



Remote Counseling: Preparing for Emergencies

The 2020 pandemic has heightened safety issues with counseling people online and so it is a best practice to gather certain information from the person in your care and to think through safety procedures ahead of time. For instance, remote sessions rely on technology to work well, and if it fails, it is important to have a plan of how to reconnect. Most of all and most importantly, the person receiving care might be located some distance from where you are holding the session. Therefore, it is important to know their location and how to contact them in case there is a mental health emergency.

Start an online counseling relationship with safety in mind

When you start to counsel someone online, during the first meeting be sure to ask for:

- Their phone number
- Exact address of where they are currently located
- What to do if the technology should fail

During the first meeting you might also want to evaluate whether they would be a good fit for online pastoral conversations or whether it would be better to meet with them in person in a safe and mutually agreed upon location. The first session could also be used to determine whether it would be best to refer them to a professional who can better meet their needs.

If someone does not seem to be doing well emotionally

Here are some pieces of information that you should gather if you notice that the person is not doing well emotionally.

- Find out if they are seeing a professional counselor or psychiatrist. If so, gather information about their treatment team.
- If not, refer them to professional counselors that can assess their condition and provide treatment based on their needs.
- Gather emergency contact numbers of close and trusted family members or friends.
- Screen for suicide ideation (refer to this previous tool: [Suicide Prevention: Creating a Safety Plan](https://counseling.redeemer.com/safetyplan): counseling.redeemer.com/safetyplan).

If someone has suicidal thoughts

When you notice