PSYCHOLOGICAL TELE-ASSESSMENT: GUIDELINES FOR CANADIAN PSYCHOLOGISTS

GUIDING BEST PRACTICES IN VIRTUAL PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

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ABOUT THE CPA

The Canadian Psychological Association (CPA) is the national voice for the science, practice and education of psychology in the service of the health and welfare of Canadians. With more than 7,000 members, the CPA is Canada's largest association for psychology and represents psychologists in public and private practice, university educators and researchers, as well as students. Psychologists are the country's largest group of regulated and specialized mental health providers, making our profession a key resource for the mental health treatment Canadians need.

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SCOPE OF THE GUIDELINES

The *Psychological Tele-Assessment: Guidelines for Canadian Psychologists* aims to clarify and support the evolving field of tele-assessment in both child and adult populations. Psychological tele-assessment is defined, for the purpose of these guidelines, as the provision of psychological assessment services using telecommunication technologies.

These guidelines were initially informed by relevant Canadian Psychological Association (CPA) standards and documentation, including the following: Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists (4th Edition) and Guidelines on Telepsychology (CPA, 2017; 2023). The American Psychological Association (APA) guidelines for the practice of tele-psychology and tele-assessment during the COVID-19 crisis (APA, 2013; 2020) were also incorporated into the structure of the document. The examination of recent empirical discoveries relating to tele-assessment and Canadian regulatory requirements further rounds out the guidelines. Anchored by ethical principles, evidence-based practices, and regulatory requirements, this document offers comprehensive recommendations for the application of tele-assessment.

These guidelines offer a framework for psychologists to provide tele-assessment services that respect jurisdictional boundaries while adapting to the growing role of telecommunication technologies. Psychologists must be mindful of the specific regulations of each province or territory where they practice. Compliance with both home jurisdiction regulations and those of the client's location remains a key consideration, especially as tele-assessment practices evolve. Psychologists must stay informed about evolving privacy laws, regional regulations, and tele-assessment practices across jurisdictions, ensuring that they maintain compliance with both current and emerging legal contexts. Additionally, psychologists are expected to consider individual differences, cultural factors, and accessibility needs when applying these recommendations.

PROCESS OF DEVELOPING THE GUIDELINES

Given the complexities and evolving nature of tele-assessment, the development of these guidelines required a rigorous process of consultation, research, and legal review. Establishing a comprehensive set of guidelines for tele-assessment requires a thorough review of both existing standards and evolving practices in the field. This involved extensive research into tele-psychology and tele-assessment literature, as well as the integration of legal and ethical considerations, to ensure the most robust framework for Canadian psychologists.

Relevant literature and practice guidelines related to tele-psychology and tele-assessment were reviewed by the Working Group in detail between December 2022 and October 2024. Relevant standards of practice, practice alerts, and ethical guidelines from both provincial and federal bodies were included. The authors compiled and integrated this information to create these unified guidelines which are appropriate to all psychologists in Canada, regardless of the jurisdiction they primarily practice within. A draft version of this documentation was circulated for feedback to relevant individuals and groups in Canadian psychology. Feedback was gathered from a diverse group of stakeholders, including regulatory bodies, provincial psychology associations, training programs, CPA sections, and various committees. Psychologists from different practice environments contributed, such as those in private practice, hospitals, community organizations,universities, schools, as well as those serving rural and northern areas. Input was also received

from professionals in different fields, including clinical psychology, counseling psychology, educational psychology, neuropsychology, and forensic psychology. Considerations for equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility were integrated based on stakeholder feedback. Finally, these guidelines were subjected to an independent and comprehensive legal review to ensure adherence to relevant provincial, territorial, and federal laws concerning the delivery of tele-assessment services.

The development of this documentation was made possible with the support of the Virtual Learning Strategy Program, which exists within the Department of Post-Secondary Education, Training, and Labour, Government of New Brunswick, and with additional support from the Government of Canada. This funding facilitated the research, consultation, and development process to ensure that the guidelines meet the evolving needs of Canadian psychologists providing tele-assessment services.

