

HOW TO START A VIRTUAL PRACTICE



GOING VIRTUAL

By ICANotes

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO
SET UP A VIRTUAL BEHAVIORAL
HEALTH PRACTICE.

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Why start a virtual practice?

10 Benefits to Starting a Virtual Practice

Telehealth offers many advantages for behavioral health clinicians. Some providers enjoy the perks of virtual sessions so much that they've moved their practices entirely online. Here are the top 10 reasons why more and more clinicians are taking this route.



1. No commuting hassle

Long commutes increase stress levels and impact overall well-being. According to a study from 2019, an absence of commuting leads to greater job satisfaction, more leisure time, and an overall increase in subjective well-being.

If you provide telehealth services, you can work from home if you wish and avoid commuting altogether. You will no longer have to put yourself at risk of driving-related hazards or deal with traffic jams to get to work. You'll also save a lot of time. With the average one-way commute time being about 30 minutes, you'll have an extra hour every day to do something other than drive.

2. Fewer cancellations

Since you won't have to deal with the hassle of traveling to your office, you won't have to cancel appointments due to poor weather, a dead car battery, or other related issues. Also, if you feel under the weather, you can still keep your telehealth appointments, since you will not have to physically go anywhere or worry about spreading germs.

You can expect fewer cancellations from your clients as well. One of the top reasons clients stop going to therapy is transportation issues. Clients do not have to worry about catching a bus or putting gas in their car if they can meet with you virtually. Overall, telehealth removes many barriers that would have previously led to cancellations.

3. Streamlined communication

When you use a software platform to schedule a telehealth appointment, it will send automated appointment reminders to your client. Your client can then manage their appointment electronically. There will be no need for them to call your office and speak to a receptionist if they need to cancel or reschedule their appointment, which reduces the risk of miscommunication. If you or your client can't remember what time you set the appointment for, you only have to look online to find out.

4. Increased safety

When behavioral health providers accept a new client, they can't predict how the person will respond to anger or another negative emotion. Telehealth allows clinicians to get to know new patients at a safe distance.

Telehealth can also help providers safely connect with clients who have a known history of violence. Using telehealth to treat violent patients is nothing new. For example, according to The Pew Charitable Trusts, the criminal justice system has used telehealth to serve inmates since the 1980s. Being able to treat clients who may have made you feel uncomfortable in the past can relieve work-related stress and expand your practice at the same time.

If you've ever felt concerned about patients finding out where you live, working remotely will give you greater anonymity. You might be hundreds of miles away from the clients you serve, which means you don't have to worry about bumping into them in public places, either.

Lastly, telehealth makes some clients feel safer as well. These people may be more comfortable opening up, which will help you do your job. Clients who experience social anxiety or who are new to treatment, in particular, might feel much more relaxed attending sessions from their homes.

5. More clients

Telehealth allows providers to connect with patients who otherwise wouldn't have access to their services. These include people who live in rural areas or hours away from the nearest clinician. Telehealth can make a significant impact in rural communities, since over 60% of Americans live in areas with a shortage of behavioral health professionals, and more than 90% of clinicians work in metropolitan areas.

You'll also be able to provide services to those with mobility issues or chronic illnesses that make it hard to leave the house. These clients may need mental health services, but find their physical conditions get in their way. For example, people with chronic illnesses such as cancer or heart disease commonly experience depression. Through telehealth, you can reach these patients without making it more challenging for them.

Overall, you'll be able to reach anyone within your state who needs mental health services, but is unable, or unwilling, to travel to a physical location.

These may also include:

- People with anxiety or who fear running into someone they know
- Incarcerated clients
- Military members
- Hospitalized patients

6. Flexible scheduling

With telehealth, you do not have to adhere to traditional office hours. You can offer your services whenever and wherever you want, and at times that are most convenient for you and your clients. For example, maybe a client is only available at 8 p.m. While you may not feel like going back to the office at that time, you can easily connect with them at home.

You also can schedule personal tasks throughout the day because you will be in the privacy of your home. For example, between appointments, you might pay bills or hop on the treadmill and get a quick workout. You'll notice a better work-life balance when you work at home.

If you were sharing an office space with other clinicians, you would no longer have to worry about working around their schedules. You can see clients based on their time preferences, not when your office is available.

7. More free time

Without having to spend an hour a day driving to and from work, you'll have more time to accomplish other goals. Maybe you would like to learn more about a new treatment, teach an online course or add posts to your blog. Perhaps you would like to take power naps throughout the day to recharge your brain. Whatever you wish to achieve, you'll have more time to do it when you work remotely. That, in turn, will help you grow as a professional and potentially attract more clients.

8. Fewer overhead costs

Clinicians in private practice who choose to work from home can expect substantially lower overhead costs, especially those who can switch to telehealth full-time. With the money you'll save on rent, utilities, furniture and other related expenses, you can invest more in your practice and professional development. You will never have to worry about finding a new or better location for your business, and can instead focus on making your home office work for you and your clients. You might also choose to rent office space a few days a week to serve clients who prefer in-office sessions and save yourself from paying rent for a full month.

9. Greater workspace comfort

Teletherapy gives you complete control of your work environment. You can design a space that promotes productivity, reduces stress, and enhances your comfort levels. For example, you don't have to worry about impacting co-workers with your preference to leave the window open or your decision to paint the walls green.

You can also feel better about the dietary choices you make throughout the day. If you want to eat a snack between appointments, you no longer have to head to a vending machine and grab a bag of chips. All you need to do is walk to your kitchen and prepare a healthy treat.

In general, working at home gives you easy access to many comforts, whether it be over-the-counter medicine to soothe a headache or a cup of tea to help you relax.

Your clients will enjoy greater comfort, too, and won't have to worry about showing up to appointments parched or hungry. They'll have access to their home amenities as well, so there's less chance of them needing to wait to use the bathroom during or before an appointment.

10. Improved health

When you work around others, be it your co-workers or clients, you increase your exposure to germs and your risk of illness. A single ill colleague can get everyone else in the office sick, merely by touching surfaces or sneezing. In small and poorly ventilated offices, the chance of becoming infected by someone else's germs increases sharply.

For example, if someone with COVID-19 comes into the office, the chance of them spreading the coronavirus to others is 18 times greater in a closed environment than an open one, according to recent findings. With teletherapy, you eliminate your risk of catching dangerous viruses and other germs from co-workers and clients.

You likely can't control the air quality in a shared office space, either. Poor indoor air can lead to a range of health effects such as eye and throat irritation, headaches, or worsening asthma symptoms. At home, you can adjust the environment to support your mental and physical health.

