and make shared decisions about what medium is going to be most appropriate.

- Maintain usual good practice by having current contact details for at least two trusted contact people along with a clear plan for when and why they would be contacted. Consider the need for more than one type of contact-point, such as home and work addresses, and landline and mobile numbers.

- Obtain contact details for crisis services in the young person's local area, which may be different to the area that you are based in. Keep a record of current opening hours, addresses and phone numbers.

- Keep contact details of the young person's trusted contacts, professional contacts and crisis services on hand during telehealth consults, in case you need to access them quickly.

- At the start of each session, establish the young person's location. Consider how a change in location might change availability of emergency contacts and services in the area. If a young person is calling from a community setting where dedicated staff and processes may be a factor, such as school, make sure to coordinate to establish and maintain safety plan processes.(2)

- Establish or confirm processes for communication out-of-session, including whether it is ok for the client to contact you via phone or email, what the delay in response is likely to be outside of working hours, and where to access support through telephone or web-based crisis services if needed. Talk this over with the young person and ask them if they have any questions. Provide agreed processes in writing so you can both refer to them as needed.

- Establish or confirm processes around missed appointments, including when and how you might contact a young person, or who else might be contacted in certain circumstances. Discuss this with the young person and provide any details in writing so that you can both refer back when needed.

PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

A range of resources are available to help you support young people's privacy and confidentiality when accessing mental health care online (see section: Additional resources). Tips for managing privacy and confidentiality in terms of risk include:

- Talk to the young person about the best place for them to access their telehealth session, or provide a list of possible places before their first session. Consider different living circumstances: whether the young person lives at one address or alternates, and who they live with – partner, family, extended family and/or other loved ones, or housemates. Cultural expectations around privacy at home are also important to consider.

- Ask the young person to choose a place they will be comfortable and won't be interrupted for their telehealth sessions. This might be their home, the home of a trusted relative or friend, a private meeting room at school, university, or a library, or even a local park if they are comfortable being outside. Suggest the use of headphones to increase privacy.

- Consider the different risks to privacy and confidentiality associated with different locations, and make sure the young person understands these. Be mindful of how a location may impact a young person's likelihood of disclosing risk. Environment may determine whether it is safe for a young person to disclose at all.

- Establish the young person's surroundings at the start of each session. If you're not sure about whether it's a safe space for them to talk openly, consider asking a question that can be answered with yes or no, for example: "Are you free to talk where you are right now?". Another way to ask is via the chat function of your telehealth platform, if available.

- Consider the need for a digital environmental risk assessment if you are going to be exposed to a young person's personal space
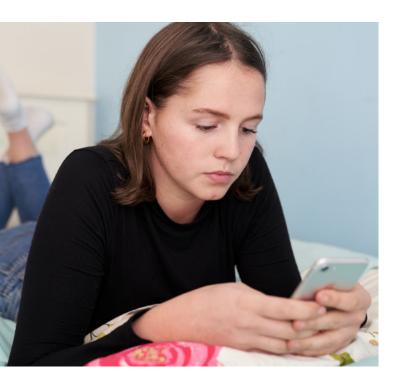
through video. Discuss how comfortable the young person feels about you seeing into their personal space, and be clear if you think you might act on what is observed in their environment, for example by enquiring about their capacity to function based on the appearance of their physical environment.

- Understand how data such as chat, audio or video may be stored by the telehealth platform you are using. Discuss whether and how sessions may be recorded, and ensure all relevant information is covered by your informed consent process.

- Be aware of how your own device or software may store or handle information and session data, for example whether files are automatically uploaded to/linked to a cloud service. Ensure your clients understand and consent to this.

- Establish how you will safely share case plans or other sensitive materials. If using text or email, explain how this information can be protected and outline measures for secure storage.

Think about how you might create a telehealth environment that is physically safe, welcoming, and promotes psychological safety – these elements align with trauma-informed care.

For more information on implementing trauma-informed care in your organisation, see the Orygen resource: **What is trauma-informed care and how can I help implement it in my organisation?**

HANDLING TECHNICAL GLITCHES

Be prepared for technical glitches like poor internet or mobile connections that might interrupt care at a critical time. Tips for managing technical hiccups include:

- Establish a process for what will happen if the connection drops out during a session. If possible, have a back-up option, such as landline or mobile phone if the internet connection fails.

- At the start of each session, ensure you have alternate contact information for the young person that is relevant to the location they are currently in, and the details of a trusted person if needed. Let the young person know that you may get in touch with a nominated contact if a telehealth session drops out and you are unable to reach them via phone or other means.

- Build skills to solve technical glitches for yourself and your client during a telehealth session. Different platforms for video conferencing have different functionality, so look at specific information for your tool as well as general guidance.

- Be flexible in your treatment planning and risk management, for instance if you need to assess a young person's risk and the videoconference connection is poor, you might both agree to move the conversation to the phone. Use your clinical judgement about what is the most important information to ascertain from an appointment and adjust your expectations for what you might achieve in a session if the connection is not ideal.

