



Practice Guide to Delivering Mental Health Support Online

Clinicians and peer workers at Open Arms – Veteran & Families Counselling, can provide online mental health support to clients, according to their need, preference and situation. This approach to delivering services has a number of different names, including:

- E-mental health
- Online mental health support
- Online video counselling or ‘OVC’
- Online mental health education.

How is online mental health support delivered?

There are many different online tools that can be used by Open Arms’ clinicians and peer workers to support clients, including:

- Apps and programs for mobile phones or computers
- Online chats and/or emails
- Audio (e.g. telephone) or audio-visual (e.g. CoviU, Zoom or Skype) consultations
- Websites.

Prior to delivering mental health support online, Open Arms’ clinicians or peer workers will talk to clients about their needs, preferences and situation. Together, they will decide which of the online tools will best suit them.

When is online mental health support delivered?

The online environment provides flexibility to Open Arms clients, with some clients actively choosing this option.

Open Arms also offers online mental health interventions to support clients who:

- Have difficulty travelling to appointment
- Are unable to leave their homes
- Have family or work commitments
- Are not quite ready to talk to an Open Arms worker in person.

How effective is online mental health support?

In 2012, the Australian Government's Department of Health published an [E-Mental Health Strategy for Australia](#). This strategy is based on research, which shows that good outcomes can be achieved by clients when they receive mental health support online.

Since then, the delivery of online mental health support and services has grown substantially. Information about the many different online mental health tools and resources that are now available can be found on the Australian Government's Department of Health [Head to Health](#) website. You can also read about the effectiveness of online mental health support at:

- The Conversation: <http://theconversation.com/is-online-therapy-as-good-as-talking-face-to-face-with-a-clinician-51492>
- Australian Institute of Family Studies: <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/online-counselling-therapy-and-dispute-resolution-review>
- Department of Health, Australian Government: <https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/pacd-ehealth-programevaluations>.

Supporting delivery of online mental health support

Open Arms' clinicians and peer workers are provided with the training they need to support clients in the online environment. Likewise, Open Arms' clients are helped to use their preferred online tools to connect with Open Arms' clinicians and peer workers.

For online mental health support that involves audio-visual tools (e.g. CoviU, Zoom, or Skype), there are some general principles for Open Arms' clinicians, peer workers and clients to follow.

Before the audio-visual interaction commences

- Be positive and remember that online mental health support can achieve good outcomes
- Be ready to discuss with one another your expectations of mental health support online
- Be prepared to make some adjustments to the way you engage with one another in the online environment and discuss how you will manage issues that may arise (e.g. how to make allowances for the delayed sound, what to do if you experience technical issues).

During the audio-visual interaction

- Be more overt with non-verbal gestures and verbal interactions to reduce the misunderstanding or mis-communication that may result from delayed sound, pixilated visuals or other technical issue
- Check-in regularly with one another about the online interaction, so that issues can be addressed as they occur. This could include a conversation about:
 - the placement of the camera lens and how this affects the interaction,
 - ensuring you are seated squarely in front of the camera lens, so that the Open Arms' clinician or peer worker and client can see one another clearly,

- removing obstacles that may hamper the other person's ability to see your facial expressions,
- ensuring good lighting in your room, checking for privacy and distractions (e.g. animals, children) and talking about how to manage possible interruptions.

After the audio-visual interaction concludes

- Follow up by phone to discuss any unresolved issues (technical, other) if needed.

Helpful Resources

Practical Tips for Online Mental Health Support:

<https://www.theraplatform.com/blog/250/20-tips-for-smooth-online-therapy-teletherapy-session>

Considerations for Online Therapy - <https://www.therapistaid.com/therapy-article/telehealth-considerations>

Australian Psychological Society: Telehealth service: <https://www.psychology.org.au/for-the-public/Medicare-rebates-psychological-services/Medicare-FAQs-for-the-public/Telehealth-services-provided-by-psychologists>

Telehealth: Guidelines and Practical Tips, Royal Australian College of Physicians: <https://www.racp.edu.au/docs/default-source/advocacy-library/telehealth-guidelines-and-practical-tips.pdf>