COMMUNICATING & RAPPORT BUILDING ONLINE

FIACHRA Ó SÚILLEABHÁIN, SIMONE McCAUGHREN & KENNETH BURNS

University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

@UCCsocialwork

INTRODUCTION

Social work practice has been significantly influenced since the introduction of travel and workplace restrictions due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. The well-established disciplinary practices of home-visits, community-based clinical work and even office-based assessments have been seriously impacted by the public health measures aimed at reducing community transmission of infection. The ONLINE SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE series has been designed for practitioners and practice managers who providing services through online and tele-communication platforms. This tool provides tips about e-communication, rapport-building and relationship-based work online / remotely through 'e-social work'. **Please note that this series is not intended to replace any organisational, regulatory, legal or data protection frameworks**. Practitioners are reminded to adhere to their professional codes of conduct and ethics, contracts of employment, and the policies, procedures and guidelines of their organisations.

WHAT IS E-SOCIAL WORK?

E-social work, as we term it, encompasses the use of real-time, audio-video communication technologies and tools to enable contact between social workers and service-users in various locations, including telephone communications. E-social work has links to the development of tele-health in health care since the advent of accessible internet connectivity, online platforms, browsers and telecommunication apps in the early 2000s. E-social work has an existing footprint in specific practice settings (e.g. mental health practice) and in some countries to provide services across large rural and less-populated regions). The emergence of COVID-19 has ignited fresh interest in e-social work in order to maintain existing service provisions. Adapting the typologies of tele-health developed by the American Academy of Family Physicians (2020) for social work purposes, we have identified four types of e-social work practice:

Type	Service type	Possible ICT platforms[1]	Service-user / social worker relationship
E-social work assessment	Online visits between a social worker and a service-user for the purposes of completing a social work assessment / bio-psycho-social assessment. Service-user may be asked to complete specific forms and/or reflective exercises between sessions.	Telephone, *Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Skype for Business, FaceTime, Whatsapp, Microsoft 365* apps such as *Microsoft Forms, Google G-Suite apps like Google Meet, Cisco Webex*	New or Established Service-user
E-social work intervention	Provision of social work interventions to service-users via ICT platforms: counselling, advice, advocacy, support, training, groups, youth services, and so on.	Telephone, *Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Skype for Business, Google Hangouts / Google Meet, FaceTime, Microsoft 365 apps, Google G-Suite, Padlet, Cisco Webex, YouTube video, online games and art programmes*	Established Service-user
Virtual social work check-in	A brief (15-30 minutes) referral conversations, consultations or check-ins with a social worker via telephone or telecommunications device to decide whether in-person office / home visit or other service is needed.	Telephone, *Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Skype for Business, Google Hangouts / Google Meet, FaceTime, Whatsapp, Cisco Webex*	New or Established Service-user
E-communication	Referrals or communications between service-users and social workers / social work agencies via portals / ICT platforms.	Telephone, email, organisational platforms such *Microsoft Office 365 apps, Microsoft Teams, Google G-Suite, Google Meet, YouTube*	New or Established Service-User

[1] Please note this toolkit does not endorse the use of any particular ICT-platform or app. However, Facebook Live, direct messaging via Instagram, and TikTok should not be used to provide care virtually. Some services permit a limited use of Whatsapp. Google Meet is preferred over Google Hangouts and will soon be free for all G-mail users until Sept. 2020. Despite its popularity and ease of use, there are security issues with Zoom which are likely to limit its usage for sensitive client and teamwork. Microsoft 365 is the new name for Office 365. Google G-Suite Business and Enterprise are pay services and different to the free versions of Google apps.