POTENTIAL ADVANTAGES AND CHALLENGES IN CONDUCTING TELE-ASSESSMENT

Tele-assessment provides an innovative way to reach clients who may otherwise face barriers to accessing psychological services, but it also introduces new variables that must be carefully considered. Understanding the potential advantages and challenges is crucial for delivering ethical and effective tele-assessment services, ensuring that benefits are maximized, and risks are responsibly mitigated.

POTENTIAL ADVANTAGES OF TELE-ASSESSMENT

- **Improved access to services:** Tele-assessment overcomes geographic barriers, providing essential psychological services to clients in rural or remote areas who may have limited or no access to specialized psychologists.

- **Greater choice and rapport:** Clients have more flexibility to select a psychologist, allowing them to choose someone with whom they feel comfortable and can build a strong working relationship.

- **Reduced travel time and costs:** Both clients and psychologists save time and avoid costs associated with travel, making the process more efficient and accessible.

- **Convenience and flexibility:** The ability of clients participating in assessments from home, school, or work, offers them comfort and flexibility to attend sessions in familiar environments that fit their schedules.

- **Comfort of familiar surroundings:** Being assessed in familiar surroundings, such as home, can help reduce clients' anxiety and stress, facilitating more open and honest communication.

- **Enhanced privacy and control:** The privacy of being at home can give clients a greater sense of control over their environment, often fostering more candid and open discussions about their experiences and challenges.

- **Deeper insight into the client's environment:** Tele-assessment provides psychologists with a unique window into the client's day-to-day environment, offering valuable insights into their lifestyle and living conditions that might not be observable in a clinical setting.

POTENTIAL CHALLENGES OF TELE-ASSESSMENT

While tele-assessment offers several advantages, it also presents certain challenges that must be carefully managed to ensure ethical and effective practice. It is important to note that these forthcoming challenges may not be unique to psychological tele-assessment, but rather apply to the greater field of psychological assessment in general.

- **Data Security and Privacy:** Tele-assessment requires strong data security measures to protect client confidentiality, as remote sessions are vulnerable to breaches or unauthorized access.

- **Technological and Environmental Disruptions:** Technical issues like connectivity problems or client unfamiliarity with technology, as well as environmental distractions, can disrupt sessions and impact engagement.

- **Interpretation of Communication Cues:** Limited video and audio quality can hinder psychologists' ability to accurately interpret verbal and nonverbal cues, potentially affecting assessment quality.

- **Control Over the Testing Environment:** Psychologists have limited control over the client's physical testing space, which can impact the assessment's standardization and validity, especially when working with children.

- **Suitability of Traditional Assessment Tools:** Not all assessment tools are ideal for virtual settings. Psychologists must stay updated on tools suited to tele-assessment and ensure alignment with current research and guidelines.

- **Limitations for Specialized Assessments:** Tasks requiring precise timing or in-depth physical observation may be challenging to conduct effectively via tele-assessment.

- **Continuous Professional Development Needs:** Psychologists must engage in ongoing training to stay current with tele-assessment technologies, tools, and best practices.

- **Local Cultural Nuances and Resources:** Delivering assessments across regions may introduce challenges in understanding local cultural practices and accessing appropriate resources for client support.

- **Collaboration with Local Professionals:** Establishing connections with local providers can be difficult in tele-assessment, affecting coordination of care and access to supplementary client information.

By carefully weighing these potential advantages and challenges, psychologists can make informed decisions on how to best approach tele-assessment in a way that meets the needs of their clients while adhering to ethical and professional standards.

SCENARIOS WHERE TELE-ASSESSMENT IS PARTICULARLY BENEFICIAL

Tele-assessment is especially valuable in the following scenarios, though it may also be useful in other contexts depending on individual client needs:

- **Remote or Rural Locations:** When clients reside in areas with limited access to psychological services, tele-assessment can bridge the gap.

