

Distance Counseling Procedures

This document is designed to inform you about many aspects of distance counseling offered through the Cognitive Behavior Institute.

Process

It is important to be aware that there is an increased risk for misunderstanding when using telephone, text-based modalities such as email, real-time internet chat, or video conferencing since many of the non-verbal cues are significantly reduced. When using video conferencing software, misunderstandings may occur since bandwidth is always limited and images can lack detail. Clinicians are observers of human behavior and gather much information from body language, vocal inflection, eye contact, and other non-verbal cues. If you have never engaged in distance counseling before, please have patience with the process and provide clarification if you think your clinician has not fully understood you. We also ask that you be patient if your clinician periodically asks for clarification as well.

Privacy

Although the internet provides the appearance of anonymity and privacy in counseling, privacy in distance counseling presents some unique challenges. The client is responsible for securing their own computer hardware, internet access points, chat software, email and passwords.

The clinician has a right to his or her privacy and may wish to restrict the use of any copies or recordings the client makes of their communications. Clients must seek the permission of the clinician before recording any portion of the session and/or posting any portion of said sessions on internet websites such as Facebook or YouTube.

Risks & Benefits of Distance Counseling

There are various risks related to electronic provision of counseling services related to the technology used, the distance between clinician and client, and issues related to timeliness. These risks may include: (1) email messages not being received; (2) possible denial of insurance benefits; and (3) confidentiality being breached through unencrypted email, lack of password protection or leaving information on a public access computer in a library or internet café. Messages could fail to be received if they are sent to the wrong address (which might also be a breach of confidentiality). Confidentiality could be breached in transit by hackers or Internet service providers or at either end by others with access to the client's account or computer. People accessing the internet from public locations such as a library, computer lab or café should consider the visibility of their screen to people around them. Position yourself to avoid peeping by those around you. Using cell phones can be risky in that signals are scrambled but rarely encrypted.

The potential benefits of receiving professional counseling services online include but are not limited to: (1) the convenience of receiving counseling from any locale as long as you the client are able to obtain an internet signal and operate the necessary hardware; (2) increased client anonymity by removing common indicators that one is receiving counseling services (ex. car parked outside of the counseling center); (3) increased flexibility in scheduling sessions; (4) lack of disruption to the regular counseling process due to inclement weather or due to the client being out of town on vacation or business; and (5) increased availability of counseling services for clients who have difficulty accessing a brick and mortar counseling site.

Safeguards

Cognitive Behavior Institute utilizes Zoom. Zoom offers videoconferencing technology and provides the highest possible security and confidentiality for the content of your sessions. Your personal information is encrypted and stored on a secure server. The client is responsible for creating and using additional safeguards when the computer used to access services may be accessed by others, such as creating passwords to use the computer, keeping one's email and Passwords secret, and maintaining security of their wireless internet access points (where applicable). Please discuss any such concerns with your clinician early in your first session in order to develop strategies that minimize risk.

Client Verification

In the first session the client and clinician will agree upon a code word, number, graphic or other nondescript identifier in order to prepare for instances in which the clinician is unable to verify the identity of the client due to technological difficulties with videoconferencing software.

Treatment Alternatives

Distance counseling may not be appropriate for many types of clients including those who have numerous concerns over the risks of distance counseling, clients with active suicidal/homicidal thoughts, and clients who are experiencing active manic/psychotic symptoms. If your clinician assesses that distance counseling may be harmful or ineffective, a referral to a local provider will be rendered on your behalf.

An alternative to receiving mental health services online would be receiving these services in person. The distance clinician can and will assist clients who would like to explore face-to-face options in their local area. Many state and local agencies will treat low-income clients on a low or no-fee basis. Please feel free to request a referral anytime you think a different counseling relationship would be more practical or beneficial for you.

Confidentiality

Maintaining client confidentiality is vitally important to the clinician and the clinician will take extraordinary care and consideration to prevent unnecessary disclosure. Further information is provided in our Privacy Practices.

Records

Like in-person treatment, the clinician will maintain records of online counseling services that are consistent with in-person treatment standards. These records can include reference notes, copies of transcripts of chat and internet communication and session summaries. The client will be asked in advance for permission before any audio or video recording will occur.

Procedures

The clinician might not immediately receive an online communication or might experience a local backup. If the client is in a state of crisis or emergency, the clinician recommends contacting a crisis line or an agency local to the client. Additionally, if the clinician has legitimate concern about the safety of you the client and the distance session is disrupted without a plan in place, the clinician will send out crisis responders to your location to complete a safety assessment. Work with your clinician to identify local resources if you have concerns about the timeliness of responses.

In order to effectively carry out this plan, your clinician will ask for your location at the start of each session to verify your whereabouts. Clients may utilize the following crisis hotlines:

- 1-800-SUICIDE
- 1-800-273-TALK
- For the Deaf: 1-800-799-4TTY

Disconnection of Services

If there is ever a disruption of services on the internet, then the client will need to call the Cognitive Behavior Institute main line at 724-609-5002.

Physical Location of Practice

Cognitive Behavior Institute is physically located at: 125 Emeryville Drive, Suite 230, Cranberry Township, PA 16066.