E-SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE: THINK BEFORE YOU ACT

Distance-based online practice offers opportunities and time to social work practitioners for direct work that otherwise would have been consumed with travel. However, social work managers and practitioners have to make informed decisions about the introduction of e-social work into a blended model of service delivery before rushing into adopting platforms. Careful and considered risk assessment should be undertaken, and where possible, service-users' views should be sought before providing social work online. Ideally, e-social work should be an addition to the suite of services delivered by organisations and should not replace all in-person visitations. Essential frontline emergency services may only be feasible through direct face-to-face practice. As in all social work practice, social workers are advised to consider their role, to plan their assessment and interventions in advance and to determine what aspects could be delivered virtually. E-social work practitioners should consider the social justice aspects of their online service so as not to exacerbate the existing

PRACTICAL TIPS:

Social work teams should list the typical actions and procedures involved in their daily casework and collectively discuss the aspects that could be delivered online / remotely. What technologies are best suited to the needs of your service users and your team's goals? What investments can we make to ensure that service users can also access the platforms / tools?

digital divide and to take measures to ensure the safety of participants.

TECHNICAL ASPECTS OF E-SOCIAL WORK

Although it can be daunting navigating the virtual world of e-practice and much of the guidance can be negative, risk adverse and about avoiding harm, e-social work can also offer plenty of opportunities for practitioners. While COVID-19 has brought e-practice into the spotlight at a faster speed than ever anticipated, it can be viewed as a medium through which our practice can be continued and in the future, it may contribute to more diverse and creative ways of working. The provision of e-social work does not have to be too onerous! It can be as simple as using a telephone, smart phone or laptop. While the decision to use and invest in particular technologies and platforms rests with agencies (RACP, 2012; RCAGP, 2019) and depends on legislative/data protection frameworks, the minimum requirement is the transfer of audio and/or video data in real time between the practitioner and service-users. Video-conferencing involves internet connectivity along with a web-cam, microphone and speakers - tools that are often built-in to newer laptops, tablets and smart phones. In addition to technical capacity, practitioners need to feel confident in using such technologies, which can develop through training and mentoring, and the sharing of learning from the setup and implementation of exemplar projects.

Social workers should regularly test the functionality of their equipment, software and internet connectivity (see Tool 1). Service-users understand occasional breakdowns of connectivity, but such occurrences should be minimised. Social workers should acquaint themselves with procedures for responding to

malfunctions (where to get IT support). Prepare a contingency plan in case the technology crashes and inform service-users about such plans in advance of a scheduled online visit. Barnesto (2018) suggests that practitioners experiment with the technology beforehand by conducting dry-run visits. Carers and others may also need to prepared in advance if, for example, children or persons with significant disabilities are to be engaged through online conferencing services.

E-social work also assumes that service-users have access to suitable ICT. Social workers need to be mindful that the quality of their online interactions with service-users will be determined by their service-users' hardware and internet access. A diverse range of issues including poverty, age, gender, culture, (dis-)ability, language, ethnicity and social engagement may influence service-users' technical knowledge and access (Barnesto 2018; McCarty & Clancy, 2008). These structural issues should be considered when determining the appropriateness of using e-social work in specific cases. Be creative! We are aware of services that have repurposed existing budgets to provide families with tablets to keep youth services going through a Padlet and other communication platforms.

PHYSICAL SPACE IS STILL IMPORTANT IN E-SOCIAL WORK

Conducting e-social work assessments and interventions also requires the appropriate use of physical space. To maintain good boundaries, social workers are advised to carefully choose the physical space they use to practice e-social work. Service-users' confidentiality, privacy and information must be protected in e-social work in the same way as in face-to-face contact. Practitioners working from home need to ensure that they carry out an online meeting in an appropriately quiet space where they are unlikely to be disturbed. Distractions should be kept to a minimum and the online communication. However, unintended self-disclosure can also happen when a household member unexpectedly joins an online call! These things happen and are part of the new norm of working remotely. There is only so much you can do to control the environment.

