

## Things to think about when working therapeutically online

1. Ask yourself, what could go wrong? What are the risks for the person/people you are working with, and for yourself? This is a useful reflection when working in a new way.
2. Imagine this new experience from the person/people's/people's perspective; how might they feel, view the work, experience you?
3. **For a long standing client**, the relationship is likely to be well established, but some of that familiarity and safety is about familiar surroundings: your practice space, what it contains (how often does the person/people notice when we move or change something?), where you sit and they sit, how you are dressed and so on.
4. **For a new client**, the added unknown of meeting online can raise anxiety:
  - Treat this interaction professionally. 'Show' them around your space if appropriate, by moving your camera. Include the closed door, perhaps where they would be sitting if they were in this space; anything that invites the person/people to feel welcomed by you.
  - Don't skimp on the introduction to yourself and the invitation to get to know them, before embarking on why they are coming to see you.

**Indemnity insurance** - If you have indemnity insurance with AON (our preferred provider) we can confirm that business activities extends to include working with people via all media channels i.e. phone, text, email, skype, face time, zoom etc (these channels of communication, like with face to face interaction, still only relate to work within New Zealand). If you have indemnity with another insurance provider please check you are covered for online work.

In terms of indemnity, it is your responsibility to ensure to the best of your ability, that the person/people is suitable for this medium and the technology is safe and confidential. This means if in coming weeks the platform you use is shown to be deficient, you must seek out an alternative.

**Your work setting** – The person/people may already be feeling unsafe or tentative, so it is good to be more intentional than you would in a physical office to make them feel secure and welcome:

- Work from an office or other room where no else will be entering the space
- Position yourself so that the closed door can be seen behind you. This can give the person/people you are working with more confidence in the confidentiality

**Professionalism** - Because online communication is typically informal, treat each encounter with the person/people as professionally as you would if you were working out of your normal workspace. Your attention to this can help counter the unconscious dynamics of being casual:

- Try to see the person/people in the same setting each time: the familiarity will contribute to safety
- Dress as you would for work. This provides normality for the person/people and psychologically you will be more in work mode
- Sitting on a bed is not professional. If your bedroom is your only confidential space set a chair up in a way that a bed (or open wardrobe, set of drawers etc.) is not behind you on screen:
- One idea is sitting on a chair, facing the bed with the laptop or computer on a stand/box on the bed.
- Another is drawing the bedroom curtains and using that as your back-drop

- If you are working out of your living space. Try to create a small area that is particularly for your work
- Have all the things you will need on hand – pens, paper, visuals, glass of water
- Check out what the person/people can see behind you before connecting
- Eliminate clutter, mess, food, pets, or anything distracting; if you wouldn't have it in your work therapeutic space, it shouldn't be in view
- Good lighting is imperative. The person/people needs to be able to see your face, eyes and expressions: So, don't have light behind you (i.e. a window or artificial light). It will put your face in shadow and can also be hard for the person/people to look at you for an hour or to see your facial expressions and body language
- If the person/people has a window behind them, ask them to pull the curtain and put the light on

**Equipment** - Use a laptop or desk-top computer - not a phone. Even a tablet can be problematic due to where the camera is:

- Don't have the device on your lap, it must be on a hard surface. It is easier for the person/people to focus on a still image and it gives a professional rather than casual message
- The camera should be central to your face and close to head height – you don't want to be looking down at the person/people
- Clean your screen, it can get murky over time
- Reduce the screen so that only the person's/people's face is showing. Then move the small screen showing the person's/people's face to beneath the camera - it will be perceived by them that you are looking directly at them
- Turn off or close all other programs (e.g. internet browser, email, Messenger, FaceTime, etc.) so that there will be no interruptions. Turn off sound notifications (i.e. the sound your computer makes when you get an email, or other notification). Google how to do this if you don't know – it is fairly simple.
- If possible use headphones or ear buds: They give another level of safety for the person/people knowing that only you can hear what they say, and improve the quality of the connection (headphones with a mic are best - your voice sounds closer to the listener – a phenomenon known as 'digital intimacy').

