

TELEHEALTH SAFETY RISKS AND PLANNING

Safety planning is an essential component of competent and ethical telehealth practice. Safety planning involves identifying steps and procedures for addressing situations that present a risk to the safety of clients and others during the course of telehealth services. There is no evidence that telehealth is less safe than traditional in-office services when sessions are conducted using evidence-based protocols.

Safety Risks

The primary safety issues encountered during telehealth sessions are generally the same as those in office settings. These risks may include client harm to self or others; worsening of symptoms that may contribute to suicidal ideation or other heightened risk; and medical emergencies that could occur during a session. A client might also disclose that she/he recently experienced an injury but chose not to pursue medical attention.

Access to firearms should be considered when assessing the appropriateness of telehealth services, including firearm ownership. Access to firearms is a particular risk if a client is known to have a history of violent behavior toward self or others.

Telehealth professionals should take additional safety precautions when working with victims of domestic violence by asking the client if the abuser is on site and if the client is able to speak privately.

Safety Planning

Safety plans are the written steps for carrying out safety procedures and emergency protocols during emergency situations. Safety planning is an ongoing process, with risk assessment completed during each session. Key considerations and actions to consider when developing a safety plan:

- Review procedures for screening/assessing clients before initiating telehealth.
- Consult with the referring provider or on-site staff, if applicable.
- Review client history, including a history of violence or self-harm.
- Assess firearms safety.
- Establish back-up communication (e.g., mobile phone call) in case of disrupted Internet connection.
- Review safety plan and expectations with client.
- Identify and document local resources, including collateral support and contacts for local emergency response.
- Request client's physical location in the event emergency services or referrals are needed.