PRACTICAL TIPS:

Service-users may be able to see personal aspects of social worker's lives in the background during sessions if interviews are conducted online while a practitioner is at home. Where possible, try to set up a webcam facing a blank wall. Some platforms allow practitioners to blur their background or to use a virtual background such as an office photograph.
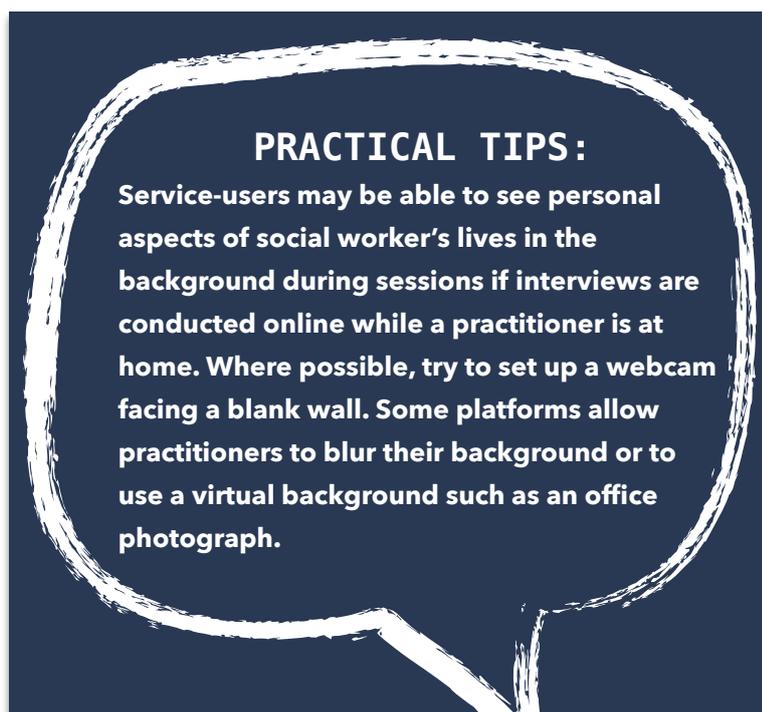
SERVICE-USER ENGAGEMENT STARTS WITH INFORMED CONSENT AND ROLE CLARITY

As in all social work interactions with service-users, clarity of roles, purpose of involvement and informed consent are key principles when initiating e-social work. Secure appropriate consent from a service-user by describing the nature of e-social work in your practice setting and compare it to in-person practice. Explain the scope of the service provision and the mechanics of your interactions. Provide information about planned sessions, scheduling and contingency plans, privacy issues and mandatory reporting policies, potential risks, organisational policies, communication and complaint procedures, record-keeping, data-management and storage and security. These issues are as important for established service-users as they are for new ones. Taking time to discuss these issues in a step-by-step, age and ability-sensitive process, will demonstrate a professional and considered service, and assist with rapport-building between practitioners and service-users. Professional engagement with service-users online is the same as in-person: it requires an investment in rapport building between the social worker and the service-user.

Organisations and social work teams may benefit from developing a checklist or FAQ sheet for practitioners to remember the relevant information to share with service-users at the outset of e-social work service delivery.

RETHINKING COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR E-SOCIAL WORK

Social workers spend much of their time communicating with services users, members of their teams and other disciplines. Effective communication is one of the profession's core proficiencies. Due to COVID-19 our work has been transformed overnight, and for many of us, we have been thrown into a virtual world of online working and face-to-face contact has become the exception rather than the norm. We now find ourselves trying to rapidly catch up with new ways of communicating. In many ways, we now need to rethink the basics of communication skills for effective e-social work. Some of the challenges that were associated with traditional forms of communication are magnified by the use of technology, and we therefore, need to dig deeper into our communication skills toolkit.

STEPS FOR ENHANCING COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR E-SOCIAL WORK

1.**Demonstrate you are listening**. Listening skills are conveyed by being attentive to the speaker and therefore our body language becomes even more important when using online video platforms. The use of non-verbal minimal encouragers (nod of head, open facial expression, smile) become essential in conveying that we are listening.

2.**Avoiding distractions** (such as reading emails or looking at your phone) is key to remaining 'present' during e-communication and engagement.

