

# Promising Practices for Sexual Violence Distance Counselling

anova

ENDING  VIOLENCE  
Association of Canada

SAC Kingston

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Women and Gender  
Equality Canada

Femmes et Égalité  
des genres Canada

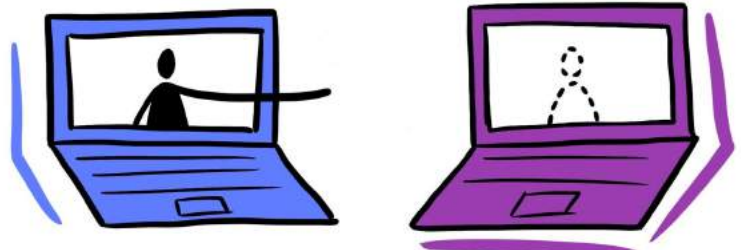
## KEY MESSAGE:

There were a number of challenges that the sector faced in shifting to offering distance counselling in the pandemic, but these challenges were met with exceptional effort and innovation on the part of the counsellors, and sometimes at great personal expense.

*"Don't doubt your abilities as a counsellor. If you have the ability and skill to build rapport with clients, the service delivery doesn't affect the connection you make with others."*

## WHAT'S IN THIS REPORT:

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## WHY THIS REPORT:

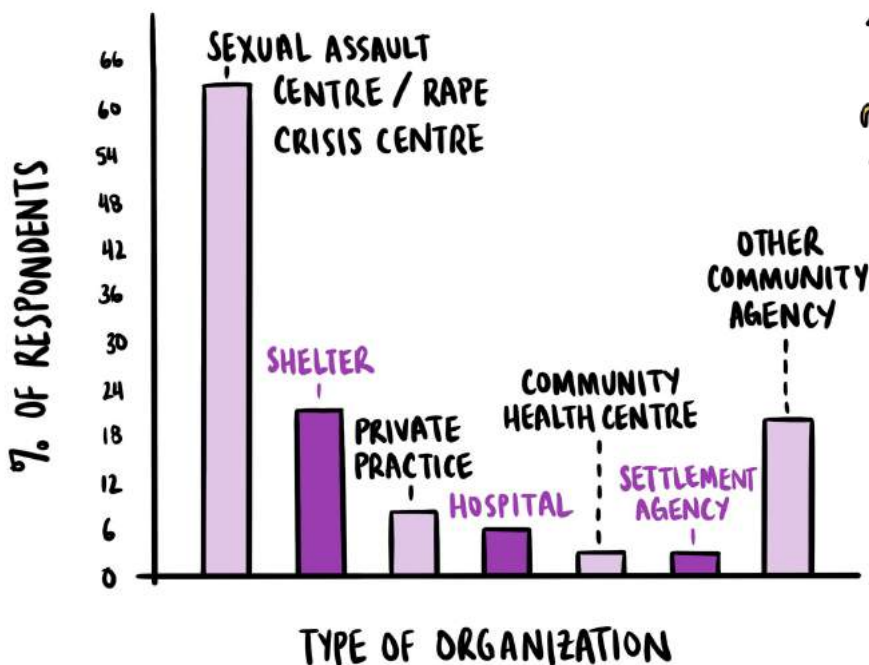
For many if not most sexual violence counsellors, the pandemic required a shift in practice to distance counselling options. Within the span of weeks, we as a sector had to learn new ways of supporting survivors through the use of videoconferencing (eg Zoom), telephone calls, and texting.

We wanted to understand the impact of this shift to distance counselling for sexual violence counselling. Was it better, worse, or different? Did it have specific impacts on different equity-seeking groups? What lessons have been learned that are specific to the sector, such as navigating safety planning and ensuring rapport-building?

A partnership emerged between Sexual Assault Centre Kingston (SACK), Ending Violence Association of Canada, and Anova, building upon the work done through the Going-The-Distance project undertaken by SACK funded by Women and Gender Equality. In summer of 2021, we launched a national survey of sexual violence counsellors.

