

Recommendations for Psychoanalysts Regarding the Use of Videoconferencing in their Practice

The International Psychoanalytical Association is working to support members so we can treat our patients and ourselves safely and effectively during the COVID-19 Virus Pandemic. Not only is there increased anxiety at this extraordinary time, but many sources are encouraging people to stay at home. For mental health practitioners, this may mean, in some cases, treating patients remotely. The IPA offers the following technical assistance to help psychoanalysts consider how they might approach remote sessions from a technological perspective.

Can We Offer Telehealth to All Our Patients?

“Analysts working with any form of remote analysis should not assume that all patients are able to sustain it. For example, patients who have suffered early separation and severe trauma may not be indicated for this approach. As we know - new areas opening up to psychoanalysis often are areas where people have suffered major historical traumas. It follows that it is important to evaluate whether the analysis is clinically or ethically counter-indicated. The initial interviews become crucial in this respect. They should allow a careful evaluation of the psychic functioning of the person and of his/her defensive system.” Please refer to the IPA Practice Note on the Use of Telephone and/or VoIP Technologies in Analysis:

www.ipa.world/IPA/en/IPA1/Procedural_Code/Practice_Notes/ON_THE_USE_OF_SKYPE_TELEPHONE_OR_OTHER_VOIP_TECHNOLOGIES_IN_ANALYSIS.aspx

About Confidentiality

Not all countries have the same legal regulations. We encourage all members to find out about your local regulations and your patient’s local regulations. For instance, in the United States, a service that provides documentation of confidentiality is required. Some telehealth services can provide such documentation. This is called a BAA (Business Associate Agreement). To learn more about confidentiality, please refer to the Report of the IPA Confidentiality Committee:

[https://www.ipa.world/IPA_DOCS/Report%20of%20the%20IPA%20Confidentiality%20Committee%20\(English\).pdf](https://www.ipa.world/IPA_DOCS/Report%20of%20the%20IPA%20Confidentiality%20Committee%20(English).pdf)

What is HIPAA-BAA Compliance?

The HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) is US legislation that provides security provisions to keep patients' information safe. HIPAA regulations have been a cornerstone for setting and raising security standards in healthcare, and telehealth technologies make it easier for health organizations and professionals to remain compliant. You will find at the end of this document a list of some popular HIPAA-BAA compliant telehealth services.

Remote analysis takes place in a setting that may be less private, secure, more unpredictable and more easily disrupted. The IPA wants to underline the impact that a different setting may have on the containing and interpretative function of analysts who are faced with situations for which they had little or no training or clinical discussions.

General Guidelines for Psychoanalysts Considering the uses of Video Conferencing

Prepare with your Patient

It is important to spend time with your patient discussing the modified setting. Make sure to talk about the new schedule if applicable, duration of the session, who will call whom, what technology you are going to use to video-conference, a Plan B if the Wi-Fi fails and electronic payments when applicable. Most of the technological recommendations apply to your patient as well. You should talk about these with them when possible, keeping in mind that while we are responsible for managing our own technical environment, our patient has the right to follow, or not follow, our recommendations. As always, we can only invite associations, offer interpretations, and do our best to contain our patient's anxiety.

About Your Wi-Fi Connection

It is recommended to use a wired connection (LAN cable) connected directly to your computer instead of wireless Wi-Fi for a more stable connection during a video call. If using a cable is not an option, try moving your device closer to the Wi-Fi hotspot or router. You may need to consider upgrading your Internet bandwidth service for a better video experience--and remember to pay your Wi-Fi and cellphone service on time. Some members with 5G cell phones have reported that these have better connectivity than using Wi-Fi. If an unknown technical issue occurs when you are connected, disconnect and try dialing in again to see if the connection improves.



Choose a Quiet, Secure, Private, and Comfortable Environment if Possible

If you're not connecting from your office, make sure you're in a place you won't be interrupted. This seems obvious, but we often forget about dogs barking, voices of family members, and other common background noises. You may want to lock your door to avoid people coming in and out while you are on a call. You may also wish to use a headset to block out background noise yourself. Pets and children are natural distractors. Expect the unexpected. Sounds and interruptions on both ours and the patient's end are common. Remember we are sharing the same virtual sound environment as our patient. Please do your best to always meet from the same place during this period of time, although that is not always possible.

Lighting, Video, and the Couch

Make sure your room is lit well enough for your face to be seen clearly during the call. LED dimmable lights are recommended because they keep your working area cooler and you can adapt brightness for day or night conditions. Make sure not to have a window or strong light behind you as this will cause your face to be in shadow. Ensure the background is as neutral as possible, keeping in mind that any decoration will inevitably trigger phantasy. You might consider centering yourself in the middle of the video frame with your head nearly touching the top of the frame. If possible, set your camera to include your upper body. Mind that body language and facial expressions communicate a lot especially if you were using the couch before moving online. Some patients that lie down on a couch might prefer not to see the analyst during the remote session. They can do this by turning off the video option or by placing the device/ video screen in a position in which they cannot see it. The risk of doing this is that if the connection suddenly fails, the patient may not be aware of this situation and will continue talking.