3.**Avoid the use of too many verbal minimal encouragers** (um/ah/ok) as they can become more of a hinderance than a help and can cause audio 'interference', interrupting the flow of conversation.

4.**Take note of your physical position in front of the camera**. It is important to notice your height in relation to the camera. It is a good idea to do a camera check before the video call so that adjustments can be made before and not during the call (e.g. raise a laptop to eye-level by putting a few books under it). The chair you sit on is important and ideally is not a swivel chair which can be distracting.

5.**Nuances of communication such as the use of silences are highlighted.** Pauses in the form of transmission delay can be a feature of online video-conferencing and can provide unwanted and awkward intervals that can sometimes impede progress. Therefore, there is a need to be consciously aware of the appropriateness of silences for online working.

6.**Make eye contact.** Many of us wonder how to make eye contact: camera or screen? Looking through the camera lens will allow you to look straight at the other person. While it might feel unnatural you could look straight into the camera just when you are talking to the other person.

7.**Your facial gestures and responses will be amplified** due to the nature of video-conferencing and e-social work. Be aware that the camera is now on you: you see your client/colleague *and* yourself. This can be very off-putting as we are not used to looking at ourselves in our normal day-to-day professional face-to-face interactions. There are two approaches to this: (i) turn the camera function off or, (ii) use it to 'check in' with yourself and evaluate how others might see you. Make any necessary changes.

8.**Show empathy,** even though this may be more difficult online. The camera lens acts as a tactile barrier and while you might ordinarily reach out to somebody in distress to touch their shoulder etc., you cannot do this with e-practice. You can, however, compensate for this by paying more attention to your tone and body language.

9.**Be genuine.** When using new forms of communication, we do not become experts overnight. It is OK to acknowledge that communicating in new and uncharted ways can be a steep learning curve for everyone.

10.**Be self-aware of the things you do habitually**. Fine and gross body movements will become more heightened and observable during e-practice meetings.

UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

ONLINE SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

STEPS FOR BUILDING AND MAINTAINING RAPPORT FOR RELATIONSHIP-BASED E-SOCIAL WORK

1.**First impressions are important!** Proof-read any e-communications. Take time to carefully explain your process, schedule and contingency plans if connectivity fails. Your professional approach in communication and preparation will demonstrate competence to the service-user.

2.**Be warm and welcoming.** While in-person contact may be your first choice, it is still possible to provide some stability to service-users through e-social work practice. Your professional input can be a source of stability amidst a crisis.

3.**Emotionally engage** with service-user's experiences and their time with you. Empathise with the service-user's emotions.

4.**Take care to convey interest and regard** for service-users through your facial expression.

5.**Your tone of voice is very important.** Rapport-building can be helped when the pace and volume of the social worker and the service-user are similar.

6.**Soften your overall approach during online interactions.** E-communications and telephone conversations can be experienced as too abrupt and direct sometimes. Allow for sessions to proceed at a slower pace and allow time for substantive topics to be discussed.

7.**Demonstrate your active listening skills** by making sure to summarise and reflect back what the service user says. This helps to convey to the service-user that you are taking them and their views seriously.

8.**Invite the person you are with to talk.** Use open-ended questions to evoke narrative responses from service-users.

9.**Careful use of self and self-disclosure can help rapport-building.** E-social work does not allow for service-users to learn about practitioners in the same way as in-person interactions. Share appropriate information about yourself, your practise and your experience. Unintended self-disclosure can happen when a household member unexpectedly joins an online call! These things happen and are part of the new norm of working remotely. There is only so much you can do to control the environment.

10.**Find some common ground or shared interests,** but practise authentically: do not pretend to know more about something (particularly about hobbies, sports or music).