Clients also do not have to expose themselves to germs or various indoor air pollutants when they don't have to visit an office. They also do not have to experience anxiety relating to virus exposure if they can stay home. Teletherapy is a win-win for everyone regarding infection control.

5 Ways Clients Benefit from Telehealth



1. Easy Access to Care

Online therapy allows clients who have limited access to mental health services to receive the care they need. Telemental health can also serve individuals with physical disabilities who otherwise may find it challenging to attend appointments.

2. Reduced fear of stigma

Some clients might be hesitant to seek treatment for mental health issues due to stigma. Online counseling encourages clients of all backgrounds to get help in the privacy of their homes, without the fear of someone seeing them.

3. Convenience

It's much less of a hassle for clients to visit a counselor via their computer than have to get in their car, deal with traffic, and drive to a physical location. Virtual therapy removes obstacles for clients who can't drive or do not have a car.

4. Greater protection against COVID-19

Therapists and their patients must find ways to protect their health during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many therapists are turning to online therapy as a way to connect with clients while reducing the risk of spreading illness. Virtual therapy can be an excellent tool to ease clients' anxiety during this unprecedented time.

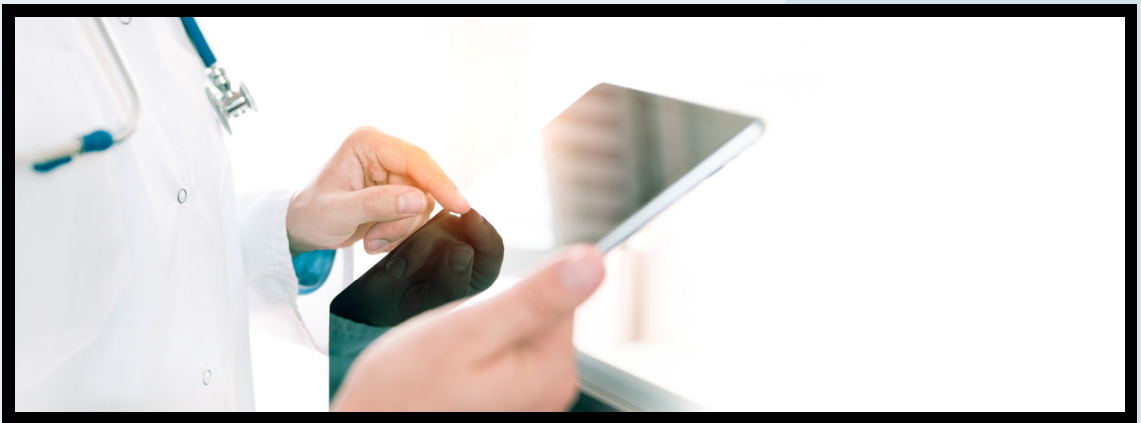
5. Access to effective treatment

Research suggests virtual therapy is just as beneficial, and in some cases, more so, than traditional face-to-face sessions. According to a University of Zurich study, 53% of the study's participants no longer met the criteria for depression after undergoing online therapy. In comparison, 50% of those who participated in face-to-face sessions weren't depressed anymore. Both patient groups reported a high degree of satisfaction with their treatment, whether it took place online or in person.

Does telehealth work?

Telehealth is an effective alternative to conventional mental care. Not only is virtual health care comparable to in-person therapy, but it is also inexpensive and advantageous through the use of adaptable designs and current technologies, particularly for isolated communities.

Patients who are coping with common mental and behavioral disorders, such as depression, can use telemental health care as a valuable tool. Indeed, these health services can be even more useful for your clients than traditional therapy. If you have clients who live in far-flung areas, who are starting counseling for the first time, or who feel more comfortable in virtual therapy sessions, telemental health may be an effective alternative to conventional mental care for your practice.



Several studies have proved the efficacy of virtual health care. The following are examples of what these studies have shown.

- Equally or more useful for the treatment of depression: Online treatment can successfully address depression, and has more significant long-term effects.
- Equally effective for primary progressive aphasia: Teletherapy is just as practical for those with a neurological syndrome known as primary progressive aphasia as on-site therapy.
- Equally or more positive exchanges between therapists and clients: The impact of interactions and conversations between therapists and clients via text messaging and email is similar to face-to-face therapy. In some cases, the effect of these online exchanges was more positive than face-to-face therapy sessions.
- Virtual CBT equally effective for the treatment of anxiety and depression: Virtual cognitive behavioral therapy is equally effective in the treatment of depression and anxiety as face-to-face therapy sessions, along with having a high rate of satisfaction.

10 things to consider before starting a virtual practice.



1. A Knowledge of Technology and Telehealth Platforms Is Crucial

First, you should be comfortable using telehealth platforms and the technology needed to conduct teletherapy sessions. When performed correctly, an online video conference does not feel much different from an in-person therapy session. When you are knowledgeable about the technology needed, you will ensure that the audio and video are both high-quality.

Equipment you will need for teletherapy includes:

- A computer, tablet or cellphone that has a speaker, camera and microphone
- A secure platform compliant with HIPAA reliable internet connection
- A malpractice insurance policy that covers telemental health services
- A quiet, private room

Little is more distracting or jarring to a client during a teletherapy session than muffled, crackling audio or a dark, blurry video. If you do not have a built-in webcam or your existing camera is not high-res, you should purchase an external one. If your client uses an older laptop or a desktop computer, they may also need to purchase an external webcam.

Additionally, if you do not have a built-in microphone, you will need to purchase a separate microphone. Fortunately, there are plenty of inexpensive options for external microphones. You may also want to use headphones during your teletherapy sessions.

Are you worried about how well you will be able to use the technology necessary to conduct a remote therapy session? If you are currently not that familiar with technology for teletherapy, you can become more comfortable through practice. For example, you should know how to adjust the audio and visual quality of the technology you are using in the session.

Fortunately, interfaces are becoming simpler, which has shortened the learning curve for mental health professionals to become proficient with navigating the needed technology for a teletherapy session. To ensure you are competent and confident with using teletherapy technology, practice with the tools, and conduct some practice sessions with friends or co-workers.

2. A Professional Environment Is Still Necessary

Just because you do not have to commute to the office does not mean you can show up to teletherapy sessions in your pajamas and conduct the meeting from your bed. The environment in which you lead a teletherapy session should be as professional as possible. **Consider the following when setting up your professional, remote office space:**

- Noise level
- Visual distractions
- Privacy
- Lighting
- Eye contact



In the space, remove any items you would not want your clients to see, and ensure the lighting in the room is sufficient for making eye contact with your patients. Practice conducting sessions with friends or family before going live with patients to ensure everything goes smoothly, and adjust as necessary.

Use the following tips to establish a professional environment for your telehealth sessions.

