



An Introduction to APA's Telepsychology Guidelines

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On July 31, 2013, at the American Psychological Association's Annual Convention, APA's Council of Representatives approved the Guidelines for the Practice of Telepsychology. These guidelines were developed by representatives from APA, the Association of State and Provincial Psychology Boards (ASPPB) and the APA Insurance Trust (APAIT). The guidelines will be published in the *American Psychologist*, but they can currently be downloaded at: <http://www.apapracticecentral.org/ce/guidelines/telepsychology-guidelines.pdf>.

The Joint Task Force wanted to distinguish these guidelines as applicable specifically to psychological services. The guidelines provide education and information in regard to the current standards of professional practice and are expected to be read and understood *prior* to psychologists providing telepsychological services. They pertain to telephone, Internet based, and video based provision of services. They also include mobile devices, email, chat, text, and websites, blogs, and social media. They may also include words, images, or recorded audio and visual data.

The guidelines include clients' increased need for access to services, particularly for people who experience geographic challenges, those who have medical or psychiatric conditions for which there is not a local specialist, and those who have financial constraints or other barriers to in-person psychological services. Other state and international associations have begun the process of developing such guidelines.

Eight guidelines are provided, with a strong focus on clinician knowledge and competence when using technology and the need for those receiving services to fully comprehend the risks involved, including the potential loss of security and confidentiality inherent with use of some technologies. For each guideline, the Rationale is provided, along with a description of the Application guidelines (APA, 2013).

Guideline 1: Psychologists who provide telepsychology services strive to take reasonable steps to ensure their competence with both the technologies used and the potential impact of the technologies on clients/patients, supervisees or other professionals.

Guideline 2: Psychologists make every effort to ensure that ethical and professional standards of care and practice are met at the outset and throughout the duration of the telepsychology services they provide.

Guideline 3: Psychologists strive to obtain and document informed consent that specifically addresses the unique concerns related to the telepsychology services they provide. When doing so, psychologists are cognizant of the applicable laws and regulations, as well as organizational requirements that govern informed consent in this area.

Guideline 4: Psychologists who provide telepsychology services make reasonable effort to protect and maintain the confidentiality of the data and information relating to their clients/patients and inform them of the potentially increased risks to loss of confidentiality inherent in the use of the telecommunication technologies, if any.

Guideline 5: Psychologists who provide telepsychology services take reasonable steps to ensure that security measures are in place to protect data and information related to their clients/patients from unintended access or disclosure.

Guideline 6: Psychologists who provide telepsychology services make reasonable efforts to dispose of data and information and the technologies used in a manner that facilitates protection from unauthorized access and accounts for safe and appropriate disposal.

Guideline 7: Psychologists are encouraged to consider issues that arise with test instruments and assessment approaches designed for in-person implementation when providing telepsychology services.

Guideline 8: Psychologists are encouraged to be familiar with and comply with all relevant laws and regulations when providing telepsychology services across jurisdictional and international borders.

The guidelines conclude with a statement that technology is likely to change quickly, and therefore, these guidelines cannot be inclusive of all potential changes and cannot take precedence over clinical judgment.

Many practitioners have been forging ahead without formal guidelines. In addition, many consultation calls to my practice and to the CPA Ethics Committee are related to the legal and ethical aspects of providing telepsychology services. Such questions also commonly are posted to professional listservs. Practitioners are looking for guidance and their clients are also requesting these services. Some clients seek temporary telepsychology services from their regular provider when they are traveling, while other clients seek out specialists in other jurisdictions because they cannot find a culturally competent provider in their area. Therefore, it is exciting and timely to see the release of these guidelines. □

References

American Psychological Association. (2013). Guidelines for the Practice of Telepsychology. Retrieved from <http://www.apapracticecentral.org/ce/guidelines/telepsychology-guidelines.pdf>.

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