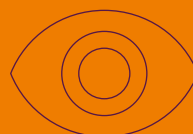
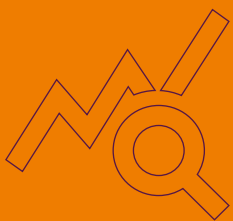
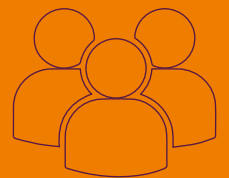
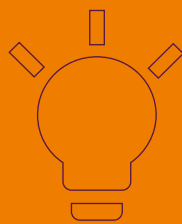


ORDEM  
DOS  
PSICÓLOGOS



06.12.2023

# REMOTE PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERVENTION



**GUIDELINES FOR PSYCHOLOGISTS**

In full exercise of their rights and responsibilities, Full Members of the Portuguese Psychologists Association (OPP – Ordem dos Psicólogos Portugueses) can carry out their professional activity remotely – namely, when they reside in other countries or in situations that require it (for example, during the COVID-19 pandemic).

Whether in-person or remotely, psychological intervention is guided by professional principles and based on scientific evidence and compliance with Portuguese Psychologists' Code of Ethics. However, considering that remote psychological intervention involves some specific challenges and to ensure the delivery of high-quality services, below are some recommendations and guidelines that Psychologists must take into consideration, when contacting their clients using remote communication tools.

Remote psychological intervention refers to the delivery of psychological services using information and communication technology (ICT), which includes (but is not limited to): smartphones; tablets; computers or other digital platforms; communications via videoconference, email, chat, websites, blogs, or social networks. The information transmitted can be written or include images, sounds, or other types of data. Communication can be synchronous, with several people involved and communicating in real time (e.g., videoconference) or asynchronous (e.g., email exchange). Different technologies can be used in various combinations and for various purposes.

# 1 ● GENERAL GUIDELINES

- Being a psychological act, remote psychological intervention is exclusively carried out by Psychologists, whose professional practice, in Portugal, is regulated by the Portuguese Psychologists Association (OPP).
- The nature of the context or the tools of psychological intervention do not change the need to comply with the ethical principles and deontological norms of the profession set out in the Code of Ethics. Regardless of the tool or intervention context, Psychologists must guide their professional practice by ethical principles and respect the same deontological and legal norms to which they are bound in a face-to-face intervention.
- Considering the technical and scientific autonomy of Psychologists, it is up to them, within the scope of the psychological intervention process, to make the decisions they believe to be appropriate, always with the aim of ensuring the best possible results, centered on the specificities, needs, and circumstances of the clients.
- Registration with the Health Regulatory Entity (ERS) is also mandatory and prior for (individual or collective) entities that plan to start or have started providing health services, namely, issuing receipts or invoices directly to users, whether in a fixed establishment, mobile (homes or health vehicle) or remotely, with professionals duly qualified and/or holding a professional certificate. Therefore, if the entity issues the consultation invoice/receipt directly to clients, it is the entity that must be registered with the ERS, although it must indicate the Psychologists integrated into the entity. If, on the other hand, it is the Psychologist who issues the consultation invoice/receipt directly to clients, registration with the ERS is his/her responsibility.

# 2. SPECIFIC GUIDELINES

## 2.1. KNOWLEDGE AND COMPETENCE

- Psychologists ensure that they have the necessary knowledge and skills at a scientific, technical, ethical, legal, and cultural level for the safe provision of Psychology services mediated by ICT, specifically through specific training<sup>1</sup> and continuous monitoring through supervision activities.

- Each Psychologist must have prior and updated knowledge of the ethical implications, limitations, challenges, and specificities associated with psychological assessment/intervention processes in this context, to ensure the appropriate and reliable application of instruments, the scientific evidence of the intervention, the effectiveness of this intervention model, and its use in the best interest of the client.

## 2.2. IDENTIFICATION OF THE PSYCHOLOGIST AND THE CLIENT

- Psychologists provide information (name, academic training, professional card number, and specialty) that assures the client of their competence to exercise this type of services.

- A particularly relevant good practice in this context is the sharing of the **Directory** provided by the OPP, in which the professional name and the professional card number of all Psychologists, as public elements, can be searchable, allowing the clients to confirm the registration in the OPP – which is a legal condition for the practice of Psychology in Portugal.

- Compliance with this practice is of is particularly important when it comes to a first contact, in which case a physical location/address associated with the Psycho-

logist must be specified.

- Clear identification of the client wishing to access Psychology services mediated by ICT should also be ensured.

- Psychologists must also ensure the client's identity is confirmed, by scheduling a prior contact by videoconference, contacting through a valid email address, or even making a telephone call using an identified number.