- **Wear plain clothes:** The clothes you wear should be plain, solid colors instead of bright, busy patterns. You may also want to avoid wearing jingly or shiny jewelry to keep your accessories from becoming a distraction.
- **Construct a minimalist background:** Keep your environment clean and streamlined. Surroundings with few distractions will keep your clients focused on the conversation at hand. If you have a blank wall in your home or remote workspace, consider sitting in front of it during your teletherapy sessions. If not, find a plain piece of fabric such as a bedsheet to hang behind you.
- **Minimize background noise:** Limit background noise to ensure your clients can hear you during your teletherapy sessions. Try to minimize sounds like fans, phones, blaring televisions, and barking dogs by closing doors and windows. If you wish to wear headphones while you conduct remote therapy sessions, it may be best to invest in a pair with a noise-canceling feature.

Encourage your patients to join teletherapy sessions in a quiet, private space with few distractions as well.

3. Knowing the Teletherapy Laws & Regulations for Your State Is Essential

Even if you have been practicing therapy in person, you may need to adhere to different laws and regulations to offer remote counseling. Before you jump into conducting teletherapy sessions with clients, you should be familiar with the teletherapy laws and regulations in your state. You can familiarize yourself with the relevant guidelines from the [TeleMental Health Institute](#) and the [American Psychological Association](#) to avoid running into any legal or ethical issues.

4. You Must Choose Secure Software

There is no shortage of video conferencing software options, but the platform you use should be secure and HIPAA-compliant to protect your clients' private information. Don't use unsecured video platforms like Skype for your telehealth sessions.

As your discussions with clients contain protected health information, you are responsible for keeping this information safe and confidential. Secure, HIPAA-compliant video platforms include Regroup Therapy, Zoom, VSee, Vyzit, and Breakthrough. Ideally, you should choose software designed with mental health care and therapy in mind.

You may also want to take steps to select a platform that ensures full HIPAA compliance, like ICANotes. Every aspect of [ICANotes Telehealth](#) is HIPAA-compliant, which means you can have peace of mind knowing that your patients' information will remain protected and that your practice maintains compliance.

To ensure you know how to use the secure software you choose, you may want to watch a live demo, use the software in a free trial and participate in training on how to use it and maximize its benefits for your practice. Before you can incorporate teletherapy into your practice, you should be confident that your chosen software is fully HIPAA-compliant and secure.

5. A Fast Internet Connection Is Vital

Regardless of how high-end your computer and equipment are, your teletherapy mental health sessions will not be successful if your video connection is slow and constantly freezing. It is vital for you and your patients to have fast internet connections to support live video feeds. Even the highest-quality telehealth platform or app cannot make up for a shaky connection.

While a slower internet connection can still allow you to stream videos, some speeds will make the video experience clear and reliable. If you or your clients are not necessarily tech-savvy, you can assess your internet connection via [speed tests](#) online. A quick check will let you know exactly what your upload and download speeds are.

The following are a few tips to keep your internet connectivity strong.

- Run updates on your software before the session: Make sure both you and your patients complete any necessary updates before the remote therapy session, as updates can slow your connection if they are running during the meeting. If you are using a new computer to conduct teletherapy sessions, aim to install all your updates a day or two before you start your remote sessions.
- Make sure not to use other video tools at the same time: If you have other video software on your computer, turn these off before the session so the video conference can function correctly.
- Ask family members to limit their internet usage: You and your clients should ask family members to avoid streaming videos or playing online games while the teletherapy session is taking place. These activities can dramatically reduce your internet speed.

Exit out of other websites and browsers: You and your patients should close all other websites and browsers, since having too many other things running simultaneously may slow your connection.

On your end, if you regularly have problems with your internet connection, you may want to reach out to your ISP and discuss upgrading your service. If clients regularly struggle with their service, suggest they use a wired internet connection, rather than Wi-Fi. Your clients' Internet connections will likely improve if they use an ethernet cable to plug straight into their modem or router.

In the worst-case scenario, your clients can use the mobile network on their phones to connect with you, though you should remind them that streaming video on their phones can use a significant amount of data.

6. Setting up Online Payment Options Is Useful

Before you provide teletherapy services to a client, ensure that you verify their insurance benefits. When you do so, you will be able to let them know what they will be financially responsible for before a remote therapy session. You may want to offer an option to clients for online payment of services that their insurance providers don't cover such as:

- Coinsurance
- Copays
- Fees

7. Informing Patients on Best Practices Is Vital

Even if you do everything right on your end, your efforts may go to waste if your clients do not adhere to the same best practices for teletherapy mental health sessions. If possible, you may want to provide your clients with guidance on best practices before your telehealth sessions.

To ensure the most successful teletherapy experience possible, you can offer your clients all the essential information they need, such as:

- What equipment they will need
- How they can secure a fast internet connection
- What they should include or remove from their remote space to avoid distractions and keep background noise at a minimum during the session

Additionally, you may want to encourage your patients to jot down notes beforehand about anything they want to discuss during the teletherapy session. When both you and your patients stick to best practices for teletherapy, your sessions can run smoothly.

8. A Backup Plan Is Essential for Troubleshooting

You should know how to troubleshoot common technical issues that may come up during the session. For example, do you know how to handle a loss of internet connection? Have a backup plan to make contact with the client if technical issues arise before or during your teletherapy session. If you have problems with your internet connection, you may choose to move to a phone call instead, for instance.

Before you begin conducting teletherapy sessions, take the time to learn and understand your setup, so you can acquire essential troubleshooting skills.

9. Telehealth Helps Grow Your Practice

For in-person therapy, space is often at a premium when you are growing your practice. While you may have plenty of potential patients and mental health professionals who can treat them, you may not have enough space to conduct the number of therapy sessions you want.

