



Considerations for the use of distance counseling

Question: I am a counselor in private practice and received a call from a potential client who lives in a very rural town in my state. She has no access to local counseling services. The nearest counselor is over 200 miles away, and she is unable to afford or take the time to drive that far. She is wondering if I can provide online counseling to her from a distance. Ethically, can I provide this service and, if so, how?

Answer: This is a very common concern among rural communities across the country. Lack of accessible services limits those who struggle with ongoing mental health issues. Clients often cannot make the drive to the nearest agency or counselor. Therefore, counselors have a responsibility to try and be knowledgeable about the resources that are available concerning distance counseling and technology. Counselors also understand that additional concerns exist within this topic, so it is important to ensure that ethical and legal requirements are met.

The *2014 ACA Code of Ethics* outlines this topic in Section H, which focuses on distance counseling, technology and social media. Pay particular attention to Standards H.1.a., H.1.b., H.2.a., H.2.b., H.2.c., H.2.d., H.3., H.4.a., H.4.b., H.4.c., H.4.d., H.4.e. and H.4.f.

In addition, per Standard I.1.b., the first step in making an ethical decision is to use an ethical decision-making model. (For an example, see sdcounseling.org/documents/Ethical_Decision_Making_Model.pdf, which was adapted from *Ethics in Counseling & Psychotherapy* by Elizabeth Reynolds Welfel.)

According to these standards, counselors have the freedom to choose whether to use technology and distance counseling in their practice. Counselors

should first make sure they are practicing within their legal rights and limitations with regard to distance counseling. If a client is asking to receive distance counseling in another state, it would be important to research the licensing rules and requirements for that state. Please note, the American Counseling Association recommends that counselors be licensed in the client's state.

Those who decide to use distance counseling should take into consideration their own knowledge and competencies. Specific certifications or additional course work may be required to provide such services. It is important to first research different programs and applications that potentially could be used in distance counseling, then to pursue proper training before using them.

There are some unique considerations that need to be made within the realm of distance counseling and technology, including discussing with the client what to do if the technology fails, what the alternative method of service would be and emergency procedures if the counselor is not available. Counselors should also discuss time zone differences, response times and the possible denial of insurance benefits. Counselors must also check that technology-based communications meet ethical and legal requirements and that current encryption standards are being upheld to ensure that confidentiality is maintained.

Finally, it is important to outline the benefits and limitations of using technology with clients. Clients need to be functionally capable of using such technology, and the counselor would need to continue checking in with clients to make sure they are using the offered technology in an appropriate manner. It is also necessary to discuss the differences between face-to-face and

electronic communication and how these differences may affect the counseling process. Clients need to know that possible misunderstandings could result due to missed cues that sometimes happen with electronic communication.

As always, keys to resolving any ethical dilemma include consulting with other counselors, referring to ACA standards and documenting the decision-making process and rationale in order to provide an explanation if the decision is called into question. It is also important to reflect back on any ethical decision to ensure that the decision was made effectively.



The question addressed in this column was developed from a de-identified composite of calls made to the South Dakota Counseling Association's ethics coordinator. This information is presented for educational purposes only. ♦

Erin Stolsmark is the current ethics chair for the South Dakota Counseling Association, a branch of the American Counseling Association. A licensed professional mental health counselor and national certified counselor, she works in private practice in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. She serves as co-editor of the new Ethics Inquiries column with Michelle E. Wade.

Letters to the editor:
ct@counseling.org