

Engaging Telepractice in your Occupational Therapy Practice

Considerations for attention
during the COVID-19 pandemic



Ontario Society of
Occupational Therapists

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April 2020

Introduction

Telemedicine, or telepractice, is rapidly increasing in frequency with the COVID-19 pandemic. Telepractice is providing healthcare service by telephone or web-based platforms. The Government has recommended social distancing and telepractice is a way to continue with healthcare provision while respecting the government's direction and client and therapist health and safety. Here is some information and resources to help you in determining if telepractice is right for you and your client.

College Resources

The College of Occupational Therapists of Ontario (COTO) has a [webpage](#) devoted to COVID-19 and occupational therapists are recommended to visit it regularly to get updated resources and direction.

As of March 20, 2020, COTO recommended that **“occupational therapists review all the direct client services...to determine if or how they can be provided safely.”** COTO has provided a [list of considerations](#) to help occupational therapists determine if they should continue care and in what form that should take place. Some occupational therapists are able to provide services through telepractice.

COTO has published [Guidelines for Telepractice in Occupational Therapy](#) which outline considerations when moving to telephone or web-based healthcare delivery.

Investigate the College requirements if you are providing telepractice services outside of Ontario. Other provinces, countries, etc., may require you to be registered with them if you are providing services to residents of their jurisdiction.

Determining Risk

When considering if you should move to telepractice, there are 2 types of risk you need to consider:

1. Client Risk:

Determine if your client requires services at this time. Consider:

- Is your client at risk of social isolation?
- Is your client able to access food, medications, etc.?
- Does your client have a variable condition which could deteriorate quickly?
- Are there other caregivers available (this can be family, friends, PSW, other health professionals, etc.)?
- Are your services addressing safety issues identified previously (e.g. risk of falls)?
- If services are not provided, would your client be at risk of falls or incidents (consider physical and mental health risks) that could result in a visit to the ER or hospitalization?
- Can your client be well-served by telepractice options or would their situation, and the essential services they need, be best served by an in-person visit for which all appropriate precautions can be taken?

2. Telepractice Risk:

Determine if using telepractice would create any risk to the client, their personal health information, or yourself (in terms of quality of service provided). Consider:

- Are you competent at providing services through telepractice? Do you have the skills and training? Can you invest the time to develop these skills? Do you need to modify your practice to ensure you are still providing quality care? Can you practice and still comply with College Standards?
- Are you able to use a telepractice system that ensures client confidentiality and privacy? (see below)
- Is your client able to use telepractice technology? Would they require assistance at home to manage the technology? Would their physical, cognitive, or mental health status impact their ability to use a technology platform?
- Does the client's environment support delivery of services in a confidential, private manner? Will others be in the room?
- Does your environment support telepractice that is respectful of privacy, confidentiality, and best practice? Can you be in a private, non-distracting environment?
- Determine the safest and most effective way of interacting with your client.
- Ensure your liability insurance provider will cover telepractice. (OSOT's Professional Liability Insurance Policy extends coverage to telepractice for the delivery of occupational therapy services by registered occupational therapists).

Once you consider these, you may use clinical reasoning to determine the benefits outweigh the risks. If so, you may need to consider the services you provide (you may not be able to provide all services or may need to adapt some practices for your remote interaction).

Modifying Practice to Meet Demand and Client Needs

What happens when you are asked to modify your practice that may require you to deviate from COTO's Standards of Practice? Remember, COTO works to ensure the public is safe. In unique situations, such as we are experiencing with the COVID-19 pandemic and State of Emergency, ensuring the public is safe may mean that some practices may need to be altered in the clients' best interest. The ideal may not be possible, but the best possible might be in the best interest of the client. All regulated health professionals are required to identify and weigh the risks on both sides of this issue. Identify your options and apply your clinical reasoning to determine your approach. Consider:

- What is in the best interest of the client?
- What is the risk to the client in each of your practice approach options?
- What is the best way to ensure reduced risk to your client, yourself, and other clients?
- Weigh the benefits and risks to each option.
- What other resources do you have available?
- Would you be justified, and be acting in the client's best interest, to take reasonable steps to reduce the risk even if you are deviating from a Standard of Practice? Is your client aware of, and consent to, the risks and benefits associated with this modification?

If you determine that you are able to minimize risks and that the benefits outweigh those risks, then you can approach your client with the option. You would need to ensure your client is informed about both the potential risks and benefits and consents to proceed. Document consent, your rationale, along with the other options you considered and why they were not possible. Continually re-evaluate the situation

to determine if anything has changed and check with your client to ensure they still consent to your service.

Considerations for Telepractice

- Are you working in a space that is shared (e.g. home with children)? If so, what are the risks of information being overheard by others? How can you reduce/eliminate the risk (see below)?
- Consider the lighting in your workspace and that of your client's so as to ensure best ability to utilize video functionality.
- Is the client end secure? Are there other people around the client that the client may not consent to hearing their personal information?
- Do you, and the client, know how to use the system competently? Do you need to develop orientation materials and instructions that can be forwarded to your client?
- Is the internet or cellular access reliable? In your area? In your client's area?
- Is there a back-up plan should issues arise such as loss of internet service (e.g. a telephone number to use)?
- Do you need support or advice from a technology specialist?
- Does the client have access to the technology supports necessary – computer, webcam, or built in camera, functional speakers?
- Are you and your patient using a password-protected, secure internet connection, not public or unsecured WiFi?
- Before you begin:
 - Review and obtain consent for using telepractice
 - Discuss payment – ensure the funder will cover care delivered by telepractice
 - What is the role of parents or caregivers – ensure they will be available.