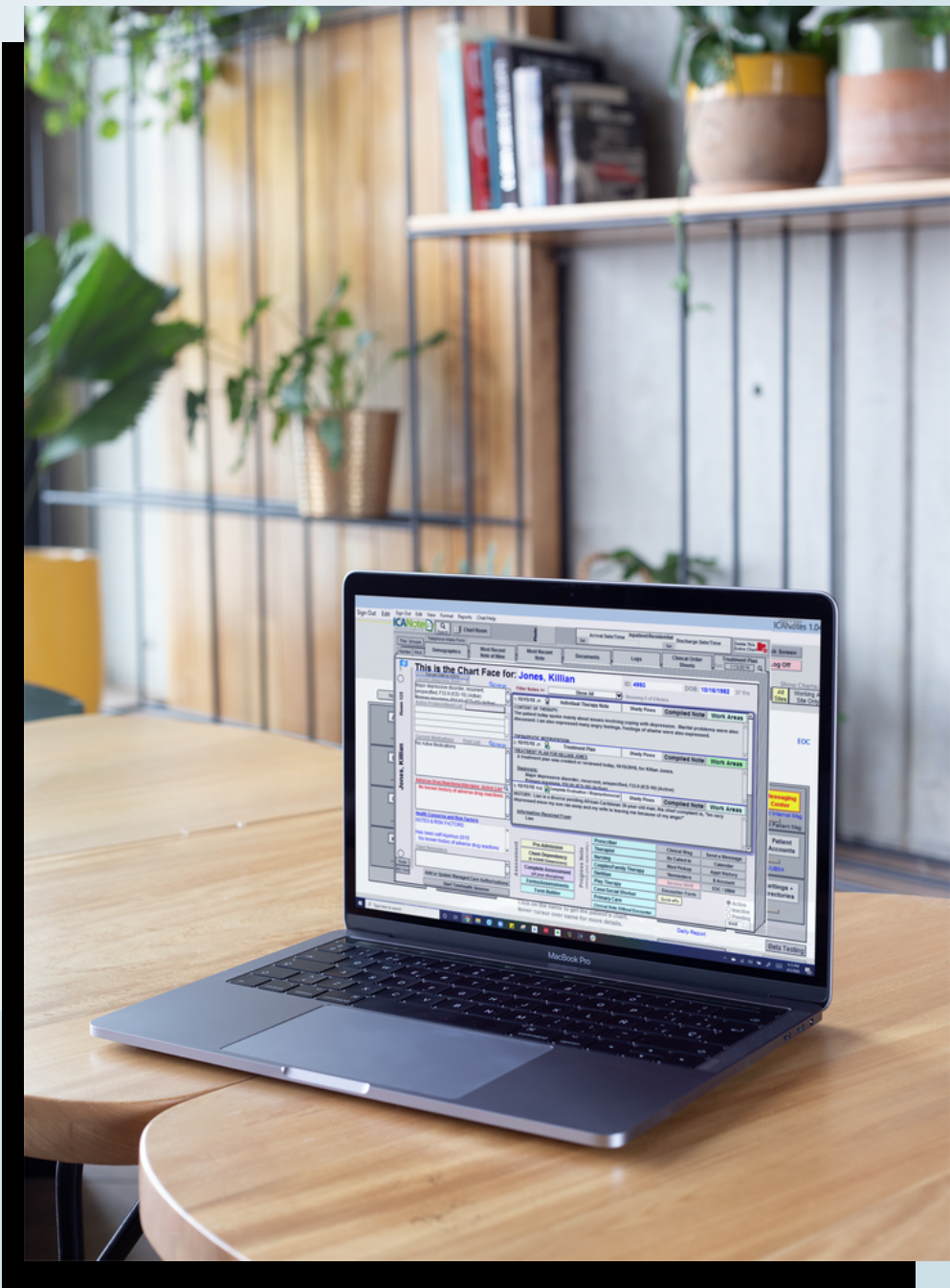
Fortunately, incorporating telehealth into your practice drastically reduces your space requirements, and you can provide care to many more clients.

10. Telehealth Is Easy With the Right EHR

At ICANotes, we designed our telehealth EHR software for behavioral health. [ICANotes Telehealth](#) is for mental health professionals seeking a HIPAA-compliant, secure platform to deliver remote therapy services to patients. Our software includes documentation and practice management features tailored to various disciplines in behavioral health.

When you use our telehealth feature at ICANotes, you can conduct sessions with clients from a distance. Our telehealth feature is compatible with Mac and Windows workstations, so your clients can participate from Mac, Windows, tablets, or mobile phones. After installing, you will click a button on your client's appointment or chart to initiate the teletherapy session. You can then choose whether to send an email or a text message to your client with a link to join the meeting. There is no download required for your client.

Our goal with EHR is to make teletherapy as easy and convenient as possible for both mental health professionals and their clients. When you combine your teletherapy with our EHR system, you can quickly and efficiently schedule teletherapy sessions. All the information you need will also be easily accessible through our system.



Is starting a virtual practice right for me?

If you want to create a successful virtual practice it is vital you have some of the following.



1. Basic Online Practice Skills

Your patients should know how to adjust their video and audio quality and how to troubleshoot technical problems. There are a number of resources you can provide your patients that will help them develop troubleshooting skills for technical problems. If you run into technical problems on your end, consult your IT team as needed.

2. Malpractice Insurance

Does your malpractice insurance provider offer coverage for virtual health services? Reach out to your malpractice insurance provider to confirm that your policy will cover these health services in your state and across jurisdictional lines. While you may have coverage for in-state practice, you may not have it for inter-jurisdictional practice for distance health services.

3. Proper Setup and Equipment

[ICANotes Telehealth](#) is a HIPAA-compliant solution for mental health professionals who need a secure platform to deliver telemental health services to clients. With ICANotes, you can begin a session with a client through their appointment, chart or chart room. Your client will receive either an email invitation or text containing a secure link to join the session. There is no download required.

We have designed our telehealth EHR software for behavioral health. Our software includes practice management and documentation features tailored to a range of disciplines in behavioral health. Every aspect of ICANotes is HIPAA-compliant, so you can rest assured your clients' information will remain protected and your practice can maintain compliance.

Must have virtual practice features.

You'll need a few tools to run an online practice smoothly and meet your clients' needs. The following features will help you fulfill documentation and privacy law requirements, provide quality care, and get paid for your services quickly.



- **Automated appointment reminders:** A HIPAA-compliant appointment reminder system allows you to send text or email reminders to clients automatically. It keeps patients informed and engaged, helps reduce no-shows, and simplifies the entire scheduling process.
- **Electronic document management:** Electronic document management allows you to quickly and securely access, store and manage patient records, such as progress notes and treatment plans. With electronic documentation, you can complete billing tasks quickly and get reimbursed for headache-free services.
- **Patient portal and messaging:** With a secure patient portal, you can send clients crucial messages and provide them access to their medical history and electronic forms. Patients will appreciate being able to view their health information conveniently online, so they can stay on track with their appointments and treatment plans.
- **Secure communications with staff:** Your virtual practice should allow you to communicate with other staff members electronically without a security breach. Features like a secure messaging system enable you to send patient charts, scanned documents, and other vital data instantly without the need to print or fax hard copies.
- **Electronic appointment management:** An electronic calendar that integrates with the patient portal and automatic appointment reminders makes scheduling a much more straightforward process for front desk staff. With options like color coding and no-show tracking, you and your team can spend less time organizing the calendar and more time focusing on improving your business.
- **Electronic prescribing:** As part of a virtual practice, you need a way to prescribe medication safely online. With an electronic prescribing tool, you and your staff can send accurate, legible prescriptions and refill requests directly to a pharmacy for fast results.

