

# National psychologist Psychology needs clear telepsychology guidelines

**By Kenneth P. Drude, Ph.D.**

Psychological organizations have a responsibility to provide leadership in developing and adopting telepsychology guidelines. Most psychologists are practicing telepsychology at least part time whether they know it or not. Psychologists, however, lack agreement or consensus about what are considered best practices or ethical practices for telepsychology.

Telepsychology or the delivery of non-face-to-face psychological services by distance communication technology such as telephone, e-mail, chat and videoconferencing has become a mainstream practice for psychologists. It has been occurring since the invention of telephones and fax machines. Innovative psychologists began exploring and using technology in clinical practice 10 to 15 years ago and many more psychologists are doing so every year.

Everyday technological communication capabilities continue to expand rapidly and have become an everyday part of most people's lives. Nearly three-fourths of Americans are Internet users and about 82 percent are cell phone subscribers.

What remains missing is clear guidance about the expectations and responsibilities of both clients and psychologists when using technology in providing services. Psychology needs better agreed upon guidelines describing what psychologists consider ethical use of technology.

Although we have the 2002 American Psychological Association (APA) Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct, they are not specific about the use of technology. The APA ethical standards refer to the Internet twice and "electronic transmissions" five times. They clearly indicate the intent for psychologists to apply the APA ethical standards regardless of the modality a psychologist uses to deliver a service, including electronic communications. Guidelines about how to interpret what this means in specific circumstances are lacking.

Prior to the acknowledgement of the use of electronic communications in psychology in the APA ethical standards, a 1997 APA Ethics Committee document titled "A Statement on Services by Telephone, Tele-conferencing and Internet" offered some advice on what can be called telepsychology.

This document advises psychologists to follow the relevant APA standards and other requirements "such as licensure board rules" when delivering "services by such media as telephone, teleconferencing, and internet." It specifically states that there is no prohibition of psychologists providing such services.

Neither of these documents, however, gives clarity to common questions that psychologists often raise about how and when to use electronic communications when practicing telepsychology. For some it may seem highly questionable or even unethical ever to use electronic communications. Others may be reluctant to use them for lack of skill and knowledge about their use or what are appropriate practices.

We do not need new ethical standards to define how to use technology when delivering psychological services. What we need are guidelines about applying the standards that we have. It is important to make a clear distinction between standards and guidelines. Standards are mandatory or required behavior.

Guidelines are voluntary and recommended behavior – not mandatory. Unfortunately the two terms are often used interchangeably, even by the developers of professional standards and guidelines.

The lack of telepsychology guidelines leaves unclear what are considered recommended or appropriate practices and puts psychologists doing telepsychology at legal and ethical risk. Without guidelines to self-regulate telepsychology psychologists are implicitly waiting for court case law, licensing board disciplinary decisions or legal mandates or regulations to define telepsychology practices. The proactive creation of telepsychology guidelines that provide guidance in applying the APA ethical standards to telepsychology seems far more preferable rather than reacting to a specific legal or ethical incident or situation.

In addition to guild reasons for having guidelines there is the professional responsibility and accountability psychologists have to the public to define what are recommended practices for psychologists and those to whom they provide services.

Although psychology has been slow to take action, other health care professions and interdisciplinary professional organizations have done so. The following is a list of telemental health guidelines or standards that have been developed since 1998:

- \* 1998 American Psychiatric Association: Telepsychiatry Via Videoconferencing
- \* 1999 American Counseling Association: Ethical Standards for Internet On-Line Counseling
- \* 2000 American Medical Association: Guidelines for Patient-Physician Electronic Mail
- \* 2000 International Society for Mental Health Online: Suggested Principles for the Online Provision of Mental Health Services
- \* 2000 American Mental Health Counselors Association: Code of Ethics of AMHCA, Principle 14, Internet On-Line Counseling
- \* 2001 National Board for Certified Counselors and Center for Credentialing and Education: The Practice of Internet Counseling
- \* 2001 Canadian Psychiatric Association: Telepsychiatry: Guidelines and Procedures for Clinical Activities
- \* 2005 National Association of Social Workers and Association of Social Work Boards: Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice
- \* 2008 Ohio Psychological Association Telepsychology Guidelines

Other telemental health guidelines continue to be developed by other organizations. Two current efforts that remain in drafts are:

- \* 2008 Canadian Psychological Association: Ethical Guidelines for Psychologists Providing Psychological Services Via Electronic Media
- \* 2008 American Telemedicine Association: Telemental Health Special Interest Group, Telemental Health Practice Guidelines

The Ohio Psychological Association (OPA) began developing telepsychology ethical guidelines in late 2005. After more than two years reviewing the guidelines or standards of other organizations and numerous drafts and requests for feedback from association members and other psychologists a telepsychology guidelines document was adopted by the OPA board in April 2008. The document, which includes extensive references, is available on the OPA web site at [www.ohpsych.org](http://www.ohpsych.org)

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