



PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES

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## *COVID-19 and Telehealth*

I hope you and yours are well and healthy at this difficult time. I also thank you for your continued trust in my ability to support your mental health needs through my HIPAA compliant remote platforms. Finally, I want to update you on my current thinking about reopening for in-person sessions.

As you all know, the World Health Organization, Centers for Disease Control, and other national and statewide organizations have issued a number of statements regarding COVID-19 as the situation evolves. The State of North Carolina and other national organizations have issued statements regarding the use of telehealth in order to minimize social contact. North Carolina Governor Roy Cooper issued the following statement “State officials recommend that employers and employees across the state use teleworking technologies to the greatest extent possible....”

In addition, the latest statement from my malpractice insurance in May 2020 recommends continuing telehealth as the preferred method of delivering services or at the very least wearing PPE (i.e. mask). They also recommend a thorough risk analysis of both the client’s and my risk factors (including our families) and that the client wears a mask as well. This remains their recommendation.

*“Rather, our advice is that if telepsychology is available as an alternative, it continues to be a preferred method of service delivery, particularly among high risk categories of patients, staff and psychologists. The risks of resuming in-person services include the risk to the life and health of your patients/clients, staff, and you; but they also include some level of increased risk of malpractice claims, licensing board complaints, and other government investigatory and enforcement processes...if adverse outcomes ensue, it can be more difficult to defend the use of in-person services...”*

COVID-19 has upended many aspects of our lives and is not finished with us yet. We have continued to learn more about the disease, including the vulnerability of younger adults and even children to become ill with serious COVID-19 symptoms, some leading to long-term distress involving the cardiovascular, respiratory, digestive, kidney, and nervous systems. We also realize that medicine is still in the early stages of fully understanding the nature and course of this virus. While there are now 2 vaccines approved for emergency

use (Pfizer and Moderna) they are not yet vaccinating the general population. Please see <https://covid19.ncdhhs.gov/vaccines> for information relevant for NC residents.

As a mental health professional, I have taken an oath to protect from unnecessary harm the individuals who seek my services. My national and local professional associations have been diligent in providing me with continually updated guidelines that address my responsibility to the public and to the people I serve directly, in addition to my malpractice insurance, which I detailed above. For example, the American Psychological Association advised practitioners to continue using telehealth as much as possible and provided a substantial number of protective measures to take when seeing someone in-person, including both parties wearing masks during the entire session (<https://www.apaservices.org/practice/news/in-person-services-covid-19>).

I am dedicated to preserving the safety and wellbeing of my clients, their families, as well as myself and my family. Therefore, I am delaying any final decision of when and how to reopen and will continue remote clinical work until I, in consultation with my professional associations and while monitoring state and local developments in the pandemic, conclude that I can resume seeing clients in person with a high degree of safety and when masks are no longer necessary or recommended for in-person sessions (though this is seemingly less likely that this recommendation will go away in 2021 so I may at some point resume with a mask requirement in place for those interested). **I am unsure when I will return to in-person sessions, though certainly hope I am able to by the fall of 2021.**

I hope that you and your family remain safe and healthy and recommend following the NC Carolina Reopening Plan, now in phase 3 (<https://www.nc.gov/covid19>), and the CDC (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/index.html>) public health guidelines for safe practices during this pandemic. Finally, I again thank you for your trust in me.