Insurance and telehealth.

Whether an insurer will reimburse you for telehealth services depends on state laws, the insurance carrier's policies, and the help you provide. In this chapter, we'll answer some of your questions about insurance and telehealth to determine if this service is right for you.

Teletherapy Laws by State

Telehealth policies are continually evolving, and it can be hard to keep up with the changes. With the current COVID-19 crisis, policies are shifting almost daily. Since telehealth laws vary by state, you'll want to research the most current policies in the state where you received licensure. Your state is responsible for regulating private insurance companies, as well as Medicaid.

You might start your research with this **chart created by the Federation of State Medical Boards**. Here, you'll find current telehealth modifications by state, including information regarding controlled substance prescriptions via telemedicine and licensing requirements.

To check current state laws and telehealth reimbursement policies, you can also visit the Center for Connected Health Policy (CCHP). You can use **their interactive map** to click on your state and find information regarding Medicaid telehealth reimbursement, private payer laws, online prescribing, and cross-state licensing. Lastly, you can check your state's emergency orders and reimbursement policies related to telehealth and mental health services through the **American Psychological Association**.

Does Insurance Cover Online Therapy? Will Clinicians Get Reimbursed?

There is no easy answer to this question. The guidelines for insurance reimbursement for telehealth vary from state to state, but they can also depend on the type of health care you offer. For example, even if they cover live telehealth sessions, they may not cover store-and-forward sessions. A store-and-forward telehealth session is where the patient provides essential data for the clinician to analyze and diagnose electronically, but they do not interact directly. These might involve a client sending a document or pre-recorded video through email.

Other common restrictions include the type of providers who can get reimbursed and the **CPT codes** used.

Insurance policies change all the time, which makes matters more challenging. Figuring out whether you'll get reimbursed by a particular insurance payer can get confusing quickly. To help you answer questions surrounding insurance reimbursement, let's first consider the different types of coverage:

- Private insurance coverage for teletherapy varies by state and the insurance plan.
- Medicaid teletherapy coverage also varies by state, but currently, many Medicaid plans cover telehealth services.
- Medicare has expanded its teletherapy services and waived many of its restrictions due to the COVID-19 crisis.

In general, your client should have coverage for teletherapy if the following factors apply:

- Your client's state has a telehealth parity law, which means private payers must reimburse providers for telehealth services in the same way they would for on-site care.
- Your client's insurance plan includes mental health benefits.
- Your client's insurance plan covers telehealth services.

The CCHP recently compiled a report that details the **regulations of all 50 states**, which you can use to determine what Medicaid and private payer laws are active in your area. **Here are some crucial findings:**

- All 50 states and Washington, D.C., provide reimbursement for live video sessions in Medicaid fee-for-service.
- All 50 states and Washington, D.C., have a definition for telemedicine, telehealth, or both.
- Sixteen states' Medicaid programs reimburse for store-and-forward services.
- Twenty-three states reimburse for remote patient monitoring.
- In 19 states, a home is an eligible place for patients to receive telehealth treatment under certain circumstances.
- There are 42 states plus Washington, D.C., that have laws governing private payer telehealth reimbursement.

It's worth noting that although most states have laws governing private payer reimbursement of telehealth services, not all of them mandate payment. Also, states might require parity regarding the type of services provided — not the amount of reimbursement.

To determine whether you'll get reimbursed, it's always best to contact a client's insurance provider. Find out if they cover teletherapy and how much you'll get reimbursed. Make sure you understand which specific services a client's plan covers.

Medicare vs. Medicaid

Millions of Americans receive Medicare or Medicaid benefits. For example, according to a Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) report from March 2020, **over 64 million individuals** have enrolled in Medicaid. If you accept clients with Medicaid or Medicare coverage and want to offer teletherapy services, you need to know what these programs cover.

First, let's review the **difference between Medicare and Medicaid**. Medicare is a federal insurance program offering coverage for individuals who are 65 years old or older. It also covers individuals who are under the age of 65 and have a disability. The CMS — a federal government agency — runs Medicare. The program essentially has the same rules everywhere across the country. Clients with Medicare pay for part of their health care costs.

Medicaid is a state and federal assistance program for individuals with low income of any age. Medicaid regulations vary between states but must fall within federal guidelines. Clients with Medicaid may have to pay a small copayment for specific services. Otherwise, they usually do not have to pay any part of a covered medical expense.

So, do Medicare and Medicaid reimburse for teletherapy services? In general, the CMS wants states to expand telehealth services to accommodate patients during the COVID-19 crisis and help slow the coronavirus spread. That's why they have lifted some restrictions to make it easier for providers to offer telehealth to clients and still get paid. For example, under a new waiver, **titled 1135**, Medicare covers telehealth for clients who live anywhere — not just in rural areas. It also allows telehealth to take place in a beneficiary's home. A range of providers, including clinical psychologists and licensed clinical social workers, will be able to provide teletherapy under this waiver. There are still some rules, such as:

- Service providers must use an interactive telecommunications system with real-time audio and video communication.
- A physician or other authorized practitioners — such as clinical psychologists, nurse practitioners or clinical social workers — must provide the service.

Medicare will also pay for brief virtual “check-ins” to prevent unnecessary trips to the doctor. Doctors and some practitioners can respond to patients during a virtual check-in through secure text messaging, email, video platform, a patient portal, or over the phone, but a few rules apply. For example, patients can't use a virtual check-in if they have a medical visit within 24 hours.

The American Medical Association provides a **helpful list of resources** to help you navigate recent Medicare changes regarding telehealth. The CCHP also provides useful information regarding Medicare and telehealth coverage policies **here**.

Regarding Medicaid, states get to determine whether to cover teletherapy services or not, as mentioned above. They also get to choose which services to cover, which types of providers can get reimbursed and how much to reimburse them. You'll have to check your state's Medicaid fee-for-service program to confirm coverage.

Does Telehealth Get Reimbursed at the Same Rate as In-Person Sessions?

In many cases, teletherapy gets reimbursed at the same rate as in-person sessions, but again, this also depends on a client's insurance plan and whether your state has telehealth parity laws. Some states require private payers to reimburse eligible providers the same amount as an in-person session, while others let the payer decide. However, in response to the COVID-19 crisis, many insurance companies are implementing emergency plans to help beneficiaries pay for telehealth services.



How Do I Determine If Private Insurance Will Reimburse Virtual Therapy?

