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The ethical framework for technology – delivered coaching:
a summary

As more of us move our practices online due to the pandemic, **Kate Anthony, DeeAnna Merz Nagel** and **Stephen Goss** of the Online Therapy Institute offer a helpful and timely summary of their guidance for coaches who use online technology to deliver their services.

The *Ethical Framework for the Use of Technology–delivered Coaching* is a frame of reference and a guide for individual coaches, coach mentors and supervisors, as well as schools of coaching and professional organisations. Many of our frameworks, influenced by BACP's *Ethical Framework*[1] and subsequent advice on working online, have been referenced or adopted by professional organisations across the globe, and we offer this framework to the coaching profession in that same vein.

Coaching as a profession continues to gain popularity[2] and counsellors are in a unique position to harness coaching skills for use in their counselling practices. There remains debate about whether coaching is a separate discipline from counselling. At the Online Therapy Institute, we posit that coaching stands alone but may also be considered a sub-discipline of counselling and psychotherapy, since coaching is rooted in positive psychology theory.

Since the start of the pandemic, we have seen a huge increase in counselling and coaching services conducted online as face-to-face services became unsafe. The Online Therapy Institute has offered the ethical framework for the use of technology in coaching for 10 years. Just prior to the pandemic the coaching framework was updated and, considering the increased need resulting from COVID-19, this framework was recently further updated and issued as a White Paper, titled *The Ethical Framework for Technology-delivered Coaching.*[3] The framework was originally created as a complement to the *Ethical Framework for the Use of Technology in Mental Health*,[4] first published in 2009. While the coaching and mental health frameworks are similar, there remain nuances for those professionals who work strictly within the coaching scope of practice. This updated framework delineates professional use of technology within the coaching profession, whether delivering a coaching session via a video platform such as ProblemShared.net or managing a professional Facebook page for your coaching business. In general, the coaching framework allows for greater transparency, given that coaching is typically not a service that is offered within the healthcare industry.

This reverts to mental health ethical expectations if the professional is working within the counsellor scope of practice. The difference is that a counsellor utilising coaching theory and technique as part of an integrative approach falls under the purview of counselling ethics and scope of practice, while a coach with a counselling background is practising under the purview of coaching ethics and scope of practice. The role of the coach or counsellor is generally specified within the initial counselling-informed consent contract or the coaching agreement contract.

The following indicates some of the competences that are emphasised in our updated framework. This iteration of its development incorporates specific attention to the use of technology within each competency:

- **Coaches have a sufficient understanding of technology.** It is important for coaches to understand the technology they use, both with clients and for marketing purposes.

- **Coaches using technology will make every effort to ensure the protection of their clients' privacy and confidentiality.** Always keeping in mind client confidentiality, the use of encrypted delivery methods represents the highest ethical standard.

- **Coaches display pertinent and necessary information on websites**. Knowing how to guide a potential client in the right direction and posting pertinent contact and crisis information on coaching websites is important, as is working within one's scope of practice. It is one thing to go online with a coaching client due to a specific time-limited necessity, and quite another to continually deliver coaching via technology, having had no training or supervision in this area.

- **Coaches work only within their scope of practice**.

- **Coaches enter into a contractual agreement with the client to provide coaching services**. Coaches enter into an agreement with clients, and the agreement includes pertinent information regarding the coach's approach, privacy, terms of use and boundaries regarding technology, such as technology breakdown during a client session and social media communication.

- **Coaches conduct an initial interview and evaluate the client's ability to effectively engage in technology-enabled coaching.** Coaches conduct an initial interview to determine the suitability of the coach's services for the client, and this includes the client's competency and capability to receive services via technology.

- **Coaches seek out training, guidance, mentoring and supervision**.

The experience of the pandemic in forcing many service providers and individual practitioners alike to address the risks and possibilities of distance

provision, even if they had not wished to do so previously, has led to a massive shift in the numbers of people working in this way and a very significant need to ensure that standards are maintained and that services remain safe and effective. The most recent research findings available at the time of writing (August 2020[5]) indicate that two-thirds of counsellors intend to continue making online working part of their core business, even if all effects of COVID-19 were to be somehow magically removed from the picture; and there is reason to believe that a similar pattern will apply across the coaching profession too. It seems likely that the mental health and coaching professions alike will contain a large amount of technology-enabled services as part of an overall blended service provision. This omnichannelling[6] of communication services in the future reflects the changes in society in general since the mid 1990s, and even from the early days of the development of the internet itself. This should have happened already to keep the profession relevant to clients; the pandemic has simply fast-tracked this process. ■

Excerpt from the updated framework:

Technology changes happen rapidly so realising that and knowing that more and more coaches are using technology to deliver services, this updated framework is both timely and necessary. Professional coaching organisations create and update codes of ethics but to date, these organisations have not incorporated the use of technology into the codes or guidelines to reflect best practice. This ethical framework is offered as a point of reference for governing bodies, certifying organisations, and the professional coaches these bodies and organisations represent.

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FURTHER READING

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr Kate Anthony is the UK's leading consultant, trainer, and author in the field of technology and mental health services. She is a Fellow of BACP and past President and Fellow of the International Society for Mental Health Online (ISMHO). She is CEO and Head of Faculty at the Online Therapy Institute and Head of Clinical Ethics for the e-clinic Problemshared.net. Kate lives on a widebeam barge on the Grand Union Canal in London with her partner and four chickens. **www.onlinetherapyinstitute.com** and **www.kateanthony.net**.

DeeAnna Merz Nagel is a counsellor and coach educator. She is considered a thought leader in the fields of telemental health and technology-delivered coaching in the US. She is co-founder of the Online Therapy Institute and a faculty member at The Institute for Life Coach Training. DeeAnna is Past President of the International Society for Mental Health Online and holds credentials as a licensed mental health counsellor, approved clinical supervisor and certified coach. **www.onlinetherapyinstitute.com** and **www.deeannamerznagel.com**

Dr Stephen Goss began in distance provision of mental healthcare over 35 years ago. He is Research and Development Director for the Online Therapy Institute and Director of Studies for the DPsych by Professional Studies at the Metanoia Institute. He also chairs the specialist Technology in Therapy Research Group and is a consultant editor to the *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*. Stephen also provides online supervision and service development consultancy.