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Online Therapy for our Shrinking, Changing, Global Community

By Norm Quantz, MA



Online Therapy

Sub-Theme: Social/Ecological Landscapes
Presenter: Norm Quantz, MA


Author Note: This article is an overview and the reader is urged to do further research into each of these areas before making decisions about using technology and distance therapy. This is not a critical review of the technology options but serves as a jumping off point for professionals contemplating or currently practicing online therapy.

The goal is clear - to provide distance therapy to the public so people can more easily access counseling services.

This is a worthy goal.

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Online Therapy

Six Key Questions:

1. Is it reasonable to expect therapy services to be available online?
2. What technology is available to provide quality therapy in an online format?
3. How will ethical responsibilities regarding issues such as confidentiality and safety be addressed if the therapist is not present?

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Six Key Questions:

4. Can a counselor carry on a viable business from a distance?
5. How do laws and regulatory bodies need to adjust to meet changing client expectations?
6. What criteria ought to be used to determine if a therapist should offer online services?

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Question One:
Is it *reasonable* to expect therapy services to be available online?

Absolutely!

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- Technology for professional services is a proven method in the medical community.
- The public is waiting for our profession to catch up with demand.
- Millions of online searchers show that the public is hungry for help.

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- Easier and less expensive for clients is an honorable pursuit.
 - The modern consumer wants instant access to online services.

Are you ready for the new landscape?

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Question Two:
What *technology* is available to provide distance therapy?

Author Note: This is not a critical review of the pricing or the technology variations currently available but serves as a jumping off point for professionals contemplating or currently practicing distance therapy. In keeping with transparency, the author is licensed to use and market an online video platform that matches his visual and security expectations. The author and his technical team trust this information will help you in your research.

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Three Core Formats of Communication:

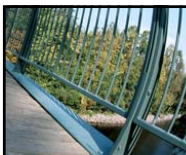
audio

text

visual

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Variations to Consider:

- ❖ security, ease of use by the client and therapist,
- ❖ clarity of communication,
- ❖ start-up and operational costs,
- ❖ reliability of the systems and
- ❖ the availability of technical support

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- **AUDIO** -
 - the telephone system or Voice over Internet Phone (VoIP)
- **TEXT**
 - using text form to communicate including:
 - e-mail – ½ hour to 48 hour interaction
 - Chat – in the moment texting interchange

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- **VIDEO**
 - visual contact in real time using a video camera

Three general categories of systems describe the array of products available:

- Peer to Peer Systems share Internet Provider address. Designed for a more casual, public applications

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- Tele-Health Systems use designated rooms with specialized equipment
- Web-Conferencing Systems using secure servers where the therapist is granted user rights

Test the system and become familiar with its use, features and limitations.

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- **Five factors** need to be considered:
 - *System Security*
 - *Immediacy or Timeliness*

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- **Five factors** need to be considered:
 - *Sensory Issues*
 - *Client and Therapist Cost*
 - *Default Options*

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- **Key factors** in choosing a system:
 - What is beneficial to your type of clientele, and
 - What types of features are needed

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Question Three:
How will *ethical responsibilities* regarding issues such as confidentiality and safety be addressed if the client is not in-person?

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Traditional methodology

Online therapy now provides an option.

Accessed from anywhere a client feels safe and inconspicuous.

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- Handling a client in an emergency:
 - If *suicidal*
 - If in danger from a *stalker*
 - If a *child is at risk*
 - If in physical emergency

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Online Therapy

- Handling a client in an emergency:
 - If *suicidal*
 - If in danger from a *stalker*
 - If a *child is at risk*
 - In a *physical emergency*

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- Overcoming safety issues by
 - establishing a risk plan at the time of intake
 - identify an alternative contact, and
 - document a locally accessible *crisis intervention service*

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Question Four:

Can a counselor carry on a *viable business* from a distance?

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■ **UPSIDE:**

Increased constituency (drawing area)

Costs are down compared to a brick and mortar business.