Keep your Screen in a Fixed Position

If you are using a laptop or computer this won't be a problem. When using tablets or smartphones, it is recommended to keep them in a fixed position. You may consider acquiring an adjustable table stand for your tablets/cellphones. Some analysts working with young patients or with patients with a different cultural background, or using a second language to communicate with their analyst, will find it useful to have a dry-erase board near to write down words, etc., and hold the board up to the camera. If you opt to do this, be aware that the image may appear reversed to your patient. To remedy this, some telehealth services offer the Disable Mirror Effect option.



Audio

The built-in mic and speakers on your computer or mobile device might not pick up your audio as clearly as a headset. If possible, use a USB headset plugged into your computer, or headphones with a mic plugged into your mobile device. To protect your patients' privacy, you may advise them to use headphones so that your voice will not be overheard by others.



Do a Test Call to Practice and Make Sure Everything Works

It is advisable to test your equipment in advance. If you are new to these technologies, ask a colleague, family member, or friend to practice with you. Familiarize yourself with how to receive or start a call. Know where the video and audio settings are located. Try to see your screen from your patient's perspective beforehand.

Dress as Normal - With Some Considerations

Try to avoid distracting colors or using huge headsets. Wearing clothing with complicated patterns uses more bandwidth and may affect your video quality. You never know if you're going to have to get up suddenly or whether the camera might move or fall. Wear professional clothing for your video calls. If you use glasses, be aware that your computer or cellphone screen might be reflected on your glasses' surface and perceived by your patient.

Digital Distractors

Turn off or put to sleep all devices other than the one you are using to make the call, including watches, laptops, tablets, and other phones. If using a smartphone or computer, do your best to quit from all programs other than the one you are using and turn off all notifications if you can. If you are using audio-only be sure to put your phone screen-side down to avoid being distracted. If using a smartphone, there is always the possibility of having an incoming call. Disconnect your cell service if possible, leaving your Internet service on.

A Plan-B is Always Welcome

Sometimes the patient's Wi-Fi may fail, or ours. Talk about this possibility with your patient and discuss a Plan-B to address the problem. Using text messages as backup is useful. Many members in the Latin-America and Europe regions are using WhatsApp in their cell-phones. Some members are using WeChat. Both are convenient but be aware that if you plan to use instant messages, some of these applications require the

disclosure of your cell phone number and these messages are not HIPAA-BAA compliant.

What Video-Conference Technology Should We Use?

As mentioned before, HIPAA compliance is specific to the US but assures confidentiality. There are some options for those who want to provide a HIPAA-BAA compliant telehealth service for their patients. Skype and Facetime are popular. Unfortunately, none of these services appears to be HIPAA-BAA compliant. Other services being used by some members follow. Bear in mind there are many others. We are not endorsing the use of any particular application and some of these companies might be overwhelmed with the increased demand for services.

- Doxy.Me has a free HIPAA-BAA service.
<https://doxy.me/>
- thera-LINK has paid plans that are HIPAA-BAA compliant.
<https://www.thera-link.com/pricing/>
- VSee has a free HIPAA-BAA service.
<https://vsee.com/hipaa>
- Zoom has paid plans that are HIPAA-BAA compliant (10 licenses/\$200). They also offer free non-HIPAA-BAA accounts.
<https://zoom.us/healthcare>

As we all know, the situation is evolving constantly and we will be updating the contents of this paper appropriately. We are all in this together – and we will get through this, together.

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References:

- International Psychoanalytical Association
On the use of Skype, Telephone, and Other Remote technologies in Analysis:
https://www.ipa.world/IPA/en/IPA1/Procedural_Code/Practice_Notes/ON_THE_USE_OF_SKYPE_TELEPHONE_OR_OTHER_VOIP_TECHNOLOGIES_IN_ANALYSIS.aspx

Report of the IPA Confidentiality Committee:
[https://www.ipa.world/IPA_DOCS/Report%20of%20the%20IPA%20Confidentiality%20Committee%20\(English\).pdf](https://www.ipa.world/IPA_DOCS/Report%20of%20the%20IPA%20Confidentiality%20Committee%20(English).pdf)
- American Psychoanalytic Association
Remote Session Guidelines for Periods of Restricted Travel.
Todd Essig, Ph.D. and Gillian Isaacs Russell, Ph.D.
- American Psychological Association
https://www.apaservices.org/practice/news/covid19-psychology-services-protection?_ga=2.225111194.1021279784.1584297433-1239352084.1583853002