



# Consumer Guide to Telepsychology

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## WHAT IS TELEPSYCHOLOGY?

Telepsychology is about providing **psychological services through telecommunication** technology. It may be done through phone or computer. It is not new but rapidly gaining popularity throughout the world. More and more psychological service providers are utilizing telepsychology in consultation, assessment, therapy, supervision, coaching, training, teaching, and meetings.

Traditional psychological services are offered in face-to-face format, often in the privacy and security of the service provider's office. When face-to-face psychological service is not practical or preferred, the service provider may offer the service through telepsychology. Yet, consumers should not assume that telepsychology can fully replace traditional face-to-face services or assume that it is always safe and effective. This consumer guide is designed to help you make wise decisions when participating in telepsychology.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF TELECOMMUNICATION & TELEPSYCHOLOGY

Today, people are getting very used to using the phone or computer to communicate via:

- Text messages (written words and symbols)
- Phone conversation and recorded voice messages (sound)
- Photos (still images)
- Video calls or video clips (sound and moving images)

While new communication technologies ease our life to a great extent, it can sometimes cause misunderstanding and frustration. Moreover, when we are not careful enough, our privacy or secrets may leak through the devices or even misused by others. The loss and damage can be serious and long-lasting.

Traditional face-to-face psychological services are designed to ensure the interpersonal communication is complete, secure and respectful. The physical office should be designed to protect and respect your privacy, and there is someone there to assist you. The psychological service provider can achieve full understanding of your issues and can offer precise advice when you meet face-to-face.

## WHEN TELEPSYCHOLOGY MAY BENEFIT YOU

Telepsychology may replace traditional face-to-face psychological services because of:

- Social distancing requirement
- Geographical or transportation barrier
- Physical disability or health limit
- Scheduling difficulty
- Security reason
- Financial reason
- Social stigma

## WHEN TELEPSYCHOLOGY MAY UPSET OR TROUBLE YOU

Telepsychology may upset or trouble you when:

- Either of both parties take it too casually or carelessly
- You do not seem to know the real person whom you are confiding in
- Your inner thoughts and emotions cannot be fully conveyed or observed
- Messages not clarified in time may lead to misunderstanding
- Privacy is not fully under your control or too easily got interfered by others
- Transmission or technology problems disrupting communication
- Malicious hacking or data stealing by others
- Careless loss or disclosure of electronically-stored privacy data or secret information
- The psychological service provider is not in front of you at emergency
- Telepsychology is not covered by your health insurance or employee-assisted policy
- When the specific telepsychology service you need has not been proven effective or acceptable to the profession

## DOs AND DON'Ts IN TELEPSYCHOLOGY

It is the duty of all psychological service providers to tell you in advance the potential benefits, limits and risks involved in telepsychology. They should prepare an informed consent form for you to review and sign before starting the service. This checklist may help you make wiser decisions:

DO:

- ✓ Ask the service provider about his/her competence and experience in telepsychology
- ✓ Ask the service provider about alternatives to telepsychology, especially at emergency situations
- ✓ Ask the service provider about his/her plan or duration of utilizing telepsychology for you
- ✓ Ask the service provider about his/her limits and rules in utilizing telepsychology
- ✓ Ask the service provider about his/her measures to protect your privacy data and secrets
- ✓ Ask the service provider about his/her fee charging policy in telepsychology
- ✓ Discuss with the service provider about the best and alternative platforms or medium for telepsychology with you (software, messages, phone calls, video calls, etc.), particularly in case of transmission breakdown
- ✓ Ask your insurance provider or employee-assisted policy whether telepsychology is covered

- ✓ Try to use a phone or computer that only you have full control
- ✓ Ensure battery is sufficiently charged and transmission signals are strong
- ✓ Ensure your environment is private and you will not be disturbed, distracted or intruded
- ✓ Ensure you keep the appointment; always set reminders
- ✓ Dress and present yourself properly in front of camera as if you are going to meet the service provider face-to-face
- ✓ Use front lighting if you are using a camera so that your facial expressions can be seen
- ✓ Be prepared to tell the service provider honestly about your current location (address), health condition, risks, etc.
- ✓ Express yourself more clearly and fully; especially about how you think and feel
- ✓ Install and activate security or privacy measures for your computer or phone for telepsychology

**DO NOT:**

- Connect through a public internet that others may access
- Disclose password to anybody, including the service provide
- Engage in other activity (meal, sports, housework, commuting, etc.) during telepsychology session
- Treat the telepsychology service too casually
- Send sensitive images, video clips voice recording without first discussing with the service provider
- Continue if you become unsure of the identity or authenticity of the service provider
- Invite or involve someone else into your telepsychology session without first agreeing with the service provider
- Record or share the telepsychology session without the prior agreement with the service provider

**CHILD OR SPECIAL CONSUMERS**

- Children using telepsychology should first seek advice from their parents or trusted adults
- Adults should help children follow the DOs and DONTs mentioned above
- Intellectually disabled persons should also be helped to follow the DOs and DONTs mentioned above
- Emotionally vulnerable persons should understand that telepsychology cannot offer emergency response or instant help; they should be prepared to access nearest emergency or protective services
- Consumers who do not wish to present themselves in face-to-face psychological service should understand that there are limits to telepsychology and that certain assessment and intervention cannot be done via telepsychology

**Telepsychology Across Countries**

Currently, Hong Kong has no specific law to regulate telepsychology. However, when either the telepsychology service provider or the consumer is located in another country during the service (e.g. overseas duty, visiting, immigrating), they may have to comply with relevant laws of that country. The service provider has the responsibility to find out early whether such service provision is lawful or restricted in that country. The consumer should also inform the service provider immediately if he or she is located in another country so that the service provider can make lawful arrangements.

## **ABOUT US**

The Hong Kong Psychological Society (HKPS) is a non-profit learned society and professional organization established in 1968 to promote psychology and to upkeep professional standards of its members as well as psychological practices in Hong Kong. Today, it has over 2000 members, about half of which are professional psychologists. HKPS has a Code of Professional Conduct which binds all members. Any HKPS member found breaching the Code may be subject to disciplinary investigation and sanction.

## **FOR GENERAL INFORMATION / COMPLAINT AGAINST A HKPS MEMBER**

Please visit HKPS website: [www.hkps.org.hk](http://www.hkps.org.hk) or write to:

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