

Developing Telepsychology Guidelines for a State Psychological Association  
Ohio Psychological Association  
<http://www.ohpsych.org>  
APA Convention August 15, 2008

**What is telepsychology?**

“Telepsychology is the provision of non-face-to-face psychological services by distance communication technology such as telephone, e-mail, chat and videoconferencing.”

**Mission**

“to propose a set of flexible and workable guidelines that can be applied by psychologists when providing telepsychology... they are intended to be applicable to any psychological services provided using communication technology.”

State or national guidelines for applying the American Psychological Association (APA) ethical standards when using communication technology do not currently exist.

**Guidelines development process**

- Literature and Internet search of relevant telehealth guidelines and standards including American Psychological Association.
- Identify areas of APA Code of Ethics needing telepsychology guidelines
- Develop draft guidelines and supportive reference documentation
- Submit draft to state association board for feedback
- Submit revised draft to state association membership and other interested parties for feedback
- Review feedback and submit draft to state association board for review and approval.

**Telepsychology Guidelines**  
**Ohio Psychological Association**  
**Adopted April 12, 2008**

The APA and other professional organizations have previously identified many of the issues addressed in these guidelines. These issues are identified in endnotes and documents listed in the References section. It is suggested that these telepsychology guidelines be read in conjunction with the APA Code of Ethics. There is some intentional redundancy between the guidelines and the APA Code of Ethics standards to emphasize the application of those standards when practicing telepsychology.

**1. The Appropriate Use of Telepsychology**

Psychologists recognize that telepsychology is not appropriate for all problems and that the specific process of providing professional services varies across situation, setting, and time, and decisions regarding the appropriate delivery of telepsychology services are made on a case-by-case basis. Psychologists have the necessary training, experience, and skills to provide the type of telepsychology that they provide.<sup>10</sup> They also can adequately assess whether involved participants have the necessary knowledge and skills to benefit from those services. If the psychologist determines that telepsychology is not appropriate, they inform those involved of appropriate alternatives.<sup>11</sup>

**2. Legal and Ethical Requirements**

Psychologists assure that the provision of telepsychology is not legally prohibited by local or state laws and regulations (supplements APA Ethics Code Sec. 1.02). Psychologists are aware of and in compliance with the Ohio psychology licensure law (Ohio Revised Code Chapter 4732) and the Ohio State Board of Psychology “Rules Governing Psychologists and School Psychologists” promulgated in the Ohio Administrative Code.

Psychologists are aware of and in compliance with the laws and standards of the particular state or country in which the client resides, including requirements for reporting individuals at risk to themselves or others (supplements APA Ethics Code Sec. 2.01). This step includes compliance with Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act to make

technology accessible to people with disabilities,<sup>112</sup> as well as assuring that any advertising related to telepsychology services is non-deceptive (supplements APA Ethics Code Sec. 5.01).

### **3. Informed Consent and Disclosure**

Psychologists using telepsychology provide information about their use of electronic communication technology and obtain the informed consent of the involved individual using language that is likely to be understood and consistent with accepted professional and legal requirements. In the event that a psychologist is providing services for someone who is unable to provide consent for him or herself (including minors), additional measures are taken to ensure that appropriate consent (and assent where applicable) are obtained as needed. Levels of experience and training in telepsychology, if any, are explained (though few opportunities for such training exist at this time) and the client's informed consent is secured (supplements APA Ethics Code Sec.3.10).<sup>13</sup>

As part of an informed consent process, clients are provided sufficient information about the limitations of using technology, including potential risks to confidentiality of information due to technology, as well as any legally-required reporting, such as reporting clinical clients who may be suicidal or homicidal.<sup>14</sup> This disclosure includes information identifying telepsychology as innovative treatment (supplements APA Ethical Principles 10.01b). Clients are expected to provide written acknowledgement of their awareness of these limitations. Psychologists do not provide telepsychology services without written client consent. Psychologists make reasonable attempts to verify the identity of clients<sup>15</sup> and to help assure that the clients are capable of providing informed consent (supplements APA Ethics Code Sec. 3.10).<sup>16</sup>

When providing clinical services, psychologists make reasonable attempts to obtain information about alternative means of contacting clients and provide clients with an alternative means of contacting them in emergency situations or when telepsychology is not available.<sup>17</sup>

Psychologists inform clients about potential risks of disruption in the use telepsychology, clearly state their policies as to when they will respond to routine electronic messages, and in what circumstances they will use alternative communications for emergency situations.<sup>18</sup> Given the twenty-four-hour, seven-day-a-week availability of an online environment, as well as the inclination of increased disclosure online, clinical clients may be more likely to disclose suicidal intentions and assume that the psychologist will respond quickly (supplements APA Ethics Code Sec. 4.05).

### **4. Secure Communications/Electronic Transfer of Client Information**

Psychologists, whenever feasible, use secure communications with clinical clients, such as encrypted text messages via e-mail or secure websites and obtain consent for use of non-secured communications.<sup>19</sup> Non-secure communications avoid using personal identifying information.<sup>20</sup> Considering the available technology, psychologists make reasonable efforts to ensure the confidentiality of information electronically transmitted to other parties.

### **5. Access to and Storage of Communications**

Psychologists inform clients about who else may have access to communications with the psychologist, how communications can be directed to a specific psychologist, and if and how psychologists store information.<sup>21</sup> Psychologists take steps to ensure that confidential information obtained and or stored electronically cannot be recovered and accessed by unauthorized persons when they dispose of computers and other information storage devices.<sup>22</sup> Clinical clients are informed of the types of information that will be maintained as part of the client's record.<sup>23</sup>

### **6. Fees and Financial Arrangements**

As with other professional services, psychologists and clients reach an agreement specifying compensation, billing, and payment arrangements prior to providing telepsychology services (supplements APA Ethics Code Sec. 6.01).

### **8. Expiration and Review Date**

These guidelines will expire in five years after their formal adoption unless reauthorized or replaced prior to that date.

## Standards and Guidelines Relevant to Telepsychology

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