To determine if a private insurance company will reimburse you, the smartest thing to do is contact the insurer directly. Check and verify coverage and note any limitations in the plan. Even when the same company covers two patients, one might have telehealth coverage, and the other might not. Find out if there are any extra steps you need to take to provide covered telehealth under the plan. You may have to be pre-authorized or be on the insurer's telehealth provider list. Some companies may require some form of proof that you have comprehensive knowledge of the state's telehealth laws. You won't know unless you ask.

Here are a few other questions you may want to ask a private payer:

- Are there restrictions on the location of the client or the provider?
- Is the reimbursement rate the same for teletherapy as in-person services?
- Which providers are eligible for teletherapy reimbursement?
- Do I need to include any specific notes in the documentation?
- Which CPT codes are covered, and do I need to use a modifier?
- Must I provide services in real-time?

Make sure you keep detailed records of the call. Note the number you called, what department you reached, whom you spoke to, and what they said. If possible, get a call confirmation number. Hopefully, you won't need to use this information, but it may come in handy if you find yourself fighting a denied claim.

How Do I Challenge a Denied Claim?

Claims can get denied **for several reasons**, such as typing errors or inaccurate information. A payer might also deny a claim if they do not cover teletherapy services. If a claim gets rejected due to a billing mistake, you should be able to correct the error and resubmit it.

In any case, an insurance payer should explain to you why they denied a claim. It's crucial to fully understand the reason for the denial before you take action. If you have questions about a denied claim, call the insurance company's provider service center, tell them your concerns and ask them what you need to do next. They might have a specific process you need to follow to dispute a denied claim.



If you have done your research and are confident a denied claim is not due to a mistake on your part, you can take steps to support your case. Here's what you should do to challenge a denied telehealth claim.

- **Remind the payer of the relevant laws:** Find and copy the appropriate state law and its source. Forward the information to the payer with a link if applicable.
- **Ask for support if needed:** If they do not respond to the legal information, you might get other entities involved. Seek resources from Telehealth Resource Centers or the CCHP to help you challenge the denial. If you are part of a professional association at the state or national level, reach out to their advocacy department to see what they can do for you. Your state's department of insurance may also be a good resource to contact.
- **Bring the issue to officials:** If the problem does not get resolved, you may want to enlist the governor's or other officials' help to bring attention to the issue.

You might also consider asking a third party to perform an external review and evaluate the claim and relevant paperwork.

What You Should Know About Telehealth Insurance Reimbursement

Insurance reimbursement can be a complicated process, whether or not you provide telehealth services. You can prepare and keep stress in check by becoming familiar with telehealth laws. An excellent place to start is with your state.

It helps to be aware of pertinent federal laws, too, such as the **Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act (MHPAEA)**. The MHPAEA of 2008 is a federal law designed to stop group health plans and insurers from providing less coverage for mental health problems than physical illnesses. Insurers can't institute higher copays or deductibles for mental health treatment, and they can't set limits on what they'll pay for that care.

The MHPAEA does not explicitly cover telehealth, but it does provide a foundation for telehealth insurance reimbursement. For example, if a group health plan covers telemedicine for medical and surgical reasons, they would likely also have to cover telepsychiatry or other telebehavioral health to comply with MHPAEA. However, the MHPAEA does not require health insurance to offer mental health benefits. The requirements only apply to plans that already cover mental health.

The majority of states have enacted parity laws, specifically requiring that telehealth receive equal coverage to traditional in-person care. Each law is a little different, so it's crucial to be familiar with your state and every state you intend to provide telehealth services in.



Other considerations

Here's a list of things you must consider before you jump into starting a virtual practice as a psychologist, therapist, or other behavioral health clinician. The following elements will help you avoid mistakes early on and keep you moving in the right direction:

1. You'll Want to Set the Right Fee From the Start

Setting an hourly rate may not come easy to someone passionate about helping others. However, to grow your business and keep it thriving, you need to make a profit. To determine your fee, consider these tips:

- Find out what other counselors charge in your area: First, research other counselors in your area and consider what they charge. Focus on researching behavioral health professionals who have similar training and experience as you. By setting comparable rates to other practices in your area, you won't have to feel like you're charging too low or too high for your services, and you'll have better luck attracting clients.
- Don't set your rates too low: It's recommended to set fees that match the top half of other local counselors. You don't want to charge too little because potential clients will likely care about your reputation more than low costs.
- Consider your financial obligations: Figure out what you need to charge to operate your practice. You'll need to consider how many clients you can realistically see per week to meet your financial goals.
- Know what to expect with insurance company contracts: If you plan to accept insurance, determine the rates you can expect to receive with each company you're interested in. Remember, you'll need to charge clients what the insurance payer agrees to pay, and this can also affect your rates for self-paying clients. Insurance companies may offer a lower fee than the typical rate in your community, but you'll have access to more clients by accepting insurance.



2. You Probably Shouldn't Start Full-Time

Running a successful virtual practice takes time, patience, and persistence. It might be months, maybe years, before you've built up a regular clientele, depending on factors such as your location and networking efforts.

In the meantime, you still need to make a living and find ways to fund your business. You can save on initial costs by slowly building your virtual business on a part-time basis. Here are a few more benefits of starting part-time:

- You can learn business basics without overwhelming yourself: As a therapist, your first concern is probably serving your clients the best you can. When you open a private practice, you also need to focus on the business side. By starting part-time, you give yourself a chance to learn the basics without too much pressure or commitment.
- You can test your niche: If you desire to focus on a specialty, particularly one that's unique in your area, running a part-time practice allows you to see whether you can find clients in your region. You'll also have more time to grow your clientele without having to give up areas you're passionate about.
- You can supplement your income and increase your savings: As a part-time business owner, you can continue working for another agency to help you meet financial obligations until your private practice takes off. You can also use your other job to help you save money to invest in your practice.



3. The Right Business Plan Will Help You Succeed

Every business needs a plan. A thoughtfully devised business plan will be your map and help you make critical decisions, stay organized, and keep on track with your goals. You might require a detailed business plan if you need to apply for a loan or grant for your practice. Preparing a business plan should be one of the first steps you take. Here are elements to include in your plan:

Mission: Write a mission statement describing your reasons for running a practice, who you wish to serve, and how you plan to help your clients. If you have values that play a vital role in shaping your vision, include these with your mission statement.

Goals: Aim to include specific and attainable long-term goals and short-term goals. Expect your goals to change as you evolve. For example, a long-term goal might be to see 15 clients a week in two years. A short-term goal may be to write one blog post a week for your practice's website during the first three months of opening. Consider what your business needs the most.

Financial information: The financial component of your business plan will include your office rent and utilities, staff wages, liability insurance, training courses, marketing costs, and other related operating expenses. Also, consider how you'll save for retirement and vacation time. Once you know how much it'll cost to run your practice, figure out the minimum income required to pay your bills, and support your lifestyle. This will help you set your fees.