**Maintaining safety – case notes**

- If you normally take handwritten notes which are then stored at your place of work, do you have secure (lockable) storage at home?
- If you are storing digital notes on your own computer, do you know how to protect these? (see 'How to protect digital notes' in resources)

**Losing connection**

- Let the person/people know that the internet could at times be unstable and you will call them back if it goes down (save them trying to reconnect with you at the same time that you are trying to reconnect with them)
- Discuss a back-up plan if you can't reconnect. Don't leave a person/people without a formal finish to the session. A suggestion is that you could use the phone to bring the session to a place where they are safe to finish

## The platform

- Platforms that should NOT be used: Most consumer social media messaging apps including (but not limited to) FaceTime, WhatsApp, Messenger, Snapchat and Skype should not be used. These apps generally have end-to-end encryption, but user data may be harvested and used in various algorithms. Often these services are also based on person/people profiles, blurring the boundary between professional and person/people
- Recommended secure platforms: Zoom (IMPORTANT: Please see the information in the resources section at the end of this document regarding Zoom), Doxy.me, Clocktree (put your IRD number in the tax verification box), iCouch, Thera-link and VSee are all recommended and secure.
- Some platforms have fees, but if a service is free, then you are probably the 'product'. It's unlikely a company would provide a free service for no gain to themselves

## The therapeutic process

Because online connections are usually for social catch ups in our normal life, we can be drawn into this social dynamic unconsciously:

- Be intentional about establishing the focus/purpose for the session so the session doesn't become a just a casual chat.
- Because we have a shared experience of lock-down, it is important to take care around disclosure of one's own lockdown experience. Self-disclosure should only be used to: Enhance the therapeutic connection or, deepen the person's/people's experience of their internal work
- Give thought to how you will give informed consent and how you will confirm/record the person/people has given consent. Take things slowly, really get to know the setting the person/people is living in. What are their living conditions like, who are they with, etc
- Be careful to assess safety, privacy and confidentiality of their space and their general living conditions
- Safety considerations must be well assessed, e.g. suicidality, self-harm, eating disorders. Do you know, how, when and who to refer to if you need to do this quickly?

**Dis-inhibition** - is a phenomenon of online work that applies to both practitioners and the people they work with. It relates to how people may behave differently online than in face-to-face interactions. These differences have important implications for the therapeutic process: The sense of being anonymous and invisible, not fully seeing (therefore not experiencing) other's reactions to what is said, experiencing an absence of external authority in the online environment, not experiencing others as 'real'. Where this occurs it can have a significant impact on the therapeutic process:

- The person/people rapidly disclosing sensitive information that risks leaving them feeling overwhelmed
- An inappropriately rapid development of intimacy, sometimes followed by withdrawal or distancing
- The uninhibited expression of anger, hatred, criticism
- Difficulty in pacing sessions because the person/people have disclosed more information than they had intended
- The person/people coming to regret having made an uninhibited disclosure
- People disclosing issues they would not address had they been in face-to-face therapy

It is important to help people who may be disinhibited to pace their communications in a manner that makes it more likely that they are able to process material they are disclosing:

- Interjecting to summarise what has been said
- Asking the person/people how they feel about what they have said

It is also important for the practitioner to reflect on their own experience of disinhibition, which may lead them to make unhelpful interventions (e.g. that are too direct, forthright or insensitive), or inappropriate self-disclosure.

### **Attachment, Transference, Counter-transference**

Online therapeutic work can provoke particular phenomena such as transference and projection in which 'fantasy' and speculation about the practitioner come to the fore (E.g. the person may perceive the practitioner to be constantly available to them). It's therefore important to:

- Understand that the absence of a prompt response may evoke feelings of rejection or abandonment in the person/people
- See this as a phenomenon, rather than a 'problem'
- Manage the person/people's attachment and sense of rejection in a sensitive way
- Negotiate and agree clear boundaries with the person/people by checking perceptions and understanding
- Discuss how the practitioner and person/people are communicating and relating to each other

### **Assessing the person/people's suitability for online work**

- The person/people's comfort and competence in using technology
- How likely are they to engage in online work
- The complexity and risk level of the presenting problem

### **Other things to consider**

- Growing one's knowledge of the culture of internet communities
- Understanding some of the characteristics of internet communities (e.g. transient relationships, false identities, playing out of fantasies) and the implications these have for the therapeutic relationship

## Resources

**Zoom** - The following was provided by ACC to manage the Zoom confidentiality concerns and promote the Safe use of Zoom.

### Maximising privacy and information security

Zoom's desktop application has greater security features for hosts than the Zoom app.

#### Before the meeting

- It's more secure to generate a random meeting ID instead of sharing a link in the invitation
- Only send the meeting invitation to required people
- Send the password for the call via a separate method
- Allow only signed-in users to join the meeting
- Disable the 'join before host' feature
- Enable the waiting room feature
- Advise participants in advance if the meeting will be recorded.