## 2.3. INTEGRITY AND RELATIONSHIP BOUNDARIES

- Psychologists recognize the need to maintain a professional relationship with their clients (considering the therapeutic context/setting as a relational variable) and are aware of potential conflicts of interest in the context of psychology services mediated by ICT.

- The adequacy of the therapeutic setting must be guaranteed, analyzing with the client the limits of the use of technology in the context of the therapeutic relationship, establishing the asymmetry and non-similarity of the Psychologist/client pair. The interpersonal relationship is the basis for psychological intervention and corresponds to a construction made over time, and there may be needs that are identified as this relationship is established and consolidated.

- The use of professional language in different communication channels (written contact, telephone, video) must be promoted, also defining the extent and moments in which (a)synchronous communication will be carried out.

- Psychologists who carry out their activity in this intervention context must continue to ensure that information about the client is obtained in the context of the therapeutic relationship, without recourse to external sources, except when duly authorized by the client.

<sup>1</sup>In this regard, we suggest consulting the **training offer** available on the **Continuous Professional Development Portal (CPD)**.

- In this context, respect for Principles C – Responsibility and D – Integrity (of the **Code of Ethics**) deserve special attention; there it is stated that “Psychologists must be aware of the consequences that your work can affect people, the profession and society in general. They must contribute to the good results of carrying out their activity in these different dimensions and take responsibility for it. They must know how to assess the level of fragility of their clients, guide their interventions with absolute respect for the resulting vulnerability, and promote and dignify their activity”. In this regard, it is important to consider that not all clients will benefit in the same way from remote psychological interventions. Finally, it should be emphasized that “Psychologists must be faithful to the profession’s principles of action, actively promoting them. They must prevent and avoid conflicts of interest and, when they arise, they must contribute to their resolution, always acting in accordance with their professional obligations”.

- Regarding advertising and publicity, Psychologists should pay special attention to the provisions of the **Code of Ethics**, in Specific Principle 5. Psychological Practice and Intervention “5.10. “Professional advertising. The advertising of services is done with accuracy and rigor and is restricted to the dissemination of information, such as the types of intervention and the titles that the Psychologist holds.”

- When this is possible, prior face-to-face contact with clients is recommended, as it appears to be predictive of the effectiveness of remote psychological intervention. In circumstances where this is not possible, this issue should be discussed with clients.

## 2.4. INFORMED CONSENT

- Psychologists recognize that remote psychological intervention entails specific additional risks that should be considered when obtaining free and informed consent.

- This consent should include clear and understandable information for the client, considering the nature data that may be digitally recorded.

- Psychologists must ensure the obtaining of informed, free, clarified consent, for example through scheduling a prior contact by videoconference, validating an email

address, and verifying a qualified digital signature.

- Informed consent must include, in addition to the usual consent given in face-to-face contact situations, detailed information on the recording and handling of the information obtained, as well as the billing conditions for the services provided and payment methods, when applicable.

- OPP provides a **draft of informed consent** that Psychologists may use in their professional practice in this context.

## 2.5. CONFIDENTIALITY AND DATA RECORDING AND TRANSMISSION SECURITY

- Psychologists must ensure that:

- They have the necessary computer knowledge for the safe and responsible provision of Psychology services with remote intervention;
- The client has the necessary resources (not only physical, but also digital literacy) to apply this type of service.

- Clients must be informed about the limits of confidentiality, security mechanisms and potential problems arising from the use of technology. Confidentiality is a prerequisite of the established relationship and trust is the fundamental basis for ensuring the continuity of the intervention, with the Psychologist being responsible for ensuring that both he/she and his/her clients adopt the security procedures necessary to minimize access to confidential information.

- Psychologists are the first to safeguard the right to individual privacy; privacy refers to the person’s right to decide the time, place, form, and information they wish to share, meaning that these aspects must be respected by the Psychologist. To reduce the risks associated with privacy in this context, Psychologists must:

- Preferably opt for professional video conferencing tools adapted for teleconsultation, video conferencing software, e-mail and text messaging that guarantee end-to-end encryption;
- Do not use a public computer, log off after a session and keep your operating system and/or applications updated (particularly security ones);
- Ensure that you are in a private place and cannot be

disturbed. Ensure and request an appointment from the client so that they are also in a private place and try to minimize the possibility of being disturbed as much as possible.

- Safeguard and reinforce the client that:
  - The confidentiality of information obtained through online psychological services may only be broken in situations provided for in the **Code of Ethics**;
  - The disclosure of information recorded/stored by both parties or its transfer to third parties must only be carried out with the consent of both parties (cf. Opinion No. 69 of the Ethics Committee on the **Recording of Contents In Psychological Intervention**);

## 2.6. LEGAL ASPECTS AND JURISDICTION

- Psychologists must consider that, in addition to the legislation applicable to the delivery of Psychology services, in general, they must be aware of the legal framework for the delivery of Psychology services using remote communication tools. Psychologists must also be aware of the guidelines regarding informed consent, confidentiality, and situations where confidentiality may be breached.

