



Tips for Getting Mental Health Support Via Telephone or Internet

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During these challenging times, we can get support from mental health providers but we may need to be flexible and a bit creative

Many mental health providers offer video or telephone meetings and research has indicated that tele-mental health is effective.

Here are some guidelines to make the transition from in-person to telehealth a bit easier.

Getting a Therapist

- Not everyone can offer remote meetings and their schedules may be full so you may have to wait and be flexible about the times.
- Look for someone who is local to you so you can continue in-person meetings in the future. Many states prohibit practitioners from practicing outside of their states.
- Contact your insurance company to understand your benefits and if you need to see someone in their network or you have out-of-network benefits. It is usually less expensive to see an in-network provider but, you will have less options. If you need to see someone in-network, see if you can get your insurers' assistance in finding someone in-network that meets your needs **and** is accepting new clients.
- As always, it is important to see a licensed, experienced professional.
- Licensed professionals can be found through associations like your state or county Psychological Association, Association of Social Workers or Association of Marriage and Family Therapists.
- The National MS Society may have referrals in your area.
- Your physician's office may also have referrals.
- It may not be possible to find someone who has expertise with MS but there are many highly qualified mental health professionals who can help you with the challenges of the current situations
- To pay your provider, you may need to use a credit card or free internet payment service. Your therapist should outline this before you begin. Most providers are currently not able to go into the office to retrieve checks.

The Technology

Just a little bit of preparation. It's not as difficult as you might think.

- Most online platforms for video sessions are very easy to use. You will need a computer, tablet or phone that has camera and audio. If you have used Facetime or Skype, you have what you need.
- Headsets are helpful to minimize outside noises and increase your confidentiality.
- Before your session, find the link to the video platform and make sure you can access it. Experiment with ways to have your device set up so you don't have to hold it.
- Ask if your therapist's platform is HIPPA compliant and if it isn't, ask them to explain the possible confidentiality risks.
- With everyone online, your connection may not be that good. It may freeze or blur or your call may be dropped. Have patience and, if possible, let your therapist know that there are difficulties. Most providers will review with you, in the beginning of the meeting, some strategies to deal with poor connection.
- To pay your therapist, you may need to use a credit card or internet payment service like Zelle or Venmo. Your provider should outline this before you begin. Understand that most therapists are not able to go into the office to retrieve checks.
- If you are using your phone, make sure that you have an unlimited data plan.
- Many cell phone and internet carriers are offering increases in data plans or internet connectivity for no extra charge so a call to them would be helpful to ensure that you have the maximum capacity.
- Lastly, most people find that the video chat medium is not flattering. So, if you don't like the way you or your therapist looks in the video, it's all part of the process.

The Therapy Session

Set yourself up as if you were going into a safe and comfortable therapist's office. There are benefits to this; no traveling, parking, mass transportation. You don't even need to wear shoes.

- Make sure that you are in a private place and ask those that you live with not to interrupt you. Putting a sign on the door is helpful to remind people. Try to be as far from others that you live with, as possible. Using a fan or playing music right outside of the door can help increase privacy.
- Set yourself up in as comfortable a position as possible- you will need to be there for a while. Set the temperature in the room to a comfortable setting.
- Many people find it helpful and calming to have tea or water and tissues right by them.
- Be patient with yourself and your therapist. It may take more effort to begin to feel comfortable with a therapist that you have never met in-person but, if you remember that this person is here to help you, you can begin to relax and benefit from the compassion and wisdom being offered.

Getting the Most from the Session

- Before you begin, take some time to think about why you are seeking a therapist's help.
- You may be asked to provide some biographical information. Think about what is most important. Here are some suggestions:

How have you been coping with the COVID-19 challenges?

Current significant relationships- are they supportive or difficult?

Current and past mental health challenges- past treatment; medications; diagnoses; drug/alcohol abuse or overuse; misuse of food or other unhealthy activities; depression, anxiety, self-harm or thoughts of self-harm; past trauma like deaths, accidents, crises

Work and home life situations- are you safe?

Living with MS or other diagnoses- Time since diagnoses, challenges and wellness activities

General strengths and challenges

What are your go-to coping tools?

- Think about what you would like to get out of therapy and what is most important. You will probably only have 50 minutes so how would you like to use the time?
- Letting your therapist know what your goals are for the therapy in general and for each session will facilitate you getting what you need. Here are some examples:

I need some ways to cope with the isolation and fear during this current situation.

I'm having a really hard time with my spouse/partner/child/parents.

I use exercise/socializing/work/outings to cope with anxiety/depression/pain. What do I do now?

I noticed that I have been drinking/eating/spending more than usual. I could use some help.

I'm just so angry all of the time.

I need to talk to someone about memories from past traumas that are coming up.

I just need someone to talk to.

Psychotherapy is helpful and can be necessary during times of stress to help you maintain strength and wellness. It is also a gift that you give to yourself and those who care about you.