#### During the meeting

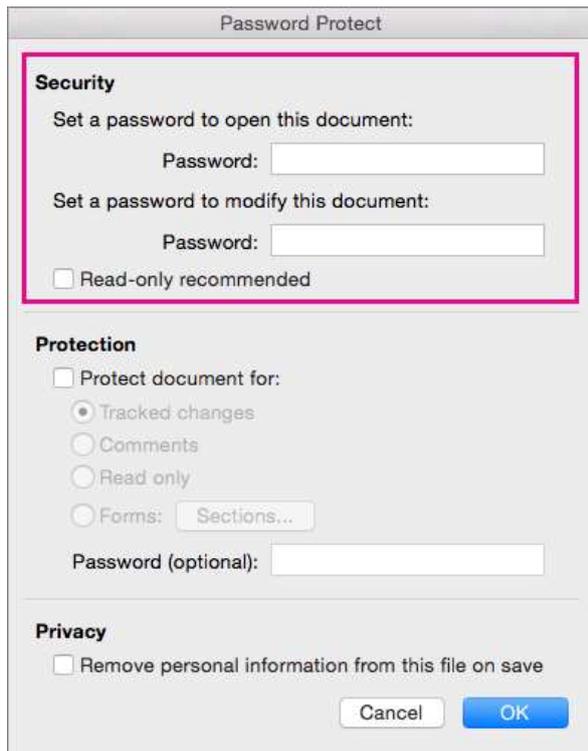
- Confirm who is on the call before discussing sensitive information
- Only accept or open attachments you're expecting from call participants
- Lock the session once everyone you were expecting to join the meeting has joined (at the bottom of the participants panel in the meeting, click 'More' and then 'Lock Meeting')
- Only allow remote control of the screen sharing session from a call participant you know and trust (not good practice for webinars)
- Use only the local recording feature in Zoom for video or audio records.

More information about Zoom host controls can be found on Zoom's website.

### How to protect digital notes

#### On a Mac

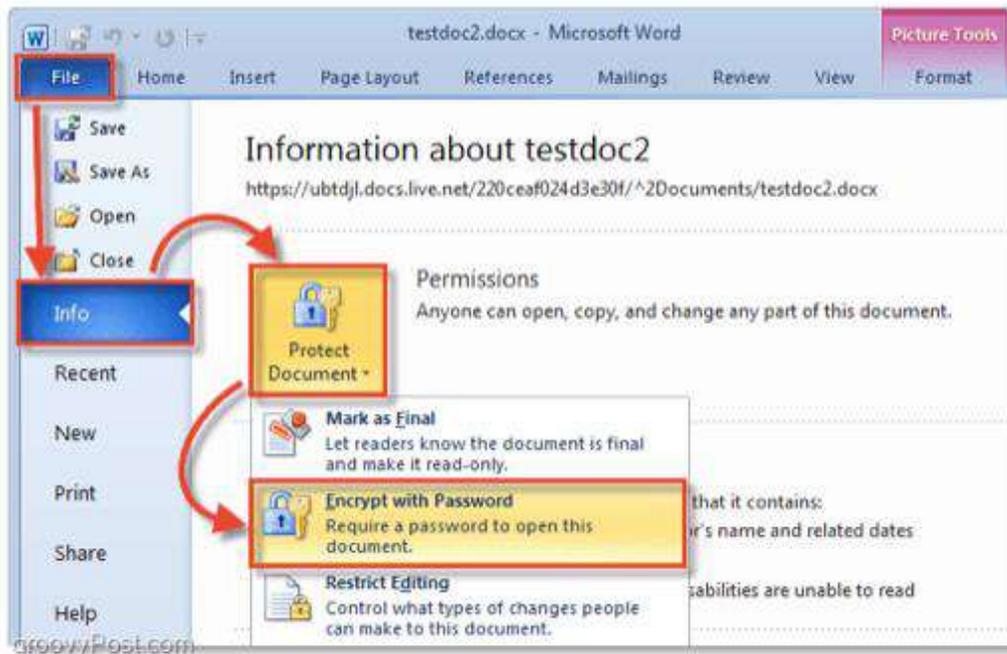




## On a PC

### How To Password Protect A Word or Excel Document Using Built-in Office Encryption

**Step 1** – Click the File tab, then Click Info. On the menu to the right Click Protect Document and Click Encrypt with Password.



**References:**

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/sound-mind/202003/teletherapy-how-guide>

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mbb982wrVoM&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR0cpppm2cZYLHqhHOYqW-gBUTNFiA80jOtiMXt\\_fAQs67NBDcLn\\_ghxigo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mbb982wrVoM&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR0cpppm2cZYLHqhHOYqW-gBUTNFiA80jOtiMXt_fAQs67NBDcLn_ghxigo)

<https://www.bacp.co.uk/media/2162/bacp-working-online-supplementary-guidance-gpia047.pdf>