

Informed Consent for Technology-Assisted Counseling and Online Counseling

The purpose of this document is to inform you, the client, about many aspects of online counseling services: the process, the counselor, the potential risks and benefits of services, safeguards against those risks, and alternatives to online services. Please read this entire document, then print and sign. Instructions on where to send the signed document are located below the signature line.

A. Process

1. Possible misunderstandings

The client should be aware that misunderstandings are possible with telephone and text-based modalities, such as email and real-time internet chat, since nonverbal cues are relatively lacking. Even with video chat software, misunderstandings may occur since bandwidth is always limited and images lack detail. Counselors are observers of human behavior and gather much information from body language, vocal inflection, eye contact, and other non-verbal cues. If you have never engaged in online counseling before, have patience with the process, and clarify information if you think your counselor has not understood you well. Also, be patient if your counselor asks periodically for clarification.

2. Turn-around time

Using asynchronous (not in "real-time") communication such as email, entails a delay in response. The counselor will make every effort to respond to email requests within 12 to 24 hours. If the client is in a state of crisis or emergency, the counselor recommends the client call 911 or go to the nearest hospital emergency room. Clients may also utilize crisis hotlines such as 1-800-SUICIDE or 1-800-273-TALK (for the hearing impaired, 1-800-799-4TTY). For Hawaii residents, the Crisis Line on Oahu is 1-808-832-3100; Neighbor Island residents may call 1-800-753-6879.

B. Privacy of the counselor

Although the Internet provides the appearance of anonymity and privacy in counseling, privacy is more of an issue online than in person. The client is responsible for securing their own computer hardware, internet access points, chat software, email, and passwords.

The counselor has a right to his or her privacy and may wish to restrict the use of any copies or recordings the client makes of their communications. Clients may seek the permission of the counselor before recording any portion of the session and/or posting any portion of said sessions on the internet, including websites such as Facebook or YouTube.

C. Potential benefits

The potential benefits of receiving mental health services online include both the circumstances in which the counselor considers the appropriateness of online mental health services and the possible advantages of providing those services online. For instance, the potential benefits of email may include:

1. Being able to send and receive messages at any time of day (or night)
2. Never having to leave messages with intermediaries

3. Avoiding voicemail and telephone tag
4. Being able to take as long as one wants to compose a message and having the opportunity to reflect upon one's messages
5. Having a record of communications to refer to later
6. Feeling less inhibited than with face-to-face contact

Text-based chat has many of the same advantages of convenience, feeling reduced scrutiny from the counselor, having time to compose a response, and being able to refer back to the chat log for reference.

Video chat is also convenient, allowing clients to potentially be counseled from anywhere once they can gain an internet signal and operate the necessary hardware and software.

D. Potential risks

There are various risks related to electronic provision of counseling services related to the technology used, the distance between counselor and client and issues related to timeliness. For example, the potential risks of email-based counseling may include:

1. The message not being received.
2. Confidentiality being breached through an encrypted email, lack of password protection, or leaving information on a public access computer in a library or internet cafe.
3. Messages could fail to be received if they are sent to the wrong address, which might also be a breach of confidentiality, or if they just are not noticed by the counselor.
4. Confidentiality could be breached in transit by hackers or internet service providers, or at either end by others with access to the client's account or computer.

People accessing the internet from public locations, such as library computer lab or cafe, should consider the visibility of their screen to people around them. Make sure to position yourself to avoid peeping by those around you. Using cell phones can be risky in that signals are scrambled, but rarely encrypted.

E. Safeguards

Your counselor has selected HIPAA BAA-compliant services with Google and VSEE for chat-based communications to allow for the highest possible security and confidentiality of the content of your sessions. Your personal information is encrypted and stored on a secure server. The client is responsible for creating and using additional safeguards when the computer used to access services may be accessed by others, such as creating passwords to use the computer, keeping their email and chat IDs and passwords secret, and maintaining security of their wireless internet access points (where applicable). Please discuss any concerns with your counselor early in your first session so as to develop strategies to limit risk.

F. Alternatives

Online counseling may not be appropriate for many types of clients, including those who have numerous

concerns over the risks of internet counseling, clients with active suicidal or homicidal thoughts, and clients who are experiencing active manic or psychotic symptoms.

An alternative to receiving mental health services online would be receiving mental health services in person. The online counselor can and will assist clients who would like to explore face-to-face options in their area. Many state and local agencies will treat low-income clients on a low or no-fee basis. Please feel free to request a referral any time you think a different counseling relationship would be more practical or beneficial to you.

G. Proxies

The counselor only treats clients who are legally in a position to consent for themselves to receive mental health services. Clients who are not in such a position include children under the age of consent (18 in most cases) or clients who have a legally-appointed guardian.

H. Confidentiality of the client

Maintaining confidentiality is extremely important to the counselor and the counselor will take care and consideration to prevent unnecessary disclosure. Information about the client will only be released with his or her permission, with the following exceptions:

1. If the counselor believes that someone is seriously considering and likely to attempt suicide.
2. If the counselor believes that someone intends to hurt another person.
3. If the counselor believes someone is engaging or intends to engage in behavior which will expose another person to a potentially life-threatening communicable disease.
4. If the counselor suspects abuse, neglect, or exploitation of a minor or an incapacitated adult.
5. If the counselor believes that someone's mental condition leaves the person gravely incapacitated.
6. If the counselor is court-ordered or subpoenaed.

I. Records

The counselor will maintain records of online counseling services. These records can include reference notes, copies of transcripts of chat and internet communication, and session summaries. These records are confidential and will be maintained for 7 years as required by applicable legal and ethical standards. The counselor will ask the client in advance for permission before recording any audio or video.

J. Procedures

The counselor might not immediately receive an online communication or might experience a local backup. If a client is in a state of crisis or emergency, the counselor recommends contacting a crisis line or an agency local to the client. Clients may choose to utilize the following crisis lines:

- 1-800-SUICIDE
- 1-800-273-TALK

- For the Hearing Impaired: 1-800-799-4TTY
- Crisis Line for Oahu, HI residents: 1-808-832-3100
- Crisis Line for Neighbor Islands, HI residents: 1-800-753-6879

Work with your counselor to identify local resources if you have concerns about the timeliness of responses.

K. Payments

All payments will be made via cash, money order, personal check, or PayPal.

L. Contact information and Disconnection of services

Your VSEE information will not be saved. You will need to initiate chat/video calls by searching for Amanda by her email address in the VSEE app: amanda@hisccs.com

If there's ever a disruption of services on the internet, then the client will need to call 1-808-676-5065 or 1-808-384-8279.

M. Signature area

Print name: _____

Sign and Date: _____

Please send this completed form to:

Second City Counseling Services
94-229 Waipahu Depot Street #207
Waipahu, HI 96797-3032

*Revised April 2018.