- **Mobility or Health Issues:** Clients with physical disabilities, chronic illnesses, or other health concerns that make travel difficult may benefit from tele-assessment.

- **Public Health Concerns:** During pandemics or other public health emergencies that limit face-to-face interactions, tele-assessment provides a safe alternative.

- **Scheduling Constraints:** Clients with tight schedules or those who cannot take time off work or school may find tele-assessment more convenient.

- **Specialized Services:** Access to psychologists with specific expertise not available locally.

- **Follow-up Assessments:** When the assessment involves monitoring progress or adjusting interventions that do not require in-person interaction.

SCENARIOS WHERE TELE-ASSESSMENT MAY BE LESS SUITABLE

While tele-assessment offers many benefits, the following situations may present challenges for both tele-assessment and in-person evaluations:

- **Severe Mental Health Conditions:** Clients experiencing acute psychosis, severe depression with suicidal ideation, or other high-risk conditions may need in-person assessment for safety and thorough evaluation.

- **Young Children or Cognitive Limitations:** Young children or individuals with significant cognitive impairments may have difficulty engaging effectively through virtual platforms.

- **Limited Access to Technology:** Clients without reliable internet, suitable devices, or the technical skills to use them may face challenges that hinder effective tele-assessment.

- **Accessibility or Sensory Challenges:** Clients with sensory sensitivities, disabilities, or accessibility needs may encounter challenges that require specific accommodations to support their comfort and engagement in tele-assessment.

- **Assessments Requiring Physical Presence:** Certain neuropsychological tests or evaluations that rely on specialized equipment and a controlled environment may not be adaptable to virtual formats.

- **Privacy Concerns in the Client's Environment:** When a client's environment cannot ensure confidentiality, sensitive discussions may be compromised, posing a risk to privacy.

- **Legal or Regulatory Restrictions:** Psychologists must adhere to regulations in jurisdictions where tele-assessment may not be allowed for specific types of evaluations, such as forensic assessments.

- **Cultural or Language Barriers:** Situations where language differences, sensory limitations, or cultural nuances are challenging to address may lead to misunderstandings and affect assessment outcomes.

GUIDELINES TO CONSIDER WHEN CONDUCTING PSYCHOLOGICAL TELE-ASSESSMENT

When conducting tele-assessment with a child or adult, psychologists can consider the following guidelines to maintain high-quality service and ensure competency in this evolving practice format. These suggestions are intended to guide and support the effective delivery of tele-assessment services.

SUGGESTED QUALIFICATIONS AND TRAINING REQUIREMENTS

Ensuring that psychologists have the necessary qualifications and training is fundamental to maintaining ambitious standards of care in tele-assessment. The following guidelines outline the recommended qualifications and training for psychologists providing tele-assessment services, helping them remain competent and compliant across jurisdictions.

- **Registration and Compliance:** Psychologists must be registered members in the jurisdiction where they reside and intend to offer tele-assessment services.

  - As standards vary between regulatory bodies regarding cross-jurisdictional practice (e.g., an Alberta psychologist offering services to clients in Nova Scotia), psychologists should confirm their legal eligibility to provide services across jurisdictions. Psychologists are advised to consult with both their home regulatory body and the body governing the jurisdiction where they plan to offer services.

- **Formal Training and Competence:** Psychologists must have formal training and supervision in psychological assessment and the diagnostic process. In jurisdictions requiring specific service declarations, psychologists must have appropriate endorsements before proceeding with tele-assessment services.

- **Supervision and Peer Consultation:** Psychologists are encouraged to seek supervision from experts in the field to develop competency in tele-assessment. Regular supervision and peer consultation are valuable tools for staying up to date with best practices in tele-assessment.

- **Cultural Competence and Local Awareness:** Psychologists should develop an understanding of the local culture and customs of the client's region. This includes awareness of language nuances, cultural values, and community resources.

  - Engaging in cultural competence training and consulting with local professionals can enhance the appropriateness and effectiveness of tele-assessment services.