ADAPTING YOUR COMMUNICATION STYLE

Communicating by video or phone is different to communicating in-person for a range of reasons. Many non-verbal signals usually shared between mental health workers and young people will be changed or lost when you are not in a room together. Fortunately, research has shown that mental health workers can quickly adapt communication styles for telehealth, even with limited prior experience with this mode of care (Simpson 2014). Tips for modifying your approach for telehealth include:

- Adjust your language for clarity. With less body language, consider how to communicate clearly by using short sentences, taking turns to talk more often, slowing down, summarising and paraphrasing. Continue to use moments of silence even if they feel different through a screen or on the phone.

- Focus on expressing empathy. This is similar to face-to-face care, but might involve using more expressions of acceptance, positive regard and active listening.

- Be aware of available verbal and non-verbal cues both in your client and in yourself, such as gestures or movements, facial expressions, tone of voice or inflection. Look into the camera as well as looking at the screen if using videoconferencing and explain any reason for looking away, for example to look at another monitor to review previous notes or case files.

- Be aware of how culture and language may influence communication styles and how differences between your own and your client's approach might translate from in-person to video or phone.(2) Consider how this might affect risk assessment or detection of change in risk, particularly if you and the young person don't both speak the same first-language. Be mindful of not making assumptions and giving the young person some power over their care, for instance in when to involve an interpreter.

- If using an interpreter, it's important to engage with them directly before and after a session. Communicate the purpose of the appointment before the session starts, and check your understanding with them after the session ends. For further information on using interpreters in telehealth see section: Additional resources.

- Allow time to review and reflect at the end of each session. Ask the young person about their understanding of the session, the main points they took from it and their thoughts or feelings about conversations relating to risk.

- If you believe that being overheard might be an immediate barrier to disclosing risk, consider finding different ways for a young person answer sensitive questions. For instance, use the chat functionality on videoconferencing apps or, if the young person is wearing headphones, ask questions that can be answered with yes or no.

- Acknowledge that telehealth is different to face-to-face care. Be honest with yourself and with the young person that communicating through technology is different to in-person and this might change the way you interact and relate to each other. Sometimes it can be helpful to be open about your move to telehealth being a learning process. This may be a new experience to be shared with the young person.

PROCESSES TO SUPPORT SAFE PRACTICE

There are a range of tools and processes available to support safe use of telehealth.

- Understand the positive evidence for telehealth to build your confidence. Research has shown that the quality of the therapeutic alliance using telehealth can be similar to face-to-face. However, mental health workers often have more concerns about its effectiveness than clients and families, and this in itself may impact the therapeutic alliance.(3, 4). Importantly, there is evidence to suggest young people tend to be very happy with telehealth, and that there is usually not a big difference in the quality of services delivered this way, compared to face-to-face.(5)

- Invite the young person to bring a trusted person to their telehealth session if they choose. Using telehealth might make it easier to involve loved ones in a young person's care, keeping in mind that including trusted people in care will be most helpful if planned and purposeful.

- Take breaks during a telehealth session as needed, being mindful that some people can find it more difficult to concentrate over video or phone call. Make plans together about what you should both do if you need a break at any point during a session, such as whether and how long you might turn off the video on a videoconference.

- Document carefully. Be diligent with your documentation and information-sharing, taking care to document any discussion or perception around risk and safety and inform relevant members of the young person's care network.

- Consider your own videoconferencing backdrop as you would any environment that you provide care in. To help create a sense of psychological safety, your service may have standardised digital backdrops that you can use.

- Consider a self-help program as an adjunct to care, with appropriate supports and check-ins around this. There is increasing evidence for the effectiveness of online programs for common symptoms of mental ill-health such as depression and anxiety,(6) though it's important to consider available research evidence for any individual program. Books (physical or digital) can also be a good option for some young people, as can web-based self-help resources. Online peer support groups can be really helpful, but consider quality and safety elements such as whether they are moderated. Always check in with young people about what additional self-guided supports they might be engaging in for their mental health, and have a plan for how they can keep these supports safe and useful. For some suggested self-help options, see section: Additional resources.

- Get regular feedback. Ask for verbal or written feedback about how sessions are going, or consider implementing a standard feedback measure such as a brief online survey at the end of sessions. Make time to review feedback and adapt your practice as needed to ensure safe, effective care.

- Be aware that many of the same general processes and practices apply in telehealth as in face-to-face care. For instance, taking the time to introduce yourself and tell the young person a bit about your background can help to build a relationship via phone or video, as it would in-person.

TIPS FROM A YOUNG PERSON

- Be clear about what confidentiality means when accessing telehealth care, including when it might be necessary to share important information with other people or services to keep a young person safe.

- Provide information and options about how to choose a comfortable, safe environment for accessing telehealth care – recognise that different people might prefer different settings and people's living situations can vary too depending on their age, culture and other factors.

- Check in with the young person to see how they're going during each telehealth session – at the start, the middle, and the end of a session is a good rule of thumb.