- low costs for web communications
- less staffing needs
- low rate long distance phone plans

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Less interruption of services through cancellations from:

- inclement weather
- illness
- parking hassles

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Clients enjoy:

- no travel time
- no transportation costs
- less time away from work and family
- convenience and confidentiality

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■ **DOWNSIDE:**

May involve some initial costs such as:

- upgrading an old computer
- buying a headset and web cam
- upgraded internet services

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As with any new business concept:

- acceptance is slow at first
- policies are being established, and
- the bugs are getting worked out

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■ **OPPORTUNITY:**

The birth of a new genre –
the business of online counseling.

Viability in the Online Therapy Business
depends on:

- the quality of the counseling
- access to clientele
- good money management, and
- business savvy.

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- **Infrastructures are advancing.**
 - Banks, government attitudes and financial services encourage online business.
 - Insurance companies are more interested in expanding to online coverage.

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- **CHANGES:**
 - For an online business you may need to change by:
 - Making online payment for services available by credit card
 - Finding expanded insurance coverage
 - Adjustments to your intake protocol
 - Document and signature sharing options for clients, and
 - Changing data storage and record keeping practices

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- **CHOICES:**
 - SHARE THE SAVINGS WITH YOUR CLIENTS
 - FINALLY TAKE A HOLIDAY
 - PARTNER IN AN ONLINE,
MULTI-THERAPIST PRACTICE
 - CLIENTS HAVE WIDER THERAPIST OPTIONS

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Question Five:
How do *laws and regulatory bodies* need to adjust to meet changing client expectations?

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The facts:

1. Laws vary widely from country to country
2. Professional Associations, Boards are working on governance policies
3. Internet Lawyers are familiar with online and international law
4. Governments depend on each profession to establish self-regulatory guidelines and protocol

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Core principles to guide the development of online therapy policies:


Note: this is for discussion purposes only and does not constitute legal advice or terminology sufficient for a legal document.

Therapy over the internet implies global access by the public to professional services.

When the public uses online services be aware that the service provider may come from another place where laws are different.

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Quality assurance organizations being established such as the International Society for Mental Health Online – www.ISMHO.com .

Therapist and Client must not be restricted in providing and accessing services when they travel.

If a client seeks legal recourse, it needs to be from where the therapist typically resides.

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Therapists need to meet the requirements to practice based on their place of residency.

Government regulations must not prevent their citizens from accessing professional services online from outside their jurisdiction.

The legitimate government of the therapist's place of citizenship and primary residency has a right to know the nature and income of business done globally online by the professional therapist.

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Question Six:
What *criteria* need to be considered before offering a client an online therapy option?

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Certain clients are not likely to benefit from online therapy.

- Those with no way of paying for online services
- If no default option is available in case of technical disconnects
- If a particular therapy process is hindered by the technology platform available
- If insufficient intake information is available for a safe online client relationship
- If extensive cultural differences exist that cannot be overcome
- If the client prefers or cannot use the technology option

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FINAL THOUGHTS:

Public demand for access to distance therapy is driving us to solutions because they are seeking our help from everywhere in our shrinking world.

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Some lesser recognized benefits:

- ❖ Client access to their therapist from a hospital, rehab center, prison, university or simply travelling
- ❖ Eliminating the risk of passing on a cold or infectious disease, and
- ❖ Help for pandemic victims who are quarantined

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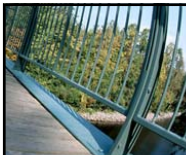
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**More Benefits and
Challenges await us**

but we have a good head start.

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About the Author:

Norm Quantz, MA-Counseling, speaks, writes and consults on the practice of technology assisted, distance therapy. He and his business associates have developed www.imagefacetoface.com, **the business and education Hub for therapists and health professionals**, in order to facilitate professionals who are expanding their expertise and collegial interaction to an online, global community.

- Norm has been a professional counselor since 1982 and lives in Alberta, Canada. He invites therapists and others to contact him through his blog, www.NormQuantz.com and clients through his website www.relationship-makeover.com

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