

Hello friends and colleagues:

I recently posted that I wanted to connect with you all in these stressful times. I thought I could visit your staff meetings or group gatherings on line and simply have a conversation about what's going on and how we are all doing.

I was prompted to make this offer when missing my husband and remembering his generous spirit. I remembered how he had acted in previous emergencies (usually climate related) in terms of picking up older folks, taking them to shop, or to doctor's appointments, going to hospitals to see if anyone needed a ride home. This was just who he was and I was missing him and wondering what he would do in the face of this invisible and dangerous stressor.

When I wondered what I could offer, I realized that I could give of myself: A supportive presence, a person who listens and understands being in the trenches and holding multiple demands at the same time.

I have now been in touch with a number of people and the most pressing question seems to be about doing tele-health and what activities will engage children. In talking with people for the past two weeks, here is what I can pass along:

1. This is a time of stress and distress for us all. Clinicians are providing therapy in a context that is unpredictable and unsafe. The changes in each of our lives are unbelievable as we struggle to keep doing our jobs, adapt to a house filled with family or more quiet than usual, try to manage distractions and normal demands from the world. Even mundane things like grocery shopping are suddenly complex and stressful.
2. We must prioritize self-care. We may not be used to doing so, and starting new habits takes repetition. Try to incorporate whatever healthy activities have worked for you in the past and know that it's okay to craft your therapy sessions in a way that reflect self care. That includes smaller sessions, more breaks, and don't forget to MOVE your bodies in between sessions, oxygenate, and nourish yourself.
3. There are no experts in tele-health, only peers giving their best efforts. There are tons of creative and generous people helping the rest of us with ideas. Take those ideas and adapt them to your clients, to promote your treatment goals, and to deepen your relationship.
4. Trust the relationship you have with the child and the family. You know what makes your clients laugh, how to engage them, what they are interested in. The relational foundation will help you co-create a new way of being together.
5. Anticipate happy surprises rather than worrying about what could go wrong. Yes, some things will go wrong, but stay flexible when those happen and learn how to tweak. Whatever happens on tele-health sessions could be happening in-vivo. Learn to observe the play behaviors and think through what you think the child/family might be showing through behavior, not just words.
6. Although many families are enjoying their forced time together, please remember that for some families being together implies great risk; spend time working on internal and

external safety and escape routes. See if there is a safe room in the house that can be entered and secured if needed. Be sensitive and monitor your high-risk families. The rates of child abuse reporting has increased and I will not be surprised to see the rates of Interpersonal Violence increasing between couples.

7. If you have made the decision to move your clients to tele-health, there are lots of resources from your professional organizations on the ethical delivery of tele-therapy and you will have to extrapolate to play therapy on line.
8. Remember that children are much more interested in technology than some of us are and they will be eager to meet on most platforms and possibly guide us.
9. Being on line with children and their parents offers them novelty: Remember that novelty is exciting and most definitely can be viewed as a positive change and fill someone with curiosity.
10. SUPPORTING/COACHING parents to provide guidance and support to their children is critical. Anxious parents may convey worries to children, calm and supportive parents will soothe and comfort children and model that even with the unknown, parents can handle things and take care of their children.
11. Prepare the tele-health session by asking what space is available for privacy, asking family members to allow child to meet without interruptions, provide guidelines should child want to go in and out of room, make thoughtful decisions about inviting siblings and look for opportunities for dyadic or family work.
12. View the room the child will be meeting in prior to your session. Ask the parent to look with you to see if anything in the room could be unsafe. Make a plan to have caretaker's texting information available should something happen to the child in the room and you can't help. Text the caregiver and ask them to go check the child;
13. You might want to ask parents to gather some items in a basket that include paper and markers, puppets, balloons, cotton balls, aluminum foil, etc.; You might ask parents and children to pick up things in nature, bring home, sterilize, and have ready for your sessions to give options;
14. Give the family some ideas for family activities that support the child's therapy. A good family activity right now is cutting out pictures for collage work or going out into nature to gather stones or seeds (that will be cleansed prior to use). These materials can be utilized in therapeutic activities.
15. Please remember that you will convey your fears and worries as well as your confidence and sense of adventure: Tell kids this is new for you, you might need their help and guidance, ask them to show you what they know and is of interest to them;
16. Most of us like to feel confident and competent. Right now, getting online can fill us with ambivalence and uncertainty...we might even feel inadequate, heaven forbid!! Showing a little vulnerability is not unusual; however, there are other things you can do:
17. PRACTICE on line with friends and family. Call folks using your platform and explore the features that are available to you. And if you have nieces, nephews, or neighbors' kids, why not do a practice run (especially if you're going to ask a client to participate in an activity);
18. Explore YouTube clips that might be relevant and therapeutic and look for games that can be shared on your platform and require interaction;

