Establishing Safe Online Environments for Telehealth Counselling and Psychology Services

During this time of physical distancing and significant life changes, support for student mental health is of utmost priority. The following document outlines considerations to policies and procedures relating to school counselling and psychology services to ensure optimal mental health outcomes.

The following considerations will help promote the safety and privacy of students, teachers and administrators using video conferencing software and will help create and maintain a respectful, responsible and safe learning environment for users in the school. All schools should ensure their staff, students, and parents understand that schools' existing policies (such as Child Protection policy, IT policies, Codes of Conduct) will remain in effect and should be referred to when working in an online environment.

Considerations for student suitability for telehealth:

- Accessibility, such as the student's:
    - capacity to access telehealth services.
    - access to technology, internet speed, audio and visual capabilities.
- Symptomology:
    - if the form, frequency and degree of symptomology is suitable for telehealth services.
- Risk of harm to self and others:
    - utilising local health services for additional support in the event of risk of harm to self/others.

Considerations for risk assessment and management of telehealth sessions:

- Review the school's current procedures and any adjustments required to suit a telehealth service. Adjustments may include:
    - confirm a risk contingency plan,
    - update informed consent process,
    - confirm counselling hours of operation and how students can access services,
    - outline processes for students and parents to access out of hours support, including Kids Helpline and local mental health services.

Considerations for counselling processes:

- Review the school's current processes for obtaining informed consent and any adjustments required to suit telehealth.
- Student confidentiality to comply with the Privacy Act (1998) including:
  - record keeping,
  - access to student counselling files if these are not electronic,
  - two-factor authentication for online notes,
  - telehealth platform compliance as per Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) which meets Australian standards. For example, Zoom for telehealth, Coviu, Vsee.
- Review the telehealth counselling environment such as:
  - location to ensure privacy and dignity of students is protected,
  - potential presence of parents/carers/family members and how this can be managed,
  - counselling space:
    - free from distractions and interferences,
    - good lighting,
    - access to resources.
- Counselling session guidelines:
  - be clear of purpose, goals and limitations of telehealth counselling.
  - establish and confirm student's understanding of how the session will run and how their privacy will be safeguarded,
  - trial technology prior to session and plan a response if connection is lost.
- Professional supervision:
  - specifically relating to telehealth counselling related matters.
- Professional Indemnity Insurance:
  - review if the school's current insurance policy covers telehealth sessions.

Considerations for identifying students in need of mental health support:

- Use of formal, whole school mental health screeners may identify students who are in need of support when learning from home.
- Assist teachers in recognising the signs that may identify a student in need of support. Review the signs that may be unique to students learning from home.
- Ensure all staff are aware of their roles and responsibilities as well as the communication pathways if a student is presenting with mental health difficulties.

Considerations for other school wellbeing matters:

- In addition to child protection and online counselling, schools are reminded to clarify internal processes and pathways for triaging student wellbeing matters/concerns with their wellbeing leaders and staff.
- The considerations mentioned throughout this document relating to counselling sessions can be equally applicable for schools when conducting regular wellbeing catch ups with their students e.g. tutor time and/or class check-ins. Staff should discuss with their school executive and/or wellbeing leaders any questions or concerns they may have.

Telehealth Counselling and Psychology Services
Frequently Asked Questions

1. Do we need parental permission to conduct online counselling?
   - A school's general policy on permissions should be followed.

2. Should the school also offer appointments in person?
   - If they wish to, they can, subject to health precautions and current Government restrictions.

3. Are all students eligible for remote counselling?
   - There may be some students whose needs may not be appropriately met via telehealth services.
   - Some students who are presenting with high risk needs may need other local alternatives for additional support. In this instance, it is suggested the family liaise with their local GP, or external Psychologist, if already engaged with one.
   - All students seeking telehealth counselling support should be triaged to assess needs and risk factors to determine ways of mitigating risk.

4. Would it be wise to ensure that there is an adult support person at the student's home when counselling takes place in case the counselling triggers an adverse reaction?
   - This would be a good precaution where practical.
   - However, issues will arise where the home environment, or a situation in the student's home life, is what is being discussed and they do not wish their parents to know they are receiving counselling. In these cases, other solutions will need to be determined based on a comprehensive Risk Assessment.

5. How should counsellors keep in contact with and "observe" the student following counselling session?
   - Establish a plan for follow-up with the student and/or parent.
   - Contact teachers and alert them to possible signs of concern.
   - Establish more regular student check-ins.
   - Liaise with local mental health services.

6. What about maintaining records?
   - The same records of counselling sessions should be kept as if they were being undertaken in person.
   - It may be harder to make notes during the session and maintain eye contact online, detailed notes should be made immediately after the session.
   - Usual care should be taken to preserve the confidentiality of records.

7. Are there any particular privacy issues?
   - Ensure the connection and platform is secure so that it cannot be monitored by anyone else. You may need to seek advice/support from the school's IT team.
   - It is not expected that sessions will be recorded. However, if the counsellor considers there is a need to record the session, they should obtain the express permission of the student and not merely rely on online messages.
   - In most cases, any recording should be deleted after appropriate notes have been made unless there is an important need to keep it.

8. What should the counsellor do if concerned about the student's wellbeing?
   - Regular school procedures apply and should be followed. This is likely to involve a discussion with a senior staff member to determine a course of action.

9. What if reportable conduct is disclosed?
   - If any concerns are disclosed that would indicate Risk of Significant Harm (ROSH) or concerns that may involve reportable conduct, the usual school reporting protocols and procedures should be followed as outlined in the school's Code of Conduct and Child Protection policy.