## WHO WE SURVEYED:

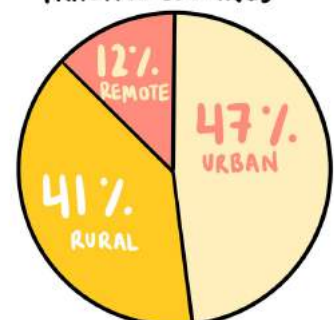
### ORGANIZATIONS OF RESPONDENTS



### WHERE RESPONDENTS WORK



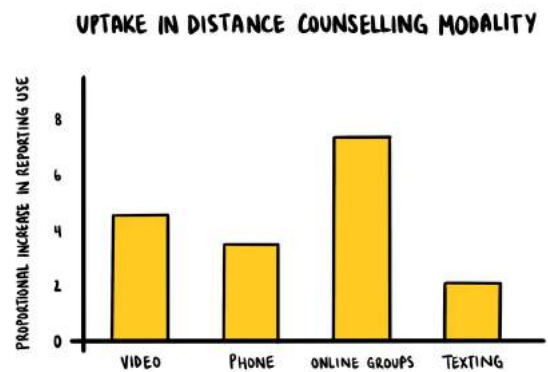
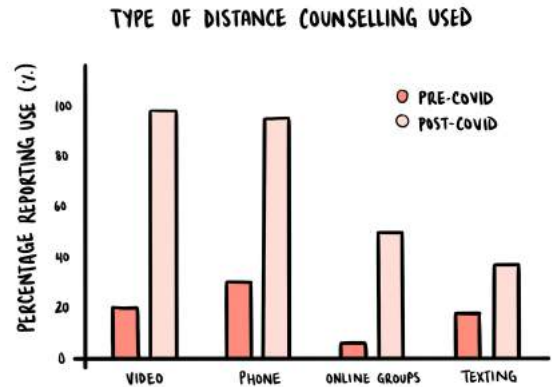
### PRACTICE SETTINGS



# WHAT DISTANCE COUNSELLING LOOKS LIKE:

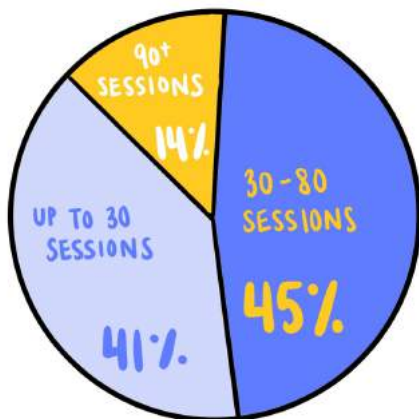
The following section gives a sense of how the sexual violence counselling sector utilizes distance counselling.

Importantly, prior to the pandemic only 37% of those surveyed had utilized distance counselling options. At the time of the survey – about 15 months into the pandemic – 98% said they had utilized distance counselling. This substantial growth in the number of counsellors using distance counselling options points to an incredible learning curve for a majority of the sector.



In terms of the software used, the most common were Zoom (at 87%), and Microsoft Teams (at 29%). 56% of respondents indicated that they offered more or a lot more sessions than usual since the onset of the pandemic. What that meant for each practitioner was different, as we can see from the number of sessions per month.

**REPORTED NUMBER OF DISTANCE SESSIONS PER MONTH**



Variations in frequency and in length of sessions were the top noted changes to counselling practice specific when shifting to distance counselling. For some this meant shorter sessions, for others longer sessions. For some this meant more frequent sessions and others more time between sessions.