- Psychologists must consult the **GDPR** and the law **applicable to contractual obligations**.

## 2.7. PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

- Psychologists must recognize the limitations associated with psychological assessment processes conducted through remote communication technology and implement it only when the minimum conditions are ensured, crossing different formal and informal instruments, in order to guarantee processes of rigorous, transparent and reliable evaluation, which are in accordance with the principles listed in the **Code of Ethics**; it must also be recognized that there are some instruments that may not be capable of being used in this way.

- The technical and scientific autonomy of Psychologists makes them responsible for deciding on the procedure they follow for psychological assessment, diagnosis, and psychological intervention and, accordingly, issuing technical reports and opinions on Mental Health.

Psychologists must be aware of the specific rules for applying psychological assessment instruments, present in the respective manuals.

## 2.8. RESEARCH

- Psychologists who develop or participate in research projects within the scope of Psychology and eHealth, regardless of whether they focus on qualitative or quantitative data analysis or use big data, must ensure the quality, comparability, and generalization of the results they obtain, ensure that applicable ethical requirements are met and comply with specific reporting standards for studies of this nature.

- Psychologists who make use of new technologies in psychological practice must bear in mind that the challenges that research in this area presents must be responded to by various disciplines and are still in their infancy parties (cf. Opinion No. 55 of the Ethics Committee on The use of inventories in investigations carried out online).

## 2.9. CRISIS INTERVENTION

- Psychologists must identify potential risk situations and establish, in advance, the mechanisms to be implemented to deal with them.

- In crisis situations, recurring crises and/or catastrophes (which the COVID-19 pandemic was an example), Psychologists must assess the feasibility of using Psychology services mediated by remote communication technology.

- The mechanisms to be implemented to deal with crisis situations must be defined in advance and include the following aspects:

- Define the crisis situation in question;
- Ask the client to provide alternative contacts (for example, telephone contact);
- Know the family and institutional resources (for example other Mental Health professionals, local services) that the client can access;
- Refer the client in a crisis situation to appropriate health services and/or according to the situation - promote and contribute to the adoption and practice of the authorities' recommendations.

- Establish a prior agreement with the client on how to deal with possible crises;
- Inform the client of the possible loss of anonymity/confidentiality in a crisis situation;
- Consult experienced colleagues for advice on how to deal with the crisis situation;
- Join in intervention or supervision processes also regarding the specific situation of intervention in this context.

## 2.10. INTERVENTION WITH SPECIFIC POPULATIONS

- Psychologists who work with specific populations must recognize the potential of remote communication technology in their practice, allowing them to overcome limitations such as the language barrier or the difficulty in accessing services in the traditional format.
- It is ensured that, in these situations, the same ethical principles and recommendations contained in this document continue to apply, with special attention:
  - In the case of unaccompanied minors, where the intervention is necessarily different, Psychologists must request explicit informed consent from the person with legal authority, as well as provide a document with all information about confidentiality and limits confidentiality and security for all participants (namely taking into account the need for the presence of an adult to help deal with technology);
  - In emergency and crisis situations, the need to provide for the possibility of referral to responses that are considered appropriate to the situation must be ensured.

## 2.11. DEVELOPMENT OF DIGITAL INTERVENTION TOOLS

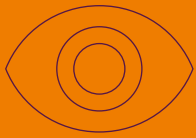
- Psychologists must be aware of the potential impacts of applications and other digital tools on Mental Health and be aware that only those that present evidence of effectiveness obtained through technical and scientific methods can be considered psychological intervention tools.
- It is safeguarded that different types of intervention are at different stages of research and maturity, requiring more research, from basic development, to evalua-

tion and implementation of studies.

- Further research is considered necessary to inform and validate the use of these new tools and programs for providing Psychological Health services, producing data on effectiveness and therapeutic results.
- It should be noted, however, that some consensus seems to be beginning to develop around the greater effectiveness of using these tools in non-initial phases of the therapeutic process, as well as the indication of their use in situations where only in this way can continuity be guaranteed interventions, particularly: 1) in periods of increased vulnerability or challenge for the client; 2) with children or other specific clients.

Reading this document does not exempt from consulting the **Guidelines for Professional Practice on the Provision of Psychological Services Mediated by Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)**. The reading of the following documents is also recommended:

- **Opinion No. 21 of the Ethics Committee on Remote Intervention**
- **Opinion No. 61 of the Ethics Committee on public information on social networks and psychological intervention**
- **Checklist of conditions and technology for remote psychological intervention**



ORDEM  
DOS  
PSICÓLOGOS

