

Making Telehealth Better: Adding more Creativity and Connection



Plus a Tip Sheet for Clients!

ANNABELLE
COOTE

annabellecoote.com

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Self-Care for Distance Therapy for Therapists

Take Care of Your Own Brain and Body

If adding telehealth sessions to your therapy practice is new to you, this is a big step.

If you took on telehealth because of the pandemic, it may still feel daunting, tiring, or even overwhelming.

Telehealth right now is taking place with a background of global uncertainty and changing information. Therapists are facing many of the same issues as their clients, and telehealth presents unique challenges. Even if you've been at it for a while, adapting your practice to distance work can be a huge source of pressure.

You are doing important work in this world and it's vital for you to put your own oxygen mask on first.

Use your existing coping strategies and resources and build new ones to take care of yourself so that you can have a solid foundation from which to serve others.

You will be in much better shape to take on this work if your body is grounded and your brain is relaxed.

Basics & Breaks

Attend to your own well-being with basic self-care including prioritizing sleep, exercise, eating well, and mental/emotional care.

Pay attention to balance. Take pauses to check in with yourself. Take breaks!! High quality breaks can be simple & short.

Resources to Help You Manage Your Own Stress & Increase Your Self-Nurturing

Here are a few posts you might find helpful:

[Barely Have ONE Minute to Invest in Yourself: The Importance of Therapist Self-Nurturing in the Pandemic](#)

[Why Teletherapy is Draining and How to Make it Better](#)

[Why You Need a Hammock in Your Office](#)

You can find brief and easy mindfulness tools for therapists at annabellecoote.com.





Creating Connection from Afar

Setting the Stage for Success

Adapting to Telehealth

Video is not the same as in person connection, but you can still do really good therapy using it.

Take the time to familiarize yourself and help your clients with the online experience. Some people are adept at talking or meeting online already, but for others it's unfamiliar and potentially downright unsettling.

Be willing to experiment and see what works for you and your clients to make it better.

Make sure to practice self-compassion, especially if this is uncomfortable or daunting!

Help your clients "get settled" in the telehealth world much the same way as you would in your office. Check in about what it's like to be meeting online.

Getting set-up, poor connectivity and other challenges are as much a part of the session as similar challenges might be in your office (construction, power outages, loud children in the waiting room for example).

Paying closer attention to non-verbal signals is important, and tricky – especially if the connection is not ideal. You may also need to ask your clients to let you know more about what's going on for them than you would in the office.

Eye contact is funny online. If you can, practice looking into your camera – that will give the client the most sense of connection.

But don't ask them to try to do this too – that's usually too much to add to the mix. But do ask about their experience of your eye contact.

Confidentiality, Privacy & Environment Set-up

In your office, you control the environment. In telehealth, the client plays a much greater role.

It is important to create guidelines for clients so they understand what their responsibilities are (privacy, limiting distractions, not doing dishes, no others present, etc.)

You will also need to assess the situation when doing sessions. If your client can't create an ideal set-up for virtual therapy, you have to decide how to manage and work the situation.

Adjusting Pace, Expectations & Goals

It is important to take into account how the telehealth "environment" is drastically different.

In addition to connecting from home, office, or other locations, clients don't have the same transitions into or out of sessions that they do when visiting your office.

You may need to give more attention to issues of comfort, safety, and security. It might take a lot of time helping your client to just get used to the format.

Clients may need to adjust their focus or goals. Slowing the process down can help you stay attuned and connected.

If you're using telehealth because of the pandemic, this backdrop may significantly impact presenting issues, coping resources and supports, and capacity for engagement.

Getting Creative, Using the Body

Beyond the Basics

Find Your Sense of Humor & Play

Humor and playfulness are hallmarks of both creativity and transformation. Enlist them to help you think outside the box and be curious about how to make good use of your options.

Experiment & Take Appropriate Risks

Creativity requires the willingness to make mistakes. You are going to have to try things out to see if they'll work. Maybe you CAN find a way to involve the cat in the session or see what it's like to have the client move away from the screen to practice boundaries.

Take Time to Ground & Center

Get comfortable. Connect to your own body. Feel your feet on the floor. Inhale & exhale deeply. Notice the space around you - not just the screen. Encourage your clients to do the same. Do it together.

Remember Your Clients Have Feet!

Throughout the session, you can be curious about what you don't see. You might ask what your client notices or you might play with moving closer or further away from the camera for different perspective.

Pay Attention with Your Whole Self

It's easy to get drawn into the screen when on video, but if you can "listen" with your heart, pay attention to your own body signals, and get a feel for being connected to your client, that will help the session come alive.

Include the Body & Movement

Introduce progressive relaxation, a body scan or a little "stand up and shake it off". Adding even a little movement can help both you and your clients feel more embodied & present.

Develop Rituals

Beginning and ending sessions in specific ways may help create a safe holding container and ease transitions in and out of sessions. It could be as simple as 3 deep breaths together or a creative check in such as "if your mood were a type of weather system, what would it be?".

Using Art, Journaling or Other Resources

Your clients might find it helpful to take notes, draw or doodle during session. The process of writing or drawing might help clients have a more tangible sense of connection to the work. If you use art with clients, get creative about how to share it. It might be possible to set up a different screen or switch the camera angle for a view of the art.

Use Caution with Art or Movement

Even if you are already experienced using creative or embodied expression in your work, it is important to carefully pace and titrate it when working from a distance. Experiential approaches can be very powerful and you don't have the same control or containment as you would in person. Please get appropriate training, supervision or consultation as needed.