- **Professional Development:** Psychologists new to administering tools in online environments should seek additional coursework, supervision, and/or consultation. These steps are critical to ensure psychologists develop the competence needed to deliver effective tele-assessment services. Steps to support the transition into this modality include:

  - Identify the tools in which the psychologist is already proficient in administering, scoring, and interpreting for in-person assessments.

  - Assess the appropriateness and validity of these tools for use in tele-assessment.

  - Obtain and review guidelines from the publisher regarding virtual administration, while also exploring relevant research.

- Consider participating in training specifically designed for virtual administration of the tools.

- Practice administering these tools with colleagues to build confidence and competence.

- Before using a tool in a fully virtual assessment, evaluate it with a client in person, if possible, to address potential challenges.

ASSESSING SUITABILITY FOR TELE-ASSESSMENT

Before proceeding with tele-assessment, psychologists should carefully evaluate whether this modality is appropriate for the specific client and assessment needs.

- **Evaluate Client's Needs and Context:** Assess the client's clinical presentation to determine if tele-assessment can adequately address their needs. Consider the client's ability to engage effectively through telecommunication, considering age, cognitive abilities, and any sensory impairments.

- **Technological Considerations:** Confirm that the client has access to the necessary technology, including reliable internet connection, appropriate devices, and a basic level of technological literacy. Ensure that both the psychologist's and client's equipment meet the technical requirements of the assessment tools.

- **Environmental Factors:** Determine whether the client can secure a private, quiet, and safe environment for the duration of the assessment. Address any potential distractions or interruptions that could impact the assessment process.

- **Assessment Tools Compatibility:** Verify that the assessment instruments are validated for remote administration and suitable for the client's cultural and linguistic background.

- **Risk Assessment:** Identify any safety concerns or risk factors that may necessitate in-person assessment or immediate intervention.

- **Legal and Ethical Compliance:** Ensure that tele-assessment is permissible for the intended purpose under relevant laws and regulations.

If tele-assessment is deemed unsuitable after this evaluation, psychologists should discuss alternative options with the client, such as in-person assessment or referral to an appropriate provider.

INSURANCE CONSIDERATIONS

Psychologists must explore whether their commercial and/or professional liability insurance covers tele-psychological services. If the psychologist holds an active practice permit in secondary Canadian jurisdiction, and provides services to clients in that region, it is ideal that their insurance provider be notified of their practice's reach.

INFORMED CONSENT FOR THE CLIENT

Ensuring informed consent is a critical aspect of tele-assessment. The following steps outline best practices in addressing informed consent in the context of tele-assessment services.

- **Ethical Guidelines:** Psychologists should adhere to ethical guidelines related to informed consent, with particular attention to the additional considerations required for tele-assessment.

- **Clear Communication of Boundaries:** Psychologists clearly communicate the boundaries of acceptable telecommunication methods with clients, including the appropriate use of emails, text messaging, and video platforms. Expectations regarding communication between sessions, response times, and the management of interruptions or breaches of confidentiality should be discussed during the informed consent process.

- **Risk and Benefit Disclosure:** The client must be fully informed of the benefits and risks associated with tele-assessment, including potential technological limitations or security risks. Psychologists should ensure that clients understand and are comfortable with the technology before proceeding.

- **Accessibility Considerations:** Provide consent forms and information in formats accessible to clients with disabilities (e.g., large print, audio recordings) and in the client's preferred language if necessary and able.

- **Cultural Sensitivity:** To ensure culturally appropriate practices during the informed consent process, psychologists should consider how cultural beliefs might influence the client's understanding of confidentiality and privacy. For example, in some cultures, discussing mental health openly might be stigmatized, requiring a more nuanced approach to explain confidentiality. Psychologists should also be prepared to adapt their consent process to include culturally appropriate language, metaphors, or community-based examples that resonate with the client's cultural context.

