

The Keys to Professional Clinical Practice Online: A Workshop with Lawrence Murphy

by Elise Meertens, Registered Psychotherapist (Qualifying)

On April 13, 2019, the OACCPP hosted a joint workshop with the Canadian Association for Psychodynamic Therapy (CAPT) in Toronto. Lawrence Murphy, a leader in the online counselling field, presented "The Keys to Professional Clinical Practice Online."

In this presentation, Murphy focused on educating participants about the risks and benefits of text and video counselling, offering ethical considerations for working in an online environment, research regarding the efficacy of online counselling, and practical tips and questions to consider. Within this review, I hope to share with you some notable takeaways.

The Internet: Considerations based on how it works

Every second, through millions of kilometres of underwater cables that transect a number of countries, massive amounts of data are shared via the internet (TeleGeography, n.d). As a result, some Canadian communications travel through or are stored in the U.S.A., which can leave that information vulnerable to the USA PATRIOT Act (Information & Privacy Commissioner for British Columbia, 2004). The USA PATRIOT Act allows any unencrypted information sent through or stored in the U.S.A. to be obtained and reviewed by the American authorities with only a simple notice being offered to the company that holds the information. This puts Canadian health information at risk and is why it is important to know where and how information is transferred and stored. When a file is stored by a data server maintained by a cloud provider it may be stored temporarily in multiple locations and multiple countries.

Canadian-owned online platforms that store data in Canada are identified as safer options to avoid privacy concerns such as the USA PATRIOT Act. Choosing safe platforms and informing yourself of Internet risks are only part of the ethical responsibilities associated with online practice.

Ethics of Online Practice

With our new, sober understanding regarding online data transmission and storage, we next turned our attention to the Ethics of Online Practice. Working online still requires that we abide by the ethical principles set by the College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario (CRPO) and any other applicable regulatory bodies. Further to this, it is highly recommended that professionals who intend to engage in counselling online should complete competency training prior to offering online services.

Professional Liability Insurance

Reach out to your insurance provider to inform them of your intention to practice online. Let them know of your online activities so you may be informed of any limits of your insurance policy. Some insurance companies provide insurance across Canada; however, some regulatory bodies discourage cross-jurisdictional (i.e., cross-provincial or cross-territorial) practice. As most jurisdictions are governed by unique regulations, it is essential to be aware of the regulations where your client is located (College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario, 2018). Assess these risks before providing services outside of your jurisdiction.

Encryption of Data

Ensure that you encrypt the information exchanged between you and your clients whenever possible. Encrypted information is scrambled so it cannot be easily deciphered. Look for Terms of Service documents that include end-to-end encryption and encrypted storage to increase security. In Ontario, the Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act (PIPEDA) (Minister of Justice, 2019) and the Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA) (Service Ontario, 2004) are the privacy laws that govern the storage and transfer of health information. These documents and the affiliated websites host valuable information that all counsellors should be familiar with.



Research into Online Therapy

Although a relatively new field, there are promising findings that video and text-based counselling are effective. Murphy and colleagues (2009) found that face-to-face and online counselling were not statistically different in outcome measures. Prado and Meyer (2004) showed that a positive working alliance through asynchronous communication is possible, and Barak, Hen, Boniel-Nissim, and Shapira (2008) discovered no difference in effectiveness between face-to-face and online counselling through a meta-analysis of 92 studies. Murphy supplemented that it is often the counsellors, not the clients, who perceive a weaker therapeutic alliance in an online environment. These results demonstrate that online services are a viable option for clients who may not have previously been able to access counselling.

Differences in the Online Environment

Although most elements of online counselling are similar to in-person counselling, there are some key differences.

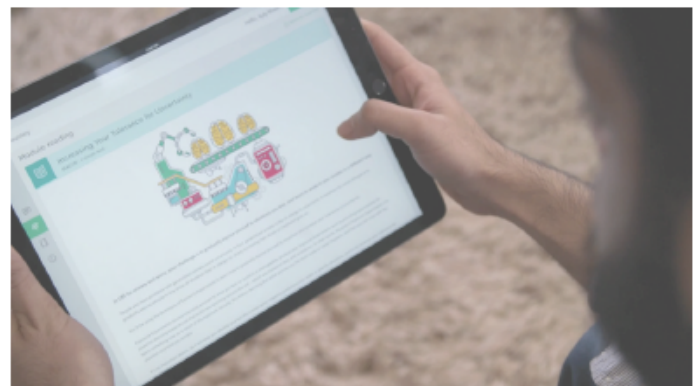
Client Expectations

Since the internet functions around the clock, counsellors should establish realistic expectations for where, when and in what circumstances counselling will be available. For example, would you offer counselling services if clients are on a bus? In a car? Driving? Working? Cooking dinner? How do you address these in session? Clients may also expect that we, as their provider, take responsibility for online safety, however, because there is less control of the client's environment, we must inform clients of their role in ensuring confidentiality and privacy.

Client Experiences

Clients may experience increased disinhibition and control of the environment. An online environment may be preferred for the relative anonymity of services, which may increase disinhibition and contribute to clients sharing more information more quickly.

Further, clients can end the session or control their experience of the session environment. For example, ending a session and walking away from the device is much different than walking out of an in-person session. Safety sensitive situations need to be managed differently and proactively, and resources and referrals must be location-specific to best serve the client.



Presence Techniques in Text Communication

By text it can be more difficult to communicate your tone, emotion, or understanding in the same way that you can in-person. Presence Techniques refer to phrasing aimed at providing the client with context and tone alongside the counsellor's words. Emotional bracketing occurs when the counsellor uses square brackets to identify the tone or the thoughts behind a comment. For example, "That sounds very difficult [said gently]". Descriptive immediacy aims to give visual images to support the client's understanding of the counsellor's reality. For example, a counsellor may describe their facial expressions in reaction to reading a phrase or may describe how they might engage with the client if they were meeting in-person (e.g., "My eyes widened with amazement as I read your description of the event – that must have been really difficult for you [said with softness and sincerity]). Both techniques provide information to the client so they may interpret the counsellor's words as intended and feel further connected to the counsellor.

Video Differences

In a video environment, you might be concerned with how you look and sound during the session. Complications with camera location, viewable background, and audio input may require adjustments to benefit the therapeutic relationship. For example, if you are sitting close to the camera and looking intently at the client's face on the screen, you might appear to be looking at their chest. Small adjustments in your physical distance from the screen could fix this issue.

Preparing for the Unexpected

Murphy posed "what if" questions to the audience to discuss potential inclusions in Policy and Procedure documents. He claimed the best way to prepare for the unexpected was to consider a variety of situations. For example, what if your client started a video call with someone else in the room? What if it was a partner? A friend? A child? What if your client is high risk during the session?

What if your client is in a public space when they are communicating with you? What if the technology fails or the client does not know how to use it? Answering these questions thoroughly will help you to establish a safe and ethical practice while preparing for client situations.

Summary

I would be remiss in sharing this information if I did not note Murphy's infectious excitement about online practice. True, there are many reasons to be cautious about online practice, but the main takeaway was: Online counselling is effective, convenient, and practical if counsellors are aware of the risks and attend to them thoroughly. If we, as counsellors, want to support a broader reach of clients, online practice may be the way to do it!

About the Author



Elise Meertens is a Registered Psychotherapist (Qualifying) and practices at Church Wellesley Counselling and Psychotherapy (www.cwcp.ca) and Parkside Counselling and Psychotherapy (www.pscp.ca) in Toronto. She has a strong interest in ethically and practically using technology in psychotherapy practice and chatting with others about the impact of technology on mental health.