11.**Use humour appropriately.**

12.**Anticipate service-user's needs by planning** each session beforehand. Take time to review files and case-notes from the previous session. Prepare possible readings or tasks/exercises which can be done between sessions (for example with children, you could watch a video clip, do a piece of artwork, play a game). Ask for feedback on what works. You may have noticed that much of the advice about e-communication and rapport-building is the same as best practice advice for face-to-face professional interactions.

E-SOCIAL WORK DURING A HEALTH PANDEMIC

Online and virtual sessions allows for social workers to maintain contact with service-users. Social workers continue to provide essential frontline services despite the risks to their own personal health. In addition, organisational and systemic responses continue to rapidly change and evolve. Social workers may struggle to support and communicate a sense of security to service-users. The well-being of practitioners is integral to quality of e-social work service provision. Self-care measures and engagement in supervision are key supportive measures for practitioners. Dregger (2020) recommends that while social workers strive for sustained excellence in their practice, the uncertainty of a global health pandemic encourages practitioners to recognise current limitations, prioritise rest, and to acknowledge and label feelings.

RECORD-KEEPING AND DATA STORAGE

You should think of e-social work practice as being equivalent to direct social work contact with service-users. Social workers are advised to attend to record-keeping measures in line with their organisation's policies and procedures, and to be GDPR compliant. Records should be retained securely. Cloud storage facilities, where used, should comply with data protection legislation and agency record retention policies.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) (2020). *Using Telehealth for Patients During the COVID-19 Pandemic*.

Balestra, M. (2018). 'Telehealth and legal implications for nurse practitioners', *The Journal for Nurse Practitioners*, 14 (1), pp. 34-39.

Burns, K., O'Mahony, C. and O'Callaghan, E. (2018) *SPARK: A Self-Care Tool for Professionals*, University College Cork / IDEA Project.

Dregger, H. (2020). *Pandemic Principles: Responding to Anomie During Unprecedented Times*.

McCarty, D. and Clancy, C. (2002). 'Telehealth: Implications for social work practice', *Social Work*, 47 (2), pp.153-161.

Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP) (2012) *Telehealth: Guidelines and Practical Tips*.

Royal Australasian College of General Physicians (RACGP) (2019) .

Thriveworks Staff (2013, August 14). *Online Counselling: 16 Ways to Build Rapport*

PRACTICAL TIPS:

Social workers are encouraged to engage in peer, group and individual supervision regularly. Our Padlet contains self-care resources such as the *SPARK Tool* (Burns, O'Mahony & O'Callaghan, 2018) and other free resources. Organisations are encouraged to prioritise supervision opportunities for practitioners, especially since social distancing may dictate that supervision is increasingly performed online.
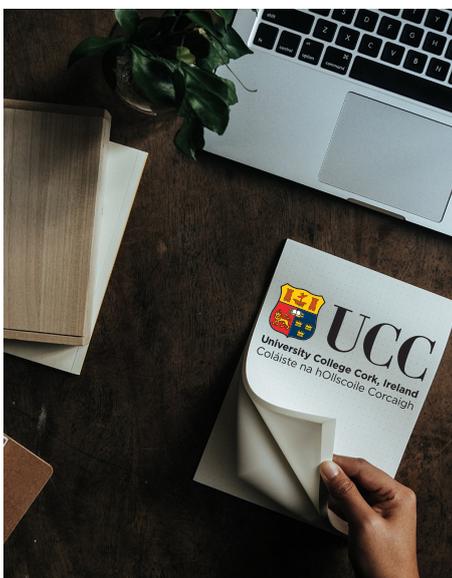
ABOUT THIS SERIES

The ONLINE SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE series was created by Dr Kenneth Burns and Dr Fiachra O'Súilleabháin, School of Applied Social Studies (social work), University College Cork, Ireland. The full series of resources are available on our Padlet with free resources with information on online meeting platforms, practice advice, GDPR (data protection), and so on. The Padlet is open access and anyone can contribute links and resources. Original artwork by Harry Venning.

TOOL 3, VERSION 1

Ó SÚILLEABHÁIN, McCAUGHREN AND BURNS (2020)