

# Ethics in Telehealth

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As sport and exercise psychology (SEP) practitioners try to keep up with technological advancements in society and the needs of their clients, they are increasingly likely to utilize technology in their practices. While the integration of technology in one's practice has the potential to provide many benefits to service, there are also many concerns associated with its use. This article, which is closely linked to a chapter currently being written by two of the authors (Watson, Schinke & Sampson, 2011), will attempt to briefly outline these potential benefits and concerns, and provide some basic guidance for integrating technology into one's practice.



## **Benefits and Concerns of Using Technology**

The potential benefits of using technology in applied sport and exercise psychology include the improved efficiency, scope, and quality of services that can be provided to clients. Clients have more access to practitioners who utilize technology (i.e., clients who live in rural locations, are traveling, have disabilities, or would like to see an expert who is not located near them). This communication may also be more cost effective, anonymous, and allow clients and practitioners additional time to consider and formulate their responses. Offsetting these benefits, the primary concerns related to

teletherapy involve ethical issues and questions about the quality of services (Bloom & Sampson, 1998). Ethically and legally, the major concerns often involve confidentiality, relationship development, communication competency, and credentialing across state and provincial lines.



## **Today's Clients**

Young people are often very attached to technology, having grown up with multiple forms of technology (e.g., computers, the Internet, cell phones/texting). In many cases, these individuals have become dependent upon technology and expect to have information constantly at their disposal. As these clients compete in sports, they have also become accustomed to traveling a great deal, and having hectic lives when they are home. They trust and rely on technology, and do not have many of the same concerns about technology as older practitioners might.



## **Legal, Ethical, and Practical Issues**

To date, the ethics codes created by the American Psychological Association (2002) and the Association for Applied Sport Psychology (1996) have included little guidance specifically directed at the work of SEP consultants with regard to the use of the Internet and other forms of distance technology. Subsequently,

you will find a summary of some of the legal and ethical issues that have emerged with regard to teletherapy, in addition to suggestions for addressing these issues in an ethical manner.



## **Legal Issues**

The primary legal issues affecting the provision of sport psychology services from a distance include insurance and cross-boundary certification/licensure. Practitioners should always take steps to check their liability policies with regard to information about services provided in non-traditional settings. In short, practitioners should ensure that they are covered against a case that is filed against them for services that they provide from a distance. Further, practitioners should check appropriate laws related to practicing in states/territories/provinces other than where they are licensed (Barnett, 2005).



## **Ethical Issues**

Many ethical concerns exist in relation to the provision of sport psychology services from a distance. While these ethical concerns include issues such as marketing, selection of resources, record keeping, intake information, and informed consent and disclosure, due to space restrictions, the authors will focus on confidentiality and only a few of the less-discussed but still important issues.

**Confidentiality.** Issues related to confidentiality are the most commonly cited with regard to teletherapy. Practitioners should take steps to maintain the confidentiality of their clients. While none of these protections are absolute, potential protections include the use of encryption software and the use of firewall protections. Further, practitioners should discuss the limits of confidentiality in teletherapy with their clients as a part of the informed consent process.

**Appropriate use of services.** Not all clients should be considered good candidates to receive services from a distance and with non-traditional technologies. Decisions about which clients to consult with via teletherapy should be made based upon factors such as the presenting concerns, setting, and circumstances (Ohio Psychological Association, 2010). For example, clients who have limited background with technology, or difficulty communicating effectively, may not be good candidates for consultations conducted from a distance.

**Competency.** When making decisions about consulting from a distance, consultants should consider both their ability to understand and effectively use the technology, as well as their ability to communicate effectively through the technology. Within the first consideration, practitioners should ensure that they have the training and/or support needed to use the technology effectively. Further, practitioners should ensure that they understand how to communicate effectively with clients using methods of communication other than those with which they were trained. Practitioners should be aware that distance consultations are not the same as traditional in-person consultations. It is essential that they understand how to modify their practice within these consultations, should consider receiving additional training, and base such consultation modifications on empirically based suggestions.

**Personal presence on the web.** SEP practitioners should be aware

that clients could find out a great deal about them via the Internet. Social networking resources now make the personal lives of practitioners very easy to access. Practitioners need to be cautious about how these and other sites are used in their practices and what information is available to clients. Information that was once considered private is now public when found on the Internet, and can be used by others to form an opinion about you (Behnke, 2008).



## Conclusion

SEP practitioners who use technology must take steps to ensure that they are providing the best quality services while remaining ethical in this new age of practice. At present, ethical guidelines do not exist to direct the teletherapy related services of SEP practitioners. Herein, the authors provide a very short overview of some of the important issues to consider when consulting with clients from a distance. Many references exist to help SEP practitioners better understand the complex issues that affect distance consultations. The Ohio Psychological Association's Communications and Technology Committee developed a set of "Telepsychology Guidelines" to help guide the behaviors of psychologists. Other guidelines that practitioners should consider reading include those written by the American Counseling Association (2005), the International Society for Mental Health Online (2000) and the National Board for Certified counselors (n.d.).



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