



VR Counselor Huddles:

Accessing Virtual Mental Health Services Remotely

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INTRODUCTION

In late 2019 or early 2020, a novel coronavirus causing severe respiratory symptoms began spreading in the United States. The illness caused by the virus became known as COVID-19. A national emergency was declared in March 2020, and states began implementing orders to stay at home and practice social distancing. Businesses closed, unemployment soared, and health care systems became overwhelmed. America's workforce transformed the way they worked and the way we live our lives changed dramatically. Due to this context, state vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies closed their offices and began providing services remotely, forcing VR counselors to work from home and change the way they interact with their clients and co-workers.

In April and May 2020, the Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI) conducted five virtual "counselor huddles" with 106 VR counselors from 11¹ state VR agencies using the video conferencing platform Zoom. These events brought VR counselors from several agencies together to discuss how they are adapting to working remotely during the time of COVID-19, what strategies they've found helpful, and what practices and tools they expect to keep using after the pandemic ends.

This brief focuses on observations counselors shared about the need for mental health services during the pandemic.

Other briefs in this six-part VR Counselor Huddle series:

- ▶ Providing Job Search Assistance Remotely
- ▶ Providing Counseling and Guidance Remotely
- ▶ Providing Transition Services Remotely
- ▶ Providing VR Services Remotely
- ▶ Agencies for the Blind Providing Services Remotely

¹ Participating State VR Agencies: Arizona Vocational Rehabilitation, Maine Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, Massachusetts Commission for the Blind, Michigan Services for the Blind, Minnesota Rehabilitation Services, Nebraska Vocational Rehabilitation, New Jersey Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired, New Hampshire Vocational Rehabilitation, Oklahoma Department of Rehabilitation Services, Oregon Commission for the Blind, Washington Services for the Blind

DISCUSSION

Dealing with mental health symptoms and maintaining emotional wellbeing in this environment emerged as a theme during the huddles. Counselors noted with surprise that some clients seemed to be more open to discussions about the services they need when communicating virtually. They were more willing to share their anxieties and the barriers they're facing than they had been previously in face-to-face meetings. Clients also seemed to have more time for meaningful discussions and looked to their counselors for support and resources.

With clients being more forthcoming about mental health symptoms, many counselors reported that they were struggling to identify related resources. Some of the challenges identified were closure of services in certain communities, telehealth and telemental health alternatives not being available, and the impact of the quarantine on overall wellbeing.

The counselors discussed challenges and useful strategies for clients who were dealing with mental health issues. There are the clients with a mental health diagnosis who were receiving mental health services for their symptoms prior to the pandemic. Some of them struggle to access their mental health providers, including their therapists and support groups.

Access to services and resources varies significantly from region to region. Clients living in more rural communities are experiencing more disruptions in their services. Smaller clinics and independent practices have closed and telehealth services are not as readily available due to technology and internet limitations. The good news is that in many communities, mental health providers were able to quickly adapt and shift to telehealth services with limited disruptions. Even in more rural communities, these services are starting to become available.

In addition to clients with a mental health diagnosis, the VR counselors reported that many other clients who do not have a history of mental illness are also experiencing situational anxiety and depression as a response to the



pandemic. Social distancing is affecting everyone. As one counselor stated, “There’s less hugging, touching, and we will still distance to a degree when face-to-face.” These feelings can be exacerbated for those living in isolation who no longer have access to their social network. For many, the fear of leaving home and coming in contact with the virus has triggered anxiety and many clients have put their job search on hold. Even individuals who continue to work with the general public during this time are reporting higher stress levels not diminished by wearing face masks.

Another contributing factor to mental health issues for many clients has been the loss of their job or reduction of hours. With so many businesses required to shut down as part of the quarantine, many had to lay off staff. This has caused a financial burden for many people. There is also the uncertainty of whether these positions will be refilled once businesses are allowed to reopen. Some businesses will not be able to return to the same capacity and others may decide to continue on a hybrid model, with some aspects of their business operating digitally.

Many of the counselors reported they found themselves wearing the “therapist hat” on a regular basis with both clients and peers. Everyone is experiencing quarantine fatigue. While technology has been invaluable in VR agencies being able to continue to deliver services and support clients, virtual meetings do not have the same impact on interpersonal relationships and feeling connected. This sense of disconnect is a major contributor to stress, anxiety, and depression.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Counselors shared the following strategies they are using and recommending to clients to help deal with stress and to maintain mind and body health:

1. Stay active, go for walks, take free online Zumba or yoga classes, and engage in other types of exercise.
2. Be present and center yourself. Meditation is a great tool for this.
3. Get outside and take advantage of the sunshine and nice weather.
4. Set time to disconnect from technology every day.
5. Reach out to friends and family members regularly and stay engaged with your neighbors and in your community even from a distance.
6. Most support groups (trauma, AA/NA, grief support) are now offering online meeting options. Take advantage of these, even if they don’t feel the same as they do in person.
7. Many of the larger national and state-based mental health providers have created online toolkits and resource guides.



