



COVID-19 Risk Mitigation Practices

Updated 4-3-20

These certainly are unprecedented times. During this pandemic the safety and health of our staff, clients and the larger community remains our number one priority. At the same time, we recognize that access to quality mental health care is vital during this time. We know our community members are facing job loss, financial insecurity, isolation, substance use, anxiety, stress and other forms of grief and loss at rates unlike anything we have seen before.

We at Benson Psychological Services are committed to finding a way to continue to serve our clients, without putting anybody at unnecessary risk. To do so, we are making some temporary changes in our operations, and following the accommodations that have been suggested by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and World Health Organizations (WHO) in order to limit the spread of this virus and do our part to protect the vulnerable populations in our state.

Beginning on April 13th, with rare exceptions, all services will be temporarily provided over Telepsychology, or by phone. We are grateful to the insurance companies who have temporarily lifted restrictions on services by Telepsychology, and to those who helped make that happen, including our state Insurance Commissioner, The American Telemedicine Association the American Psychological Association (APA), The North Dakota Psychological Association (NDPA), and individual providers at our clinic and elsewhere who created teams of dedicated professionals and worked tirelessly on advocating for insurance reimbursement for Telepsychology services during this time in order to ensure your services would not be interrupted.

In order to use this option we recommend you have a password-protected, secure internet connection, (not public or unsecured WiFi) and anti-virus/malware that is up-to-date. There are other requirements as well, most are readily and easily achievable, and all are at no cost to you.

Between now and April 13th you will be contacted by our receptionist to make sure we have the necessary contact information to use one of these options. You also will be provided with a copy of our Telepsychology Informed Consent, or directed to find it on our website.

The process is fairly simple. You will be sent an invitation by email or by phone and you click a link. If you know how to open an email attachment you should find this process very doable. If you have an appointment in the next few weeks, your provider can practice with you in session to show you how to use the system.

If you do not have internet at home, or if for other reasons Telepsychology is not an option for you, during this crises, phone sessions are also allowed.

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From now until 4-13-20

Until April 13th we will continue to provide services in the clinic but we have made the following changes to our operations:

Restricted Access: We are requiring staff and clients to stay home if any of the following conditions apply:

- You are over 60
- Your immune system is compromised by another illness, or treatment for that illness
- You have an existing illness, such as heart or lung disease that places you at higher risk
- You have a fever, cough or shortness of breath
 - We have a forehead thermometer in the office, and staff and clients may be asked to have their temperature taken upon entering the building
- You have traveled or visited locations within the last 2 weeks that are known to have multiple cases/major community spread of COVID-19
- You have family members who have symptoms of this illness
- You are, or you live with, a health care worker taking care of infected persons
- You are responsible for the direct daily care of someone who is elderly or vulnerable to the disease

Waiting rooms: We are temporarily removing our toys, books, games, puzzles and magazines from the waiting rooms. The coffee and water machines will not be operating. All “high touch” areas are disinfected no less than twice a day (light switches, door knobs, railings, chair arm rests). Hand sanitizer is available in our waiting rooms, as are tissues and baby wipes (should you wish to use these to open the bathroom door, to hold the railing etc.).

In keeping with the most recent CDC guidelines we have made modifications to limit the number of people allowed in the clinic at a time to no more than 10 people. We are limiting entrance into our facility to staff and clients only. All meetings with outside sources have been cancelled. Student training is taking place over the computer. Some staff are working alternative shifts, such as evenings or weekends. Many services are already taking place by Telepsychology.

Clients are asked to come alone to appointments. Minor clients are asked to limit who accompanies them to the appointment to one parent or guardian. No friends, siblings, spouses or other sources of support. We have temporarily turned other empty offices/conference rooms into alternative waiting rooms so that we can limit the number of people waiting in one space. Clients are asked to come no earlier than 5 minutes before their appointment, and to leave within 5 minutes of their appointment ending.

Cancellations: During this outbreak, Benson Psychological Services, PC will waive all cancellation fees for patients who cancel their appointment due to illness. Please contact our office at (701-297-7540) if you need to cancel. No show fees will continue to be charged.

Resources for Updated Information: During times such as this it is important to seek information from reputable and reliable sources. Misinformation and rumors do not serve the goal of protecting the public.

Below are some sources of information we recommend.