- **Client Competence:** Psychologists can help clients understand aspects such as security risks, technological skills, and available alternatives.

  - **Security Risks:** Clients will be informed about risks related to security and confidentiality when using electronic formats, including potential issues like technology security breaches (e.g., viruses or malware) or privacy breaches (e.g., unauthorized access).

  - **Technology Skills:** A basic understanding of how to access the online platform and set up the necessary audio and video is useful for clients. Psychologists may explain the platform being used and the security protocols in place.

  - **Limits to Tele-Assessment and Alternative Options:** Tele-assessment may sometimes face limitations (e.g., lower quality cameras or potential for technological challenges). Psychologists can discuss with clients the possibility of additional testing, in-person assessments, or other alternatives if needed, ensuring clients are fully informed before proceeding.

REVIEWING IDENTITY AND LOCATION OF THE CLIENT

Once the client has been fully informed of the potential benefits, risks, and limitations of tele-assessment, it is equally important to ensure their identity and location are verified before the assessment process begins. These steps help protect the integrity of the assessment and ensure appropriate emergency responses can be coordinated if necessary.

- **Identity Verification:** Psychologists must verify the client's identity using methods suitable to the specific situation, such as requesting identification or using secure alternative verification methods.

- **Location Confirmation and Emergency Preparedness:** Gathering information about the client's physical location, alternate communication methods, and emergency contacts can be helpful in case of technological issues or emergencies. Psychologists should familiarize themselves with local resources in

the client's area, should they need to reach out to them. Being aware of local emergency services and cultural practices related to crisis intervention is essential.

MAINTAINING TEST INTEGRITY AND DATA SECURITY

After verifying the client's identity and location, maintaining the security and integrity of the tele-assessment becomes crucial. This includes ensuring that all data exchanged during the assessment remains confidential and that testing conditions reflect those of traditional in-person assessments to the greatest extent possible.

- **Confidentiality Assurance:** To help maintain test security, psychologists should inform clients about the importance of confidentiality and the need to avoid recording or taking screenshots during tele-assessment sessions. Allowing clients to copy testing materials (e.g., response booklets) should also be avoided.

- **Secure Platforms:** Psychologists must use secure videoconferencing platforms that meet privacy and security standards, ensuring data protection for both the client and the psychologist.

- **Monitoring Tools:** Psychologists should consider the use of additional methods to monitor the testing environment if necessary.

- **Technical Preparedness:** Anticipate potential technical issues, especially when collaborating with clients in remote areas or with limited technological resources. Have contingency plans in place for interruptions due to connectivity problems or equipment failures.

ASSESSMENT TOOL SELECTION

Once the tele-assessment environment is secure and confidentiality has been established, the next key step is to carefully select the appropriate assessment tools. The tools used in tele-assessment are expected to meet the specific needs of the client while ensuring they are validated and suitable for use.

- **Informed Selection:** Psychologists should stay informed about the psychometric properties and current research for any psychological assessment tools they plan to use in tele-assessment.

- Appropriateness: Tools are to be carefully selected based on the referral question and their appropriateness for tele-assessment. If tools are not designed for virtual use, psychologists may use them with caution, documenting their reasoning and acknowledging the increased level of error that may be introduced.

- **Cultural and Language Considerations:** Select assessment tools that are culturally appropriate and available in the client's preferred language when possible. Be cautious of cultural biases in assessment tools and interpret results within the appropriate cultural context.

- **Material Presentation:** If permissible, psychologists may project assessment materials using digital copies or document cameras to ensure clarity and proper presentation during tele-assessment. Consider providing materials in accessible formats for clients with disabilities.

Having selected the appropriate tools for tele-assessment, the psychologist must now ensure that the testing environment is conducive to accurate and reliable data collection. Setting up a distraction-free, private, and technologically equipped space is critical for both the psychologist and the client.

SETTING UP THE TESTING ENVIRONMENT

Creating an optimal testing environment is critical to the success of tele-assessment. Psychologists must take the lead in helping clients establish a setting that mirrors, to the best extent possible, the conditions of an in-person assessment, ensuring the integrity and accuracy of the results.