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www.ExploreVR.org

www.CommunityInclusion.org

RESOURCES

Screening Tools

These free depression screening tools can be used via teleconference:

- ▶ The [Glasgow Depression Scale](#) is a valid and reliable depressive symptom rating scale for people with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities.
- ▶ The [PHQ-2](#) is a two-question screening tool that can be used as a starting point for determining whether a referral must be made to a mental health professional. The [PHQ-9](#) is a more in-depth tool.

Online Tools and Guides

- ▶ The [American Bar Association](#) has some links and resources on depression, anxiety, dealing with panic and stress, and substance abuse.
- ▶ The [Anxiety and Depression Association of America](#) understands that coronavirus outbreak is triggering increased anxiety, especially with such heightened media attention. The site has expert tips and resources specific to anxiety related to COVID-19.
- ▶ [Access Living](#) is a Chicago-based organization. They have a large repository of COVID-19 resources including several specific to mental health.
- ▶ [Care for Your Coronavirus Anxiety](#) contains a toolkit with information about anxiety, isolation, medications, financial stressors, and expert advice.
- ▶ The [CDC](#) provides a list of emergency contact information and strategies for managing stress.
- ▶ [Crisis Text Line](#) offers step-by-step information on how to access a crisis hotline via text or through Facebook Messenger.
- ▶ The [Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion](#) has created a toolkit focused on creating a mental-health-friendly workplace.
- ▶ The [Equality Maine](#) website has a dedicated COVID-19 resource section including mental health organizations and online support groups.
- ▶ The [Global Healthy Living Foundation](#) is a nonprofit whose mission is to improve the quality of life for people living with chronic illnesses (such as arthritis, osteoporosis, and cardiovascular disease). They have a COVID-19 patient support program.
- ▶ [Mental Health America](#) provides various resources including tools, workshops, etc. for individuals experiencing mental health symptoms and their families, providers, and first responders.
- ▶ The [Minnesota COVID-19 Response](#) website contains resources on housing, healthcare, food support, and mental health.
- ▶ The [NAMI COVID-19 Resource and Information Guide](#) contains information on managing symptoms, accessing services, and using support systems.
- ▶ The [OCD Kids Movie website](#) contains information for families and kids on managing OCD symptoms, including tip sheets and how to find a provider in your community.

- ▶ The [Pennsylvania Office of Developmental Programs MyODP](#) offers guidance for behavioral specialists, supports coordination organizations, and other providers about diverting and responding to potential crisis situations. They also have a statewide helpline for individuals struggling with anxiety and other challenging emotions due to the COVID-19 emergency.
- ▶ The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration fact sheet [Taking Care of Your Behavioral Health – Tips for Social Distancing, Quarantine, and Isolation During an Infectious Disease Outbreak](#) offers pandemic coping strategies. SAMHSA also has COVID-19 [emergency grants](#).
- ▶ The [Workforce Innovation Technical Assistance Center](#) website has a designated COVID-19 resource section on a number of VR-specific topics. It also has some general resources including a few specific to mental health in the Resources for Individuals with Disabilities section.

Hotlines

- ▶ **SAMHSA National Helpline** (1-800-662-HELP) is a free, confidential, 24/7, 365-day-a-year treatment referral and information service (in English and Spanish) for individuals and families facing mental and/or substance use disorders.
- ▶ **Suicide Prevention Lifeline** (1-800-273-8255) provides 24/7, free and confidential support for people in distress, prevention and crisis resources.

Meditation/Mindfulness

- ▶ [Insight Timer](#) is a app for sleep, anxiety and stress.
- ▶ [Mindfulness App](#) is designed to take a moment and reset during your busy day. It's main features are a daily delivery of mindfulness inspiration to your phone/tablet in the form of tips, exercises and teachings.
- ▶ [Omvana](#) is an app that provides one of the largest collections of meditation sessions currently available. You choose from a selection of famous authors and renowned teachers that provide guided sessions.

Relevant Articles

- ▶ [Amid Coronavirus, Calls and Texts to Mental-Health Hotlines Are Surging](#) describes the increased need for mental health services during the pandemic.
- ▶ [Coronavirus Anxiety: Key Advice for Chronic Illness Patients from Health Psychologists](#) looks at the impact of the pandemic on individuals with chronic illness. It suggests strategies for minimizing and dealing with anxiety during this time.
- ▶ [How to Manage the Emotional Impact of Getting Laid Off](#) from the New York Times shares strategies for dealing with negative feelings brought on by a lay-off.
- ▶ The Forbes article [How To Protect Your Mental Health During The Coronavirus Pandemic, According To Psychologists](#) discusses ways to minimize the impact of COVID-19 on mental and emotional health.