19. Don't forget that you know your client already (unless you're doing intakes online), and you know what they like to play with, what their interests are, what makes them laugh and delight.
20. I am confident that you will feel more adequate over time.
21. If you can get to your office and get a little basket full of "transitional objects" that the kids will recognize (a puppet, a picture, a book, a toy), you can show it to them online or use it to engage their interest and participation, or to remind them of work they were doing in your office.
22. Surprise them in between sessions by sending them a note or card. Everyone likes getting snail mail.
23. Don't feel so much pressure to "do" something; try "being with" and exploring together "I wonder what this will be like," "I wonder what you and I will find to do that we like;"
24. Anticipate something positive: Many therapists are finding delightful surprises when doing online work, like the child who was more open and candid about past traumas because he felt the benefit of the added perceived distance and privacy;
25. If you're feeling at a loss for activities to do, or ways to engage children, think about how you greeted the child in your play therapy office...find ways to spark their interest or let them spark yours.
26. There are lots of activities that people are sharing on social media. Please look up the following individuals who are actively sharing resources. They all have websites and they are easy to find: Paris Goodyear-Brown, Tammi van Hollander, Jenn Ann LeFebre, Lynn Louise Wonders, and Lianna Lowenstein. In addition, there is a group online called Tele-Play Therapy. Don't forget to check out the Association for Play Therapy website. Their discussion page is full of ideas.
27. However, don't rush to find activities outside of yourself. Yes, they are there, but give yourself a moment to see what you can discover if you allow yourself to close your eyes and think about the relationship you have with the child, his or her strengths, vulnerabilities, resources, temperament, interests...and imagine yourself reaching out to them. Remember that you are still offering the same thing: Yourself and a corrective (reparative) experience.
28. Develop a rhythm to your online sessions: a greeting, a focal point, and a closure. The focal point might be new (given all the collective stress in the universe) or it might be something you were working on before. See what continuity you can provide and then see how the child is doing now.
29. If you are child-centered, you are in a great position to allow the child to show you his/her environment and to follow their lead in whatever they might want to do.
30. If you are feeling the need to guide or direct the session, prepare a list of things to try and see how it goes while remaining flexible to changes. Remember that children are by nature exploratory, playful, and sometimes provocative. Give them opportunities to express themselves in myriad ways. Also, invite kids to help you come up with ideas for other kids. Children love to help and share what they know.
31. Personally, I enjoy mirroring exercises and think they can be a good way to start. For example, moving your body and having them follow, making a sound in rhythmic bilateral ways that they can follow. Asking them to show you how they are feeling in the

moment using a sound and/or movement. Playing charades with feelings might be fun too.

32. Showing each other your new environments might be interesting but remember to clear your space of too much personal information that might have unintended impact on your child clients. Just prepare what they will see and look around where they are. Zoom has virtual backgrounds you can use and a feature that allows you to add your own pictures.
33. Use props if needed and keep in mind you're the biggest prop there is. The online experience shrinks us to the parameter of the camera and to sitting in place. Be sure to experiment with standing and stretching or guiding breathing/stretching exercises.
34. Trust that all your sessions will be unique.
35. It might be more tiring to do these sessions because you're "on" most of the time and there is a little added stress when not feeling 100% confident. Remember that your confidence will grow.
36. You have not changed, only the mechanism by which you are connecting. You will find and rediscover each other online and it may be strangely comforting to see/be with each other in this new way. Remember that continuity of care is important.
37. Remember also that you are co-creating your sessions within the context of a foundational relationship...trust that.
38. If obstacles arise for you, do some problem-solving, consult, or try welcoming this new way of being in a new and different way.
39. Phone sessions can be a little more challenging since you can't see them; however, you are more likely more familiar with speaking on the phone. You can still converse and ask them to participate in interactional games such as "reflection cards," or "complete a sentence." You can make sounds and have them repeat them in whatever way they can. You can ask them to guess what feeling you're having by making a sound. You can have them play you a favorite song. You can read a book or listen to one. You can do story telling or mutual story telling. You can do guided imagery. You can just listen and see how the child feels about not being seen, just heard. Some children will feel more open and playful, some will use silence more. Do what you would ordinarily do with those behaviors in a more typical in-vivo session.
40. We are all trained psychotherapists grounded in theory and application. Trust yourself. You and your client are on an exploratory path, filled with mutual curiosity about how this will go.
41. Use your support systems, share ideas, share your joys and share your stressors.
42. Most importantly, take care of you!!

Good luck everyone, I am here as a support system. Feel free to contact me at 202-257-2783 or elianagil@me.com I have lots of dates set up and I'm looking forward to them.