Walk & Talk By Phone or Video

You can pause if needed to bring attention to something in particular or focus in a different way. This is easy with a phone, but you could also use video on a phone or tablet. You might use only audio most of the time but pause to get back on video from time to time.

Back to Basics – Tech Issues

Making it Work

Managing Tech Issues

Test your platform before you have sessions!

Check out the settings, do a trial run, get as familiar with the system as you can. See if your system has how-to materials for you and your clients to read or watch.

You will have tech problems. You just will. No platform is perfect. Your internet connection; your client's internet connection; web traffic; computer, phone, and tablet functioning; user comfort and know-how and even the weather can all have an impact.

This is ok; you just have to be prepared to manage it and any stress it creates.

Can You Hear Me Now?

Check in with clients at the beginning and throughout sessions.

Remember that how you see yourself on a video screen is not necessarily how the clients sees you. Same with audio.

Check in about the quality of the connection and explore how it impacts the work.

Communicate & Create Back-up Plans

Have a clear plan for communication and back-up plans in the event that you encounter tech problems getting connected and for issues that crop up during sessions.

Will you email, call the client, have them call you?

Sometimes Phone Might be Better than Video

On the one hand, video connection allows for more elements of human interaction to be present than talking by phone. On the other, the nature of video connection might feel harder to manage.

Sometimes phone (or audio only on a video conference) might actually create a sense of better connection, particularly for clients who are less comfortable with video.

Audio instead of video can also reduce the anxiety about being observed in a new way or seeing oneself on screen.

Phone might allow a client to walk or doodle while in session in a way that might help them focus or feel soothed.

And sometimes a decent phone connection might simply be a lot better for the therapy experience than a poor video connection.

Note that some insurance companies or practice guidelines view phone as telehealth while others do not.



Back to Basics – Set-up

Telehealth 101 Refresher

Informed Consent

In some states it's a legal mandate, but it's certainly recommended that you have a signed consent for telehealth.

Clearly cover all the issues that are unique to telehealth and make sure your clients have a reasonable understanding of how this form of therapy works.

Client Insurance Coverage

Insurance coverage for telemental health varies widely. During the pandemic, many insurances covered telehealth by both video and phone, but it is important to check with the insurance companies.

Professional Liability Coverage

Check with your professional liability insurance carrier to see if you are covered for delivery of telemental health with your plan or how to add this coverage.

Choose a Telehealth Platform

Many electronic health records (EHR) systems have a built in option.

Other video platforms include VSee, Doxy and Zoom. They all have the option for being in compliance with HIPAA guidelines through a Business Associate Agreement (BAA) and appropriate security protocols.

Security and privacy are important considerations and it is important to consider HIPAA requirements.

For more on the topic, [please visit this blog.](#)

Telehealth Laws & Regulations

Generally, telemental health is considered to be taking place in both the location of the therapist and the client.

As of now, for most mental health professionals, most states require that you be licensed in the state in which you are practicing and the state in which the client is located at the time of the session.

The regulations about interstate therapy are evolving, and during the pandemic, many states have made allowances for cross state telehealth, but it is important to be aware of the regulations in your state and any states where clients may be located for sessions.

This is a particular concern if clients in your practice reside in a state other than where your practice is located.

Some states have additional telehealth regulations and requirements.

Crisis Management Issues

In situations of crisis, especially if your client is not in the same geographic area where you practice,

it's important to make sure that your client knows what the crisis resources and procedures might be if needed.

You might also need to develop additional crisis evaluation practices.

Using the Telehealth Tip Sheet *with Your Clients*

- When you share the tip sheet with clients, make the time to go over it with them.
- Give this process the same therapeutic attention you would any other part of therapy.
- Talk about specifics in your practice or your work with particular clients that you think are important to highlight.
- Talk about how teletherapy is different than other social or work interactions online.
- Take time to address client questions & concerns.
- Be curious with clients about what you can do to make the experience feel as rich and alive as possible.

TELEHEALTH TIP SHEET

for Clients

Find or Make a Private Space

This is really important and also sometimes challenging. Where can you get behind closed doors by yourself? Bedroom, back room, bathroom? Sit in your car or go outside?

Minimize Distractions

Treat your session like you would if you went to your therapist's office. Don't do dishes, clean out your junk drawer or check email. Close out other apps on your computer or phone.

Use Sound Screens

Play white noise or music, or turn on a fan. The noise will give you more privacy if it is outside the room you are in. There are many phone apps for white noise.

Set Boundaries at Home

Tell other adults and kids you have an important meeting and create a plan so they don't disturb you. Try to have someone else in charge of the kids or be creative about activities they can do.

Talk About Options

Different options may be available depending on your therapy situation and what your therapist can offer. Ask about your options, such as video, phone or even journal communication. What about walking while you talk? If appropriate, this might be possible by phone or even video. Discuss session length, devices & apps. Be creative!

Share What Is & Is Not working

If you're new to teletherapy, make sure to tell your therapist about your experience, what's working and what feels awkward or uncomfortable so you can problem-solve.

Know Your Back Up Plan

It is not uncommon to have technical difficulties with teletherapy. Ask your therapist what the plan is for communication – will they call you, email you, should you get in touch with them?

Expect New & Different Questions

Your therapist won't have the benefit of getting a full in person sense of you so they might ask you to share more about your emotions or your body state.

Have Pen & Paper or Art Supplies

You might find it helpful to take notes, draw or doodle during your session. There might be other helpful resources. Perhaps a cup of tea, a pillow or blanket or workbook used in therapy.



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annabellecoote.com
hello@annabellecoote.com