Marketing strategy: Determine the client base you want to reach and how you'll connect with referral sources. Include your strategy in your business plan. You can reach more people and help them contact you by developing a website and social media pages. If you create a website, include helpful blog posts related to therapy and self-care, so people can find you when they search for answers online.

4. There Will Be Legal Considerations

When you own a private practice, it's considered a small business regulated by local and state laws. You might ask an attorney or accountant to help you establish your practice and ensure you're compliant with regulations. Some areas you'll need to consider include:

- **Zoning codes:** Zoning codes regulate where you can practice, and the type of building you can use for your business. Zoning laws also govern details like the signs you're allowed to install to advertise your practice.
- **Business licenses:** You may need to obtain a business license that will grant you the right to operate your practice in your municipality. Depending on your location, you may also need a county license. Check with your local and state governments to see exactly what you need to practice within your specific area.
- **Ethical and legal qualifications:** What specialty do you wish to practice? Do you have the certifications and licenses needed to offer the services you wish to provide? You can check your state licensing board to ensure you have the necessary credentials.

5. Your Office Space Sets the Tone

Your office even in a virtual space plays a vital role in making clients feel comfortable and encouraged to return. You'll want to invest in your office space and make it seem cozy and welcoming even though it's virtual. This doesn't mean you have to spend all of your savings on furniture or decor, but you will want to put some thought into the way your office looks and feels. Here are some tips:

- **Bring in nature:** You can use the healing and stress-reducing qualities of nature by decorating your office with plants or serene landscape paintings. If you have windows, allow natural light to brighten the room. If you do not have any windows, use soft-light table lamps instead of fluorescent overhead lights.
- **Display your credentials:** Help your clients feel confident in your expertise by hanging your diplomas on the wall.
- **Have good lighting.**

6. Organization is Key

Paperwork doesn't go away when you transition into private practice. You'll need to comply with the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and other state and federal laws that require documentation and forms. If you accept insurance, you'll need a system for submitting claims to get reimbursed. All of your records must be kept secure, and ideally, organized and easy to access. By staying organized, you can save time and complete documentation requirements efficiently.

Examples of paperwork you may need to keep with each patient's record include:

- Contact information
- Billing information
- Documentation of informed consent
- Documentation of consent for release of information
- Diagnosis or reason the patient requests your services
- Medical historyAssessmentsTreatment plan
- Progress notes

One way to keep all your forms and notes organized is to use a comprehensive electronic health record (EHR) software. EHR software can help you turn your office into a paperless practice. This means fewer cluttered shelves, more office space, and high security for your clients' records. With an EHR designed for behavioral health, you can keep patient charts, progress notes, billing information, and other required documents in an easy-to-access place. You can also use features like appointment reminders, a telehealth platform, and electronic intake forms to make sessions more convenient for you and your clients. You have the option to scan documents, too, if you want to eliminate paper completely.

If you use EHR software in your practice, consider using time-saving templates for treatment plans and progress notes. Once you customize templates to meet your needs, you can create a system and stick to it, so you can focus on client care rather than formatting notes.

7. Getting New Clients Can Be Easy

You may feel intimidated by networking and finding clients, especially if you're not one to "sell yourself." Attracting clients doesn't have to be difficult or time-consuming if you know where to look. Here are tips to attract clients and increase revenue:

- **Join an insurance panel:** Joining an insurance panel may not be for everyone, but it's worth considering if you want to potentially reach more clients. You'll have to fill out an application for each panel you wish to join, and it can take months to complete the credentialing process, so you'll want to start applying to different insurance companies before you open your doors.
- **Network with other therapists:** Get to know other behavioral health professionals in your region and bring business cards when you meet. After other professionals get to know you, they might think of you when they need to refer clients to a clinician in your area of expertise.
- **Advertise:** You have plenty of ways to market your business, and many options are low-cost or free. You might register with an online directory for a fee or create a basic website and email links to colleagues who might refer people to you. You can also get your name out there by offering your knowledge at live speaking events, answering questions on online forums, or making appearances in the community.
- **Create a niche:** Choose a niche in an area you're passionate about to build knowledge and target an audience. For example, you might specialize in trauma, substance abuse, or bereavement counseling. Imagine your ideal client and whether they may be seeking treatment in your town or city to help you pinpoint your niche.



Marketing your virtual practice

As a behavioral health professional, you likely didn't take many digital marketing courses in college. While you may not feel prepared for the marketing skills you need to run your therapy practice, it's not too late to learn. Marketing your business online is critical to attracting new clients and getting your name seen by the right audience.

Ask Yourself These Questions to Determine Your Marketing Strategy

Marketing can feel overwhelming to anyone who doesn't consider themselves an expert. By developing a plan with the right strategies, you can tackle marketing with a precise target. Before you begin advertising your practice, ask yourself questions:

- **Who do I want to reach?** You need to know who your target audience is before you start marketing your practice. For example, if you specialize in treating elderly clients with depression, you won't want to spend time and energy advertising your practice to adolescents with substance use disorder. Create a clear picture of your ideal clients in your mind, and consider the age groups, gender and income levels you work with. Also, think about the issues you want to help your ideal clients solve. Let this image guide you through your marketing efforts.
- **What do potential clients need in my area?** It helps to know what potential clients in your area need and if these needs are being met. If you're able to fill an under-served niche, you can quickly grow your practice. By conducting market research, you can figure out if your region needs a particular service that you might fill. For example, perhaps after researching you find that clients are looking for therapists who specialize in eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR). Perhaps you're one of the few therapists in your area who is qualified to provide EMDR treatment. If this is the case, you may want to reach clients interested in EMDR through marketing.

There are plenty of tools to help you research your region's needs and pinpoint your niche and target clients. You can start by searching for local therapists with Google and seeing what's already available. You can also use [Google Keyword Planner](#) to see how often local clients search for certain keywords or phrases.

Another way to conduct market research is to check out online directories, such as [Psychology Today](#), or review sites. This will give you an idea of the type of services available in your area and what clients want. To learn more about your region's demographics, consider visiting the resources listed by the [U.S. Small Business Administration](#).

Digital Marketing Strategies for Therapists

After conducting market research and getting a better idea of the local services available and sought-after, you can reach out to potential clients and promote your practice. You don't have to use every digital marketing strategy, but many of these methods complement each other. It may take some trial and error before you discover what works for you. Here are effective digital marketing strategies to explore:

1. Pay Per Click Advertising

How does pay per click (PPC) work? Imagine you google "therapists in Nashville." The first few search results that pop up will include advertisements you can click on. If you click on one of the ads, the advertiser will pay Google for your click because Google helped lead a potential client to their website. Businesses might expect to pay Google between \$1 and \$2 for each click on their search network.

