

BRIEF REPORT: Guidelines for Tele-psychotherapy Services for Clinical Psychologists Release and Online Session held on 17.4.2020

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in disruption of continued psychological services for our clients and as a barrier for persons seeking to engage with professional psychotherapy services. In this context, the Department of Clinical Psychology at NIMHANS, has taken the initiative to formulate *Guidelines for Tele-psychotherapy Services*, with sample consent forms, to be used by qualified clinical psychologists, as recognized by the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) and the Mental Health Care Act, 2017. These guidelines aim to standardization of competent and ethical tele-psychotherapy services in our country to benefit clients in need, while safeguarding their interests.

Version 1.0 of these guidelines were formulated after referring to a range of national and international practice guidelines for tele-psychology and tele-psychiatry. The contextual realities of the practice of psychotherapy in India have been considered in the preparation of these guidelines. The draft version of the guidelines was reviewed by faculty members in the Department of Clinical Psychology, and subsequently by a panel of senior Clinical Psychology professionals including former heads and psychotherapy coordinators from the department, the President of the Indian Association of Clinical Psychologists (IACP), as well as the Head of Telemedicine at NIMHANS.

ONLINE PANEL DISCUSSION AND RELEASE OF GUIDELINES

The Department of Clinical Psychology, NIMHANS, in collaboration with the Telemedicine Centre, NIMHANS, conducted an online panel discussion on *Tele-psychotherapy Services Guidelines for Clinical Psychologists* on 17th April, 2020, between 2.45 and 4.30 p.m.

Number of participants: About 210 participants including clinical psychologists from across the country. Dr. Kalpana Srivastava, President, Indian Association of Clinical Psychologists and several other senior Clinical Psychologists were in attendance of the session.

Introduction

Dr. Seema Mehrotra, Prof. & Head, Department of Clinical Psychology, NIMHANS, introduced the need for the guidelines to the participants, shared about the process of development and the plan to evolve new versions of the guidelines, as needed, based on experiences in the field. She moderated the online session and discussions.

Release of Guidelines

Dr. B. N. Gangadhar, Director, NIMHANS, released the guidelines and addressed the participants. He highlighted the context in which these guidelines were developed, and their particular relevance and applicability in the current situation. He drew parallels to similar guidelines such as those developed for telemedicine in the country. He hoped for utilization, accumulation of experience and wide acceptance of these practice guidelines by clinical psychologists across the country as well as potential adoption of these guidelines by the Rehabilitation Council of India.

Presentation

Dr. Poornima Bhola, Additional Prof. & Psychotherapy Coordinator, Department of Clinical Psychology, NIMHANS and Dr. Nithya Poornima, Assistant Professor and Joint Psychotherapy Coordinator, presented the guidelines and discussed tele-psychotherapy practice issues.

Interactive session

The session provided an overview of the key aspects of tele-psychotherapy practice that needed to be considered by Clinical Psychologists. There was active participation from the attendees, who raised several queries related to clinical, ethical and legal aspects of tele-psychotherapy practice. The interactive session was handled by a panel that included Prof. Seema Mehrotra, Dr. Poornima Bhola, Dr. Nithya Poornima and Prof. Suresh Bada Math, Head of Telemedicine and Legal Aid Clinic, NIMHANS. Dr. Thomas Kishore and Prof. Paulomi Sudhir, Department of Clinical Psychology, actively supported and managed the participant queries through the chat function.

Queries were related to recording of sessions, client access to therapy records, dealing with emergencies that surface during the session, special considerations in working with children, the use of therapist judgment and discretion in selection of suitable clients, legal implications in situations involving suicidality and doubts about privacy being maintained.

Several participants have already requested for the guidelines and have expressed their enthusiasm in using the same. Participants have also sent further queries to telepsychotherapy.nimhans@gmail.com, an email created for furthering communication regarding these practice guidelines. Immense positive feedback was received, along with requests for continued sessions on this topic.

Future Plan

- To *disseminate* the guidelines within the professional community of clinical psychologists in India, through placement on the NIMHANS website, Telemedicine website, via email and other relevant means.
- To conduct *online sessions* for sharing information about the guidelines, addressing queries regarding their use and obtaining continuous feedback from clinical psychologists.
- To prepare an FAQ document to address common queries about tele-psychotherapy practice.
- To create an *email list of clinical psychologists* who have expressed interest in updates and future training.
- To release *iterations* of version 1.0 of the guidelines with modifications and expansions, as and when required.
- To engage with the *Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI)* and discuss the provision of accredited training in tele-psychotherapy practice for clinical psychologists in the country.