

Guidelines for Choosing a Video Platform

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Things change very quickly in the world of technology and right now, with the Coronavirus issue, this is has never been more true. Although the basic guidelines and concepts given below should remain reliable, pricing and/or availability on some of the specific products that are mentioned could change.

DECISION-TREE FOR STARTING TO DO TELEHEALTH:

These are the questions you need to answer for yourself to begin doing video telehealth sessions with your clients:

- Do I have to use HIPAA-compliant video products?
- What hardware do I need?
- Which of the two kinds of video software do I want?
- Do I want a bundled product or a standalone?
- Possible products that fit my needs

DO I HAVE TO USE HIPAA-COMPLIANT VIDEO PRODUCTS?

Sometimes therapists feel that it's OK to use common video apps like Skype, Facetime or WhatsApp – especially if the client signs a release that they're OK with it. Here are two important legal and ethical reasons why that's not a good idea:

- **ENCRYPTION:** Video platforms that are not HIPAA-compliant may or may not be encrypted. If they're not, the sessions you have with your client could easily be hacked – without either of you being aware of it. A worst-case scenario would be to learn that some of your confidential therapy appointments had been posted on the Internet.
- **BAA (Business Associate Agreement):** Even if your video platform is encrypted, if it's not HIPAA-compliant, the company is not going to give you a BAA. The BAA isn't just a nice add-on. It's an essential piece of HIPAA-compliance. The BAA is the legally binding document between you and the company where they agree to keep all client data (PHI) confidential. Without a BAA, the company has the right to sell your client data to any company or individual that wants to buy it. They will often claim that they de-identify the data, but there are cases where people have been able to identify members of their community using de-identified data.

Ethically, it's our responsibility to at least do no harm to our clients. When we use non HIPAA-compliant video platforms, we can't ensure that.

Legally, we are bound by HIPAA to use products that can be HIPAA-compliant. Keep in mind that HIPAA is federal law. Fines for infractions are quite large and can, in extreme cases, result in losing your license and malpractice insurance, or even in federal incarceration.

WHAT HARDWARE DO I NEED?

You will need some kind of device (desktop computer, laptop, tablet or MAYBE a cell phone, in a pinch) with an Internet connection, camera, speakers and microphone. These days, many devices come equipped with camera, speakers and microphones already built in. If your device is a bit older, you should be able to buy those kinds of accessories for your device at any store that sells computer supplies and plug them in to your computer. They will typically self-install.

You do NOT have to go out and buy the newest, fastest computer on the market. If your computer or other device is 8 – 10 years old or newer, it will probably be fine.

WHICH OF THE TWO KINDS OF VIDEO SOFTWARE DO I WANT?

You also have to have video software. This will almost always be some type of service you subscribe to as opposed to a one-time purchase. There are two basic types of video software subscriptions: **WebRTC** (which works in your browser) and some kind of **native app** that you have to download, such as Zoom or VSee. There are pros and cons to each:

Pros & Cons for the Two Types of Video Software

WebRTC

Pros:

- Usually cheaper
- Works in the browser so there's nothing for the user to download

Cons:

- Quality isn't quite as good
- Isn't quite as reliable
- WebRTC can have IP leaks (I'm not sure how big of an issue this is)
- Since WebRTC works in the browser, you and your client both have to have browsers that support WebRTC. MOST do these days, but older browsers do not.
- Can't be used with people in more than one location, i.e., groups, families, etc.

Native Apps

Pros:

- Quality is top-notch
- It's more stable and reliable than WebRTC
- Can have video sessions for larger groups, i.e., do family sessions, groups, or even things like webinars. This isn't possible with WebRTC.

- You don't have to worry about which browser your client may have. Since the software is a native app that you download, anyone can use it and expect a similar result.

Cons:

- The subscriptions usually cost a bit more
- The first time you use the product, you'll have a small download. Most products have this incorporated seamlessly so it's easy - you just have to say "Yes" a couple of times and it's done. But some people don't like the idea of downloading software to their devices.

Additional Considerations

Much of the quality of your video session will depend on the Internet speed that both you and your client have. Most Internet connections these days are fine – you don't need to invest in something super high powered. But if either you or your client is trying to connect from a location that has a weak Internet speed, your video connection will be choppy or you'll lose it altogether. It won't matter how good your video hardware or software is if your Internet connection is weak.

You should also consider lighting factors in your room for the best quality. It's usually best to go into the video room a bit ahead of your client so you can test both the audio and video and make sure all is well.

DO I WANT A BUNDLED PRODUCT OR A STANDALONE?

The concept here is whether you JUST want a product for your video sessions, or whether you want a video product that's integrated into other tools you might use in your practice, such as encrypted email, file storage, credit card processing, efiling, notes, appointment reminders, schedulers, etc. These types of integrated products often have names like "EHR & Portal" or sometimes "EMR with Portal" or even "Practice Management System & Portal." There are some compelling arguments for integrated products. They'll save you time and reduce errors because - assuming the product is well-made - you only have to enter data once and it will populate all of your tools with the correct information. Say your client gets a new address (or anything else). If you're using separate tools for each task, you have to remember to change the client's information in each tool. That's more work and also increases the chance you'll make a typo somewhere. With a product that's fully integrated, you just enter the new information once and every tool gets the update.

If you're already using an integrated product that you like and all you want is video, it may make most sense to go with a standalone product. However, if you're not currently using an integrated product - or if you're not wild about the one you're using - I'd suggest checking into integrated products that have video. That way, you'll have all the tools you need in a single product.

POSSIBLE PRODUCTS THAT FIT MY NEEDS

If you've used the decision tree above, you may now have an idea about which of the two kinds of video you'd prefer and also, whether you'd rather have a bundled (integrated) product or whether a standalone fits your needs better. The products below are obviously not the only ones available in each category, but I feel each of these is good:

WebRTC Standalone - [Doxy.me](#) (has a free product for low volume users)
WebRTC Integrated - [SimplePractice](#)

NativeApp Standalone - [SecureVideo](#) (uses the Zoom platform)
NativeApp Integrated - [PSYBooks](#) (uses the Zoom platform)

Be careful to make sure whatever you choose is HIPAA compliant and gives you a BAA. I've noticed that right now, some companies seem to be claiming to give you a BAA but then not. It may be a kind of bait-and-switch, which would really be unfortunate, given the circumstances we're in. I specifically did NOT include those companies in my list above for obvious reasons.

Similarly, be careful if you try to get Zoom directly from the Zoom website. Their home page makes it look like they are very competitive pricewise. However, if you dig a little deeper, you'll see that their HIPAA compliant product is quite expensive. They don't offer a low-cost product that's HIPAA compliant. If you definitely want Zoom, SecureVideo and PSYBooks both use the Zoom platform, but they have competitive pricing so you would probably be better off with one of them instead of going directly to Zoom.

Hope this has been helpful. Stay safe, happy and well, everyone.

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*** Financial Disclosure:** Please note that Susan Litton, PhD is the owner of PSYBooks and receives financial compensation for its use.