- **Client Environment Setup:** Psychologists should assist clients in setting up a suitable testing environment that is comfortable, confidential, and free of distractions. Devices should have alerts silenced, and any unnecessary programs should be turned off.

  - Recognize that there are limitations on controlling the physical space where testing is occurring, especially when working with children. Children may leave the testing space or become distracted by their surroundings. Psychologists should plan for these possibilities by setting clear expectations with caregivers and establishing strategies to minimize disruptions.

- **Technological Support:** If the client requires support in setting up their environment, these methods can be arranged in advance. Provide additional assistance or resources for clients unfamiliar with technology or who may have limited access to high-quality equipment.

- **Psychologist's Environment:** Psychologists should also ensure that their own environment is conducive to the assessment process, with minimal distractions, good lighting, and the necessary equipment (e.g., monitors, webcam, microphone).

- **Technology Compatibility and Accessibility:** Psychologists are expected to verify that the client's technology is functional before the tele-assessment process begins. Ensure that both the psychologist's and the client's technological equipment are compatible with the tools used. Conducting trial runs of videoconferencing platforms and assessment software before the session is recommended to avoid disruptions.

  - If physical materials are needed, they can be mailed to the client, and any adjustments to testing should be clearly documented and justified.

By establishing an appropriate environment for tele-assessment, psychologists can mitigate the potential challenges posed by virtual testing, ensuring the accuracy and reliability of the data collected.

INTERPRETATION OF TESTING RESULTS AND REPORT WRITING

After ensuring that the testing environment is properly configured and that the assessment is conducted successfully, the last step is the accurate interpretation and documentation of the results. Consideration of the tele-assessment conditions is essential when interpreting the outcomes and authoring the final report.

- **Contextual Interpretation:** When interpreting results obtained through tele-assessment, psychologists should consider technological or environmental factors that may have influenced the data, including adjustments made to accommodate client needs, such as assistive technology or extra time for completion.

- **Cultural Context:** Interpret findings within the client's cultural and local context, being mindful of cultural norms, values, and language differences that may impact assessment results. Additionally, document accommodations or supports provided to ensure equitable participation, such as assistive technology or culturally relevant modifications.

- **Documentation of Challenges and Limitations:** Psychologists should document any technological, environmental, or other challenges encountered during the assessment. This includes noting instances where control over the testing environment was compromised (e.g., interruptions or distractions) and any modifications made to accommodate the client's needs. This transparency ensures that the context in which the assessment occurred is fully understood, contributing to a more reliable interpretation of results.

- **Reporting Considerations:** Use clear and accessible language in the final report, avoiding unnecessary jargon to facilitate understanding for clients. Where relevant, provide explanations that are culturally appropriate or simplified summaries that accommodate diverse client needs, such as those with different language abilities or cognitive challenges. Document why tele-assessment was chosen and how the testing environment and modifications may have influenced the results, providing a comprehensive and transparent overview.

By clearly documenting the reasons for tele-assessment, the context in which testing occurred, and any limitations, psychologists ensure transparency and clarity in their reporting, providing the most reliable results possible despite the challenges of tele-assessment.

CONCLUSION

The *Psychological Tele-Assessment: Guidelines for Canadian Psychologists* serves as an essential framework forensuring the effective and ethical delivery of tele-assessment services. By addressing both the opportunities and challenges presented by telecommunication technologies, and integrating considerations for equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility, these guidelines enable psychologists to offer high-quality assessment services that are accessible, flexible, and adaptive to the evolving needs of diverse client populations.

As tele-assessment continues to grow and innovative technologies emerge, it is critical that psychologists stay informed of changes in best practices, technological advancements, and legal or ethical standards. Regular professional development, peer consultation, and adherence to jurisdictional regulations will ensure that tele-assessment remains a reliable and effective modality in our practice.

APPENDIX
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