- Consider the accessibility of telehealth for young people of different ages, abilities and backgrounds – check with the young person if there are any issues with accessing telehealth and how you might be able to help.

- Don't stress too much about technology – lots of young people use platforms like Zoom all the time, so they're used to talking on video, and in heaps of ways telehealth is just like in-person care.

- Give some reassurance, just like you would for a face-to-face session – the idea of seeing someone for your mental health can be scary, having some encouragement can really help.

MANAGING YOUR WORKLOAD

Moving to telehealth may change your workload, which could impact your ability to provide best practice care. Tips for managing your workload when adjusting to telehealth include:

- Acknowledge that learning to use a new system takes time and energy. Complete appropriate professional development to learn the technical and clinical processes important for using telehealth.

- You may notice increased fatigue from doing telehealth. Take breaks when you can, and discuss strategies for preventing burn-out with your supervisor and manager. Be aware of the extra time needed if telehealth systems aren't integrated with existing systems such as client records. Establish processes and governance at your service, as well as with other services and providers, to support safe, appropriate and efficient information-sharing.

- Realistically consider how many clients you can see each day while maintaining appropriate records. Discuss your capacity with your manager and be willing to advocate for a change in caseload to protect your own wellbeing and professional capacity.

GETTING SUPPORT FOR YOURSELF

Adapting to a new way of working takes time and energy, and may bring added anxiety to your work. Looking after yourself is essential to providing best practice care.

- Seek regular supervision to support your practice, especially for management of young people's risk and safety. Be aware of the availability of senior and other colleagues, and consider booking sessions with young people who might be experiencing heightened risk at times when you can access peer support. Be clear with the young person when you might need to follow up with a colleague and get back to them about something, and about how long this might take.

- Access peer support to share concerns and learn from your colleagues. If possible make this part of your daily practice, especially if you are working in an isolated setting.

- Make sure you know where to access wellbeing support for yourself. This might include EAP, flexible work hours and leave if needed. For more tips on looking after yourself in clinical practice, see the Orygen webinar: **Working with young people in the trauma space**.

ORYGEN RESOURCES

Toolkit. **Staying safe on telehealth: tips for young people**.

Toolkit. **Getting the most out of telehealth: tips for young people**.

Webinar. **Working with young people in the trauma space**.

Webinar. **What do young people want from digital support?**

Clinical practice point. **The digital age: Does digital technology work in youth mental health settings?**

Clinical practice point. **Assessing and managing risk of violence in early psychosis**.

Clinical practice point. **Managing ongoing suicidality in young people diagnosed with major depressive disorder**.

Various **resources about self-harm and suicide prevention**.

"Within my service, we set up a buddy system and we called each other at the beginning and end of each day at the very least. This really helped us 'sign off' at the end of the day and gave us just a little bit of time to have those informal peer support sessions which happen naturally in the workplace."

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Emerging Minds. **A practical guide to working with children and families through telehealth**.

Mentalhealthonline. **A practical guide to video mental health consultation**.

New South Wales Government Agency for Clinical Innovation. Various **telehealth resources for clinicians and patients, carers, and other providers.**

Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA). **Telehealth guidance for practitioners**.

Australian Government Cyber Security Centre. **Web conferencing security**.

Australian Government Department of Health. **Privacy checklist for telehealth services**.

e-Mental Health in Practice. **A guide to digital mental health resources**.

Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP). **Guidelines for interprofessional collaboration between general practitioners and other medical specialists providing video consultations**.

Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists. **Telehealth in psychiatry**.

Australian Government. **Free Interpreting Service**.

Victorian Transcultural Mental Health. **9 tips for an interpreted session**.

Victorian Transcultural Mental Health. **Interactive online learning, including module on working with interpreters**.
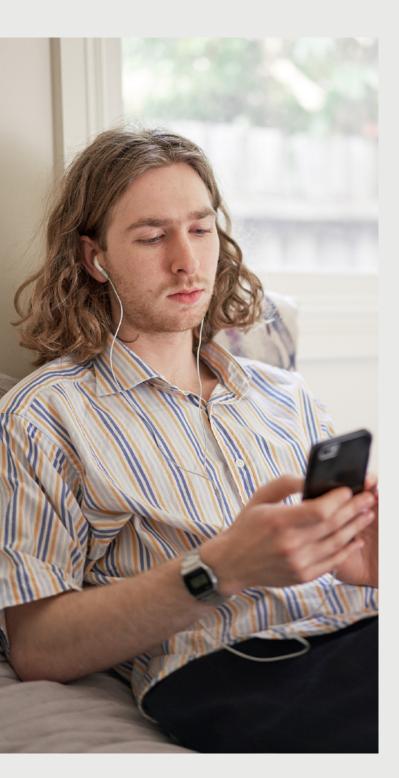
American Telemedicine Association. Practice guidelines for telemental health with children and adolescents.

Centre for Clinical Interventions, Government of Western Australia. **Self help resources for mental health problems**.

GetSelfHelp.co.uk. **Self Help pages**.

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