## LESSONS LEARNED:

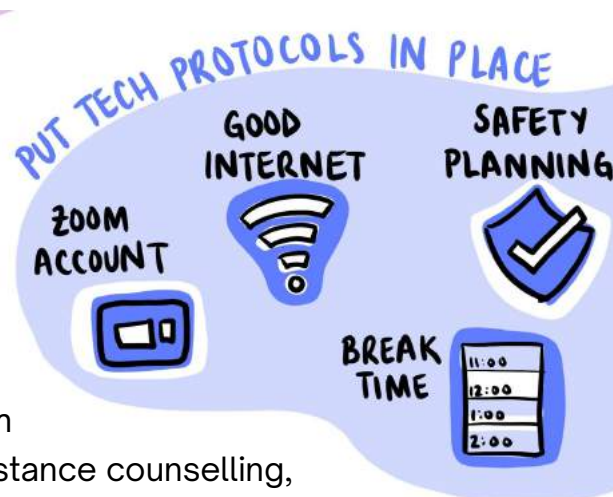
Overwhelmingly we heard that distance counselling was surprisingly better than anticipated and that we as practitioners should not assume it is less effective than in-person counselling. Distance counselling presents different benefits and different drawbacks. It requires shifts in safety planning and rapport-building.

When survey respondents were asked what surprised them or what they felt were their biggest learnings from using distance counselling, the following top themes emerged:

- There was a preference from survivors for distance even when in-person is available
- Their own growth in terms of comfort as counsellors working in this modality
- That distance counselling can be effective and that counselling modalities can be adopted to work in this format
- Their ability to find ways to build rapport and connection despite virtual setting
- The ability to expand availability of services through distance counselling to survivors regardless of location
- Fewer no shows and cancellations

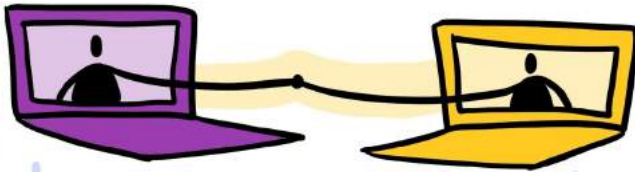
Looking back to their "beginning of the pandemic" selves, survey respondents offered insight about what may have been helpful to know as they transitioned into providing distance counselling. They would ensure that they:

- Take care of themselves
- Ensure support mechanisms with colleagues are in place (ex. formal debrief and info/learning sharing)
- Embrace change and recognize that distance counselling can work
- Trust their abilities as a counsellor
- Get technology-based options and protocols in place, such as individual Zoom accounts, good internet, safety planning protocols, and schedule time between appointments to manage Zoom fatigue





*"It was really hard to transition to doing sexual violence counselling in my home at first - set limits on where you do sessions (try to avoid your bedroom), keep a regular schedule with your hours and avoid working after your day has ended -don't check email in the evenings -Create rituals for your day that help you know when work from home is starting and ending -more self-care is needed for working from home because it's harder to distance yourself from work."*



**BUILDING CONNECTION  
& RAPPORT WAS POSSIBLE**

*"I would tell myself that it will work and you will be able to build and maintain relationships even at a distance."*

## **SHIFTS IN PRACTICE: RAPPORT WITH SURVIVOR**

*"I am now much more visual in my explanations of certain things, as I can pull up diagrams and things much easier when on Zoom than when in person, which clients seem to enjoy."*

*"Creativity in delivery of counselling to include further independent reflection - i.e., increase in homework/journaling (creating journal prompts), accommodating self-care/coping to fit current global situation (lockdown), use of social media/videos, etc."*

*"I have had to become much more in tune to shifts in voice and words because of the number of phone sessions and lack of ability to read body language."*



While entering into providing distance counselling felt daunting for many, it was clear that counsellors developed promising practices in terms of ensuring connection and rapport with survivors. The following practices emerged as commonly used approaches:

## COUNSELLOR SET-UP

- ✓ APPEARANCE: use tea and set up to demonstrate calm and casual demeanor, clean, neutral space, appealing on video
- ✓ PRACTICALITIES: use work phone or lap top (if using cell phone, turn off home phone)
- ✓ LOCATION: home office - private and confidential, door closed, do not disturb sign, white noise or fan outside door, ensure no noises coming from home, disclose any potential noises (ie. pets)
- ✓ SUPPORTS: call/text others for peer support or debriefing
- ✓ SELF-CARE: sleep, eat, water available, go to bathroom, deal with pets and family ahead, essential oils, walk around house and stretch between sessions
- ✓ PREPARATION: review case ahead, take more notes than in-person



## SETTING UP THE FIRST SESSION

- ✓ First session booked by phone and for phone
- ✓ Provide tech support in advance, clear tech instructions
- ✓ Review confidentiality
- ✓ Discuss needs and goals and expectations

- ✓ Verify client identity
- ✓ Scheduling: let clients know how often they are able to book, when they can resume in person
- ✓ Give options to ensure flexibility in scheduling and modality
- ✓ Describe other relevant services offered by agency (beyond distance counselling)
- ✓ Develop a tech back up plan (contacts shared to switch to phone if needed)
- ✓ Discuss platform, and what procedure to expect (i.e. where to send link, when the link will be sent, virtual waiting room, etc.)
- ✓ Ensure they have headphones/microphone
- ✓ Discuss awkwardness of being online and how to minimize, acknowledge difficulties of not seeing one another
- ✓ Encourage clients to replicate comfort of in-person session (i.e. blanket, hot drink, snack, pet, anything comforting and grounding)
- ✓ Offer a reminder that the session is for them and you will be guided by their needs
- ✓ Offer to help set up their space, camera, netiquette, background things
- ✓ Provide options and supports if client not ready to begin counselling  
Ask about questions or concerns



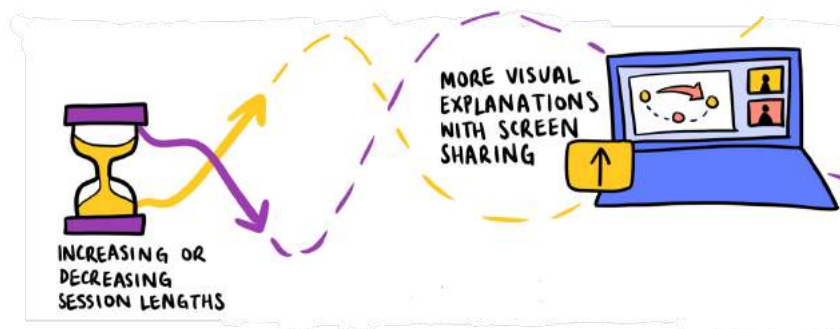
## **SESSION FLOW:**

- ☑ Text ahead to confirm appointment time still works
- ☑ Allow client to choose format for session
- ☑ Check in location
- ☑ Check in for safety (Are you somewhere safe and comfortable and private? Are you ready to begin or would you like to postpone?)
- ☑ Check in for content – check in, how client is doing, what they want to cover
- ☑ Ease into session, light topics to connect where left off
- ☑ Inform the client about your location as a counsellor (i.e. private, confidential, etc.)
- ☑ Ask client to describe their location
- ☑ Ask client to have glass of water or something with them for grounding
- ☑ Utilize a grounding meditation before and/or after session
- ☑ Utilize breathing techniques
- ☑ At end, ask about most important take away
- ☑ End session with joke or reason to smile
- ☑ Ask: what are plans for rest of day? What is your plan for self-care this week?
- ☑ Follow up, for example, email worksheets gone over during session

## **OTHER ACCOMODATIONS or**

### **CONSIDERATIONS:**

- ☑ Client connects from location most safe and comfortable (examples: home, bedroom, parked car, on a walk, public settings such as cemeteries that offer privacy)
- ☑ Schedule longer sessions as needed
- ☑ Ensure scheduling flexibility to allow clients to book when is best for them (safe and alone)
- ☑ Check in every 3-4 sessions about needs/preferences/comfort with format
- ☑ Provide tech materials to clients that need it
- ☑ Client decides technology used (phone, zoom, video chat)
- ☑ Satellite models: clients can use organization's board room to connect virtually; organization setting up computers in real centres for clients to use for sessions if they need access to safe and private space





## SHIFTS IN PRACTICE: SAFETY PLANNING

Respondents indicated a number of measures to promote safety through distance counselling however only 33% indicated that their agency had a formal policy or guide developed to support them in this. Pulling on the wisdom and learnings shared by respondents, we have compiled promising practices for distance counselling safety planning.

