

Information for Students about Telecounseling Services

During campus closure for COVID-19, LSUS Counseling Services is offering distance counseling via telephone or video conferencing to currently enrolled students who meet the eligibility criteria for this service.

Eligibility for Telecounseling Services

To be eligible for services, students must:

- Be a currently enrolled student at LSUS
- Reside in Louisiana
- Meet pre-screening criteria

Scope of Telecounseling Services

Telecounseling or distance counseling refers to providing counseling services remotely using telecommunications technologies, such as video conferencing or telephone. Telecounseling is offered to improve access to counseling services for LSUS students during major crises and campus closures, such as COVID-19. However, the results of telecounseling cannot be guaranteed or assured. You are not required to use telecounseling and have the right to request other service options or withdraw consent at any time without affecting your right to future care or treatment at LSUS Counseling Services.

Distance counseling should not be viewed as a substitute for face-to-face counseling or medication by a physician. It is an alternative form of counseling with some differences from traditional counseling. LSUS Counseling Services will be providing a limited scope of service via telecounseling, as counselors are working remotely from home. Limitations are as follows:

- Telecounseling will be restricted to offering limited support and guidance (i.e. check-ins, self-care, coping strategies), as well as providing alternative resources, and will not be used for ongoing mental health related matters.
- Telecounseling services may not be appropriate, or the best choice of service for reasons including, but not limited to: heightened risk of harm to oneself or others; lack of access to, or difficulty with, communications technology; significant communications service disruptions; or need for more intensive services. If it is determined that your needs exceed the scope of service or expertise available through LSUS Counseling Services, or that your needs cannot be adequately met by participating in telecounseling, we will assist you to identify an appropriate referral to meet your needs.
- Telecounseling appointments will be conducted only between the individual student and the LSUS counselor with whom the student has established a counseling relationship. *No other individuals will be allowed to participate in telecounseling sessions.*

Benefits and Risks of Telecounseling

One of the benefits of telecounseling is that the client and clinician can engage in services without being in the same physical location. This can be helpful in ensuring continuity of care if the client or clinician moves to a different location, during campus closures, or is otherwise unable to continue to meet in person. It is also more convenient and takes less time.

Telecounseling, however, requires technical competence on both our parts to be helpful. Although there are benefits of telecounseling, there are some differences between in-person counseling and telecounseling, as well as some risks. For example:

- **Risks to confidentiality.** Because telecounseling sessions take place outside of the counselor's private office, there is potential for other people to overhear sessions if you are not in a private place during the session. Counselors will take reasonable steps to ensure your privacy on their end. But it is important for you to make sure you find a private place for your session where you will not be interrupted. It is also important for you to protect the privacy of your session on your cell phone or other device. You should participate in counseling only while in a room or area where other people are not present and cannot overhear the conversation.
- **Issues related to technology.** There are many ways that technology issues might impact telecounseling. For example, technology may stop working during a session, other people might be able to get access to your private conversation, or stored data could be accessed by unauthorized people or companies.
- **Crisis management and intervention.** Usually, counselors will not engage in telecounseling with clients who are currently in a crisis situation requiring high levels of support and intervention. Before engaging in telecounseling, we will develop an emergency response plan to address potential crisis situations that may arise during the course of our telecounseling work.

What to Expect Before You Begin Telecounseling Services

Prior to beginning distance counseling, the following will be expected:

- For all students new to utilizing our services, you will be provided with digital intake forms that share more details about the nature of counseling, which you will be asked to complete and digitally sign prior to your first appointment.
- For all new and continuing students, you will be required to complete an informed consent document describing limitations to telecounseling services being offered.
- You will be required to provide information about how to contact you, an emergency contact person, and emergency resources in your current location.

What to Expect in Your First Telecounseling Appointment

Telecounseling sessions will be facilitated using the Zoom digital platform with secure encryption settings. The following are expected steps in this process:

- We will email you a secure link via email for the appointment.
- All LSUS students are provided with free Zoom accounts. It is recommended that you sign in to your account at least 5 minutes prior to your session start time.

- You must initiate the connection at the time of your session by clicking the link provided by Counseling Services staff.

In the first telecounseling appointment, your counselor will begin by reviewing the informed consent forms you filled out and asking a few screening questions to assure that telecounseling services are appropriate for you.

Emergency Management for Distance Counseling

Assessing and evaluating threats and other emergencies can be more difficult when conducting telecounseling than in traditional in-person therapy. To address some of these difficulties, we will create an emergency plan before engaging in telecounseling services. In the event of an emergency, and for your safety, the following measures are important and necessary:

- We will need to know the location/address in which you will consistently be during counseling sessions, and will need to know if this location changes.
- We will ask you to identify an emergency contact person who is near your location and who can be contacted in the event of a crisis or emergency to assist in addressing the situation.
- We will ask you to verify that this emergency contact person is able and willing to go to your location in the event of an emergency, and if your counselor deems necessary, call 911 and/or transport you to a hospital.

Backup Plan in Case of Technology Failure

- If the session is interrupted for any reason, such as the technological connection fails, and you are having an emergency, do not call your counselor back; instead, call 911, or go to your nearest emergency room. Contact your counselor after you have called or obtained emergency services.
- If the session is interrupted and you are not having an emergency, disconnect from the session. Your counselor will wait two (2) minutes and then re-contact you via the Zoom platform which you were using to conduct your session.
- If you do not receive a call back within two (2) minutes, then email communication is the secondary or backup form of communication.
- If there is a technological failure and we are unable to resume the connection, then your counselor will rely on email to reschedule or follow-up with you.

Electronic Communications

For communication between sessions, counselors only use email communication with your permission and only for administrative purposes. This means that email exchanges with our office should be limited to administrative matters. This includes things like setting and changing appointments, sending resources, and other related issues. You should be aware that we cannot guarantee the confidentiality of any information communicated by email. Therefore, counselors will not discuss any clinical information by email and prefer that you do not either. Also, counselors do not regularly check email (particularly after hours and on weekends) and cannot be guaranteed to respond immediately, so email should not be used if there is an emergency.

Counseling is most effective when clinical discussions occur at your regularly scheduled sessions. But if an urgent issue arises, you should feel free to attempt to reach your counselor by email, who will try to return your email within 24 hours except on weekends and holidays. If you are unable to reach your counselor and feel that you cannot wait for a reply, contact your family physician or the nearest emergency room, or call 911.

If you have any questions, please ask your counselor for further details.

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FOR INFORMATION ONLY: This document provides information in preparation for telecounseling services through LSUS Counseling Services. You will be asked to digitally sign a briefer version electronically.