There are many platforms for PPC, including Google, Facebook and Bing. Several PPC platforms, such as Google Ads, use a bidding system. Google Ads runs an auction every time there is ad space available on a search result to determine which ads appear in that space. To participate in the auction, you'll make a bid. You might place a bid for specific keywords, like "art therapists Austin," for example.

You'll only pay when someone clicks on your ad. However, you won't know if a competitor bid a higher or lower amount than you for the same keywords. If you find that you didn't bid high enough and your ads aren't showing up as frequently as you would like, you can go back and raise your bid. Over time, you'll get an idea of how high you need to bid to get the attention you want.

PPC advertising may not be for everyone, but if you have a little room in your marketing budget to explore this option, it's worth considering. Here are some benefits of PPC advertising:

- Produces results quickly
- Encourages immediate action
- Reaches clients who are actively searching for the type of services you offer
- Easy to measure and modify

If you want to start attracting clients to your practice's website without waiting for your blog content to gain exposure, PPC advertising can be worthwhile. To learn more about PPC for a therapy practice, visit this [beginner's guide to Google Ads](#) provided by the American Psychological Association.

2. Email Marketing

Email marketing involves sending emails that promote your services and help develop or maintain relationships with clients. Email marketing is an excellent way to share content with your target audience and spread awareness of your practice. According to HubSpot research, 78% of marketing professionals have seen email engagement grow over 2019, and 73% believe email is important to a business's success.

Email marketing can be even more advantageous than social media marketing because clients are more likely to see your emails than the content you post on Facebook. However, it can be beneficial to use social media and email marketing together. Here are some ideas of content to include in your emails:

- Blog post links
- Book, event, or workshop promotions
- Information about the services you offer
- Helpful insights about a mental health problem

To get started with email marketing, you'll first need to select a secure email service provider. Then, you'll need to get people to sign up to receive emails. One way you can do this is to add email sign-up options to your blog posts. Once you have a list of email subscribers, make sure you group them into segments based on demographic information or whether they are past, current, or prospective clients. Segmentation allows you to target subscribers in groups rather than send out general emails that may not be relevant to every client.

Try to send emails to subscribers at least once a month to keep them engaged. If possible, consider sending emails weekly to keep your name fresh in recipients' minds.

3. Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

Search engine optimization (SEO) is a process that enhances your content and helps clients find you on search engines. To illustrate this principle, imagine you write an article on your blog about the benefits of exercise on mental health. You want this blog post to show up in the top search results if someone searches the phrase "mental health and exercise." SEO uses several strategies to tweak your article and get it to the top of the search results list.

Since most of those searching for answers online start with Google, it makes sense to optimize your content to rank high with Google. You'll want to create content that Google will likely include in the top results. In general, Google wants helpful information that answers questions quickly. If you can provide accurate, clear answers in your content, you're off to a great start.

Incorporating SEO can be fairly simple on a basic level. If you create quality, original content, you're already applying a few SEO practices. Here are some additional tips:

- Include long-tail keywords: Keywords are the words searchers type into the search bar. You'll place keywords in your titles, content, and links. Long-tail keywords involve three or more words and are usually better than one or two words because there's less competition. For example, using the keyword phrase "anxiety counselor in Wichita" may be better than "anxiety counselor." Start a list of long-tail keywords you'd like to include by considering the services you offer.
- Use a plug-in: Consider adding a plug-in to the website software you use to enhance your SEO. One example is Yoast, which is a free WordPress plug-in designed to help you optimize your content for Google.
- Include your contact information on every page: Make sure every page on your website has your name, number, and address. This can help Google find you when users look for local therapists.

It's important to remember that SEO takes time to produce results. But it is worth the effort in the long run because more clients may find you, visit your website and stop in your office.

4. Social Media Marketing

You can use social media platforms such as LinkedIn, Twitter, or Facebook to attract new clients or network with other mental health professionals. Your social media page should reflect your website and share details such as your contact info, biography, and services you provide. You can use your account to interact with clients, comment on posts, provide links to your blog, and share inspiring thoughts.

With most of the adult population using social media, it can be an excellent marketing tool. However, if you feel uncomfortable using social media due to ethical concerns or other reasons, you can choose to market your practice differently. If you enjoy using social media and decide to test it out for your therapy practice, here are tips to consider:

- Use a professional profile picture.
- Be sure to include your contact information.
- Use easy-to-read language.
- Post content that will catch your target audience's attention.
- Keep your practice's social media account separate from your personal accounts.
- Never disclose personal information about your clients on social media.
- Do not ask or suggest clients follow you on social media.
- Create a social media policy to share with clients.

5. Content Marketing

Content marketing is a way for clients to get to know you before they ever step foot in your practice. It can also help existing clients stay engaged and develop a sense of trust. Content marketing generally involves creating and sharing free articles, videos, or podcasts. You can publish the content you produce online, either on your website, social media page, or both.

The point of content marketing is to provide helpful information and gain followers, establish expertise, and ultimately attract clients to your practice. As mentioned above, you can also use SEO-optimized content to improve your rankings in search engines. Not sure what to write? Here are some tips:

- Consider writing posts relating to common issues your clients have and advice you often offer.
- Create content aiming to answer questions clients commonly ask.
- Write intriguing openings to encourage readers to click on your content or continue reading.
- Always proofread content and check for grammar and spelling errors.
- Fact-check your information and include links to your sources.
- Avoid large blocks of text and instead write short, simple paragraphs containing only a few sentences.

Ensure the content prompts readers to take action at the end of each piece. You might ask them to subscribe to your blog, read another article, or contact your office to schedule an appointment. Aim to publish at least two articles a month on your blog and make sure each post is at least 300 words long.

Common Marketing Mistakes to Avoid

- **Targeting too many people:** If you target too many people, you'll make it harder to set yourself apart from a crowd and connect with the type of clients you want to attract. Instead, you want to imagine your ideal client and get as specific as possible. When you understand who you're trying to reach, you can craft relatable marketing content that speaks to them personally.
- **Not maintaining your website:** Make sure you build a functioning, attractive, and user-friendly website. Your website can make a great impression if it's well-maintained, frequently updated, and visually appealing.
- **Not focusing on your clients:** Your blog, social media posts and any content you create should focus on helping your clients. Even in your biography, you'll want to talk about how and why you can help clients. Clients visit your website to find out if you can solve problems for them, so you'll want to show them you have solutions.
- **Giving up too soon:** Some strategies, such as SEO, may not produce results overnight. It takes time for websites to rank on the first few pages of search results, but the longer they're active, the higher they'll climb. Keep track of your results, learn from your mistakes and be patient.

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