Selecting a Telepractice Platform

When identifying a telepractice platform, consider the following:

- What way would you like to communicate with the client - by telephone, smartphone, or web-based (online/computer)?
- Do you need to see the client or is a conversation (only) appropriate?
- Does the system or platform sufficiently secure client information?
- What are the risks and benefits of using the platform? Do the benefits outweigh the risks?
- Will you be able to safely complete your services or will you need to modify your practice depending on which system/method of telepractice you choose?

- For web-based/online systems:
 - Is the system encrypted or compliant with PHIPPA?
 - If not, consider ways to secure client information (e.g. use initials or non-identifying information only)
 - How is information transmitted, processed, and stored?
 - How complex/user friendly is the platform? Will clients be able to manage independently? Do you, and the client, know how to use the system competently?
 - Are there any risks associated with its use? If so, your client needs to be made aware of them and provide consent to proceed. Clients can choose to accept risk but they need to have all the information to help them make their decision to consent or not.
 - Does the platform offer orientation materials/webinars and technical support should you need it?
 - Can you speak to a representative to help you assess the option?
- For telephone/smart phones:
 - What access does your client have?
 - How secure are your conversations? Are they listening in a hands-free mode?
 - Are volumes adjustable?

Platforms to consider

Although the following platforms indicate they are compliant to HIPPA and/or PHIPPA legislation it is up to the individual occupational therapist to verify it meets requirements and/or your client understands the risks to using the platform and provides consent to its use. This is not an exhaustive list and systems change regularly so you are responsible for selecting and maintaining your system appropriately. OSOT does not recommend nor endorse any of these platforms and suggest that you research any platform prior to its use.

- [Zoom Healthcare](#): indicates it is PHIPPA, PIPEDA, and HIPPA compliant. Is \$200 per month with the option for added savings with an annual plan. Zoom offers other solutions, including a free version, however, it does not meet privacy requirements.
[Ministry of Health Advisory and Tips for Safe Use of Zoom Platform](#)
- [Ontario Telehealth Network \(OTN\)](#): For-profit healthcare provider/organization is \$875/year + \$175 set-up fee. Not-for-profit (more than 50% of your base funding comes from MOHLTC, LHIN, or OHIP) this is complimentary. **NOTE**: OTN offers registered occupational therapists discounted rates (approx. 17% savings) and waives the set-up fee.
- [Nous Talk](#): Indicates compliance. You need to contact the company directly for rates.
- [On Call Health](#): Indicates compliance. You need to contact the company directly for rates.
- [Doxy.Me](#): Indicates compliance. Free with option to purchase upgrades.
- [Jane](#) – a Canadian company that provides web-based practice options that integrates scheduling, documentation, invoicing, etc. Secure and HIPPA compliant. Packages from \$74/month.
- Some other health professions such as physicians, [have created lists of platforms](#).
- [Adracare](#): Indicates compliance with PHIPPA, PIPEDA and HIPPA. Includes additional features such as charting, scheduling and reminders. Different plans starting at \$14/month.

Considerations when working from home

No matter what system/method of telepractice you use, you need to take steps to minimize the chance of a privacy breach. With many OTs working from home (with others present) you need to take reasonable measures to prevent client information from being observed. Consider:

- Using a headset to reduce others from hearing confidential information.
- If a camera is used, try to ensure your screen is concealed/protected from others' view. There are privacy screen protectors that reduce others' ability to see the visual on your screen, or position the screen in such a way that others can't see it.
- Any unauthorized access to private information is required to be reported to the Information and Privacy Commissioner of Ontario in an annual report – see [what your obligations are](#).
- Be aware of who is present on the client's side and ensure confidentiality.

Funding for Telepractice Services

Occupational therapists are advised to consult their funding agency to confirm payment options for telepractice services. To facilitate access to services at this time of pandemic, Ontario funders (home care, mental health organizations, WSIB, auto insurers, Veterans Affairs (mental health)) are largely supportive of telepractice options and are working to determine funding and payment rates.

Occupational therapists who work privately are advised to suggest that clients check with their extended health insurer to determine funding. To date, Sun Life has announced [coverage for virtual care occupational therapy services](#).

Resources

[Adopting and Integrating Virtual Visits into Care: Draft Clinical Guidance for Health Care Providers in Ontario](#), Ontario Health Quality

[Tele-Rehabilitation in Times of COVID-19](#) Canadian Physiotherapy Association

[Information on COVID-19](#) College of Occupational Therapists of Ontario

OSOT Archived Webinar: [E-Therapy for OTs Practicing Psychotherapy](#) – presented by Sandra Carter OT Reg. (Ont.) (COTO) and Carrie Anne Marshall (PhD, OT Reg.(Ont.), and Lisa Brousseau MSW.

COMPLIMENTARY until April 30, 2020.

Reviews delivery of e-therapy including psychotherapy. Has helpful tips for telepractice in general.

[Telehealth Occupational Therapy: What you need to Know \(March 19, 2020\)](#) – An American blog with some basic tips and platforms to support OT services.

[Security Practices Checklist- Electronic Practice. March 2019](#) - College of Psychotherapists of Ontario

[Information and Privacy Commissioner of Ontario](#)