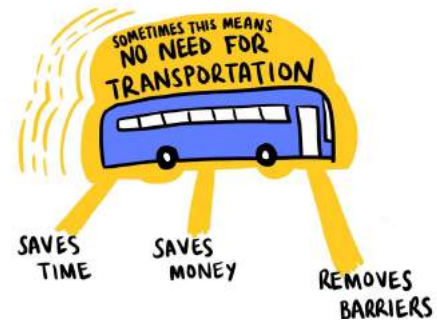


- Ask if client has designated private and confidential space
- Establish a back-up plan if technology does not work
- Discuss ways to optimize safety on the client's end (e.g. use of code word to indicate it is unsafe, advise them of spyware, suggest ensuring phone is password protected, offer a check-in text before call)
- Protecting technology and records on counsellor's end (e.g. passwords, blocking phone numbers, initials in calendar, vague meeting titles, code words)
- Review potential situations of risk (Safety Planning & Risk Assessment Procedure)
- Discuss platform security parameters and limits to confidentiality
- Ask about restrictions/preferences on use of messages, emails, texts, phone calls
- Only send worksheets upon their request
- Check in throughout session to ensure safety and privacy, and if not safe schedule for another time
- Remind client to end session at any time if needed, flexibility to reschedule
- If someone enters client's environment relocate to somewhere else, reschedule or cancel
- Ensure safety during and after call, including ensuring technology not monitored
- Be prepared to address safety planning related to suicidal ideation, and talk about what they need to do
- Call police if client is unsafe, and if possible keep them on the line until situation resolved



When asked what benefits distance sexual violence counselling offers, survey respondents most frequently identified the following:

- Increased accessibility because of transportation (including accessing transportation and the distance) (85%)
- Improved choice and options for survivor (72%)
- More flexibility in scheduling (66%)
- Increased accessibility because of childcare (66%)

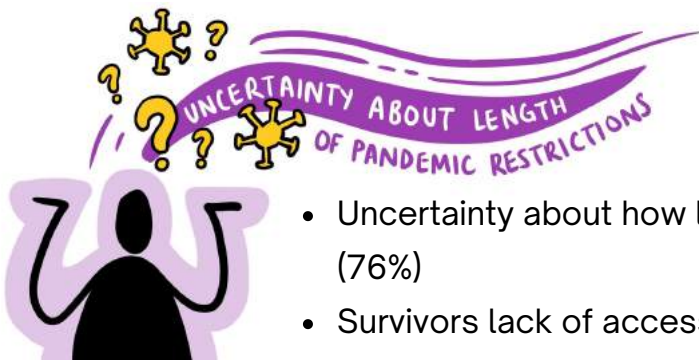


The impact of these benefits were:



- Better client attendance
- Improved sense of safety and comfort (i.e. not being ‘seen’ when on phone; ability to open up more; comfort of being in own home)
- Ability to reach clients in more distant areas for agencies serving large geographical or remote area

While survey respondents were clear that distance counselling offered many benefits, they also identified a variety of challenges. Those challenges most widely identified included:



- Uncertainty about how long pandemic restrictions would be in place (76%)
- Survivors lack of access to technology needed (67%)
- Survivors lack of internet access (65%)
- Counsellor fatigue (e.g. Zoom fatigue) ( 63%)
- Less opportunity for debriefing with colleagues (61%)
- Staff reluctance/discomfort with distance counseling (35%)
- Lack of clarity around online safety protocols (35%)
- Lack of tools and resources to effectively offer remote services (29%)



Many of the benefits and challenges of distance counselling relate to issues of equity and ensuring underserved and marginalized survivors have access to sexual violence counselling supports.

Importantly, the majority of respondents indicated that distance counselling IMPROVED their ability to reach underserved client groups. Why? They noted that it:

CAN SCHEDULE DURING WORK DAY  
LESS NEED TO ARRANGE CHILD CARE

GREATER FLEXIBILITY  
IN GENERAL



- Removes the need for access to and cost of transportation
- Offers more flexibility in scheduling and time (i.e. no need to factor in travel time; ability to have sessions while people are at work)
- Removes some of the barriers for clients who have difficulty leaving home for mental health reasons
- Creates a sense of anonymity that some clients find helpful
- Removes barriers of attending counselling for persons with physical disabilities
- Lessens the need or complications in arranging child care

Despite these improvements, some respondents provided reminders of the ways that distance counselling did not improve their ability to meet underserved client groups, including:

- Barriers for people with certain disabilities (i.e. visual and auditory) where accessible technology was not available
- Barriers for people who do not have safe environment to participate in distance counselling (i.e. no privacy, abuser being at home, lack of childcare, etc.)
- Barriers for people with no technology or data/internet (i.e. people living in poverty; homeless; living in remote/rural areas) or who have limited technology literacy/ability to use certain tech and platforms

ACCESSIBLE TECH IS CRUCIAL



BARRIERS FOR  
THOSE WITH VISUAL  
OR AUDITORY  
DISABILITIES

In other words, distance counselling both improves and limits access for underserved survivors. Where distance counselling limits access for underserved survivors, survey responses suggest that those survivors who already are most likely to face barriers in accessing supports continue to be most negatively impacted within a distance counselling service delivery model.

*“It has enabled us to provide services to folks who do not have a reliable means of transportation to or from the office; it has increased capacity for clients to meet after their jobs as they do not have to factor in travel time to the office; and it has enabled busy, working parents, students, and other folks to work counselling into their schedules without having to worry about childcare, transportation, or other barriers. Though, it has reduced the ability for people with certain disabilities to access services, as we do not have access to captioning software. It has also made it extremely challenging to serve people who do not have a safe environment to speak freely in, and those who do not have access to technology.”*



*“Due to our area being largely rural areas, some clients have issues with internet connection (i.e. satellite internet not as reliable). If this is the case, we normally transfer services to the phone via call or text. Some clients don't have the opportunity to designate a private and confidential space in their home, so we offer recommendations of going for a walk/drive or sitting outside with headphones in. If we're providing services over the phone, it can be hard to pick up on non-verbal body language both for client and counsellor. I have adjusted to using more verbal language to acknowledge that I'm actively listening. I also pay attention to subtle sighs or sounds coming from the client and asking them to describe what is coming up for them.”*



## A LAST NOTE on SELF-CARE:

Counsellor self-care was the key theme that emerged when asked what they would do differently to prepare for 2020. While self-care is important at all times, it was even more so during this high-stress, shifting time.

*“Working during the pandemic required more self care which was not considered at the beginning and compassion fatigue became an issue for me. Having access to good internet services was very important as accessing safe work connection from home was in issues when internet was not stable. Lots of interruptions. Make sure you have supports from work in term of social support and supervision as the work was very isolating and doing trauma work on your own with no access to support was hard, there was not place to leave the trauma at work, as trauma worker we brought the trauma home and there was no separation of work and home, personal and professional, we were all facing a threat.”*

*“It was really hard to transition to doing sexual violence counselling in my home at first. So, set limits on where you do sessions (try to avoid your bedroom), keep a regular schedule with your hours and avoid working after your day has ended, don't check email in the evenings, create rituals for your day that help you know when work from home is starting and ending. More self-care is needed for working from home because it's harder to distance yourself from work.”*