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/about/transmission.html>
- Mayo Clinic
<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/coronavirus/symptoms-causes/syc-20479963>
- North Dakota Department of Health (NDDoH): <https://www.health.nd.gov/>
- Minnesota Department of Health: <https://www.health.state.mn.us>

Recommended Preventative Measures: Although there is no vaccine available to prevent infection with the new coronavirus, you can take steps to reduce your risk of infection. WHO and CDC recommend following the standard precautions for avoiding respiratory viruses:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water, or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Cover your mouth and nose with your elbow or tissue when you cough or sneeze.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth if your hands aren't clean.
- Avoid close contact with anyone who is sick.
- Avoid sharing dishes, glasses, bedding and other household items if you're sick.
- Avoid non essential travel, shopping and gathering
- Clean and disinfect surfaces you often touch.
- Stay home from work, school and public areas if you're sick.
- Wear a mask when you go out in public according to the most recent (and changing) recommendations of the World Health Organization (Who.int).

Recommended Self-Care Practices During the COVID 19 Pandemic

- Stick to a routine as much as possible, you may be working from home, your kids are doing school at home, nothing seems the same. The more you can keep doing your regular routine (wake at the same time, eat at the same time, exercise at the same time etc.) the more it will restore some sense of normalcy to the otherwise abnormal situation we are all in.
- Create opportunities to be physically distant, but socially connected. Call, Skype or Facetime with friends and family. Have family movie nights or family game nights. Help your children with their homework. Reach out to loved ones, especially those who live alone or in communities that have been hardest hit.
- Practice Mindfulness and other relaxation techniques. Clinicians have known for years that mindfulness activities can be helpful for dealing with anxiety. Your therapist can teach you how to do mindful breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, full body stretches and other techniques to help you relax.
- Catch up and slow down. Take time for activities you enjoy. Clean that junk drawer, get the clothes ready to be donated, catch up on that scrap book, play with your dog, listen to a podcast, read a good book, take a bubble bath, watch that documentary. Keeping your mind active is critical to not allow negative self-talk to creep into the empty spaces.
- Maintain a healthy sleep schedule, eat healthy and exercise. Take a walk and go outside for sunshine and fresh air. Just make sure to stay 6 feet from your neighbors and obey restrictions on larger gatherings.
- Practice patience with family members. Most people are doing the best they can, their best may look different than yours, but it is still their best. When the whole family is staying at home you may notice yourself getting more irritated with one another. Children may return to behaviors they have outgrown (toilet accidents, bedwetting, tantrums), teenagers may become sullen and withdrawn and want to just stay in their rooms, spouses may bark orders instead of asking nicely. Sometimes this is a signal of anxiety, depression or fear. Try and open up lines of communication and acknowledge that this is hard for everyone. Express expectations and consequences, but resist the urge to yell and exert unnecessary control.
- Get involved. Find out how you can help your community during this time. See if healthy volunteers are needed at the hospitals, shelters, food banks etc. Put hearts in your window and join the “All in this together” movement. Write letters of thanks to doctors, nurses and other first responders across the country.
- Practice positive and affirming self-talk such as; “I can do this”, “I’m doing the best I can”, “I can’t control other people, only my reaction to them”, “I am capable and strong enough to get through this”, and “I am not alone”.

Recommended Self-Care Practices During the COVID 19 Pandemic Continued:

- Avoid self-medicating. Be careful that you are not using alcohol, food, amazon or certain internet sites to help regulate your mood.
- Take a “media break” if you start to feel overwhelmed or panicked. It is important to consider reducing the amount of screen time focused on COVID-19, especially for children. Spending too much time reading or listening to information can lead to unnecessary fear and anxiety. Stay up to date on what is important to foster preventative and safeguarding measures so you can do your part to slow the spread of the disease, but hours of news consumption on this, or any topic, is not good for your mental health.
- If you are a person of faith, stay connected to your faith community and your spiritual and religious practices. Can't gather at a Church, Synagogue, Temple or Mosque? Join on line services or worship privately.
- Focus on what you can control. So many things right now are outside of our control. Accept this and shift your focus to those things you can control, such as your Mindset. Practice gratitude. Try find something to be thankful for every day.
- Remain calm and reassuring to your children. Provide honest and accurate information, but keep in mind their age and maturity. Check in with them and find out what they are thinking and what they have heard. Let them know to come to you with questions. Teach them good preventative measures and focus on how they can help keep safe. As Mr. Rogers says, teach them to “Look for the helpers...you will always find people who are helping.” This wise advice helps divert children to focus on safety instead of distress.

More resources for Mental Health and COVID-19: Here are some good resources regarding how to talk to your children about COVID-19, the mental health aspect of COVID-19, and how to deal with the social distancing that accompanies it

- American Psychological Association:
<https://www.apa.org/practice/programs/dmhi/research-information/social-distancing>
- Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress: <https://www.cstsonline.org/resources/resource-master-list/coronavirus-and-emerging-infectious-disease-outbreaks-response>
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network:
https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/outbreak_factsheet_1.pdf
- CDC: How to talk to children about the Coronavirus
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/talking-with-children.html>

