

What do I need to know about reopening my practice?

The pandemic has affected everyone in this country, and counselors and those with whom they work are no exception. As COVID-19 spread across the country, counseling practices and centers quickly closed in an attempt to mitigate the impact of the virus and to help keep everyone safe. But now as states and jurisdictions are beginning to reopen, the question becomes, how can counseling practices reopen in a way that ensures both the safety of the counselors and clients? All businesses must address the physical safety of clients as they reopen. But counselors must also factor in the mental health needs and psychological safety of their clients and address ethical and risk management issues. In short, both clients and counselors need to feel comfortable returning to offices and understand that steps have been taken to mitigate any risk.

We have listed below some considerations when deciding when to reopen a practice.

Physical safety considerations

- Adhere to the most current CDC safety protocols.
- Follow the recommendations of the jurisdiction where you practice. Some cities and counties have policies that differ from the state.
- Know the safety protocols for the building, especially if your office does not have a direct entrance from the outside.
- Ensure both clients and counselors practice physical distancing in the office and waiting area. Clients could wait outside until the appointment time.
- Limit the number of people (especially non-clients) in the office at any given time.
- Disinfect high-touch surfaces (such as doorknobs, chairs, and pens) before and between clients.
- Remove magazines and other shared information and objects.
- Wear masks and other protective equipment while in the office. Keep extra masks in the office in case a client forgets to bring one.
- Ensure adequate ventilation and filter systems in the office.
- Post a copy of your protocols in the office and send it to each client before their appointment.
- Ensure that anyone who does not feel well or has a temperature does not enter the office and is not seen.

- Have clients wash their hands or use hand sanitizer when entering the office. Keep wipes and hand sanitizer available.
- Provide as much information and forms online as possible to minimize what clients and others have to touch, and use electronic communication outside of sessions when possible.

Emotional safety considerations

- Consider your own feelings about returning to the office. You may transmit your concerns and fears about the virus and the risk of being in the office to your clients, thus increasing their anxiety and fears and exacerbating their problems. If you're not ready to return, find another means of providing services if possible.
- Have a discussion with each client to ensure that they understand what precautions you are taking and that they are comfortable returning to the office. You may wish to amend your informed consent document to include this issue and have them indicate they are willing to return.
- Be prepared to provide alternative counseling options (such as telebehavioral health) for clients who feel uncomfortable with in-person sessions.

Ethical and risk management considerations

- Ensure that you take every precaution to provide counseling services while attending to the safety needs of your clients. As the 2014 *ACA Code of Ethics* states, you should put the client first.
- Review your liability insurance policy.
- Update signed informed consent documents.
- Review legal and risk management strategies to prepare for a sudden interruption or closure of your practice. Nancy Wheeler's article in the [June Counseling Today](#) delineates these considerations.
- Communicate constantly with clients and provide clear updates on protocols and how you are mitigating risk.
- Consult with a lawyer, if needed.

In summary, nothing about the way we are operating now is the same as before the pandemic. We are all trying to navigate the new circumstances while still doing the best we can for our clients. When in doubt, remember to seek advice and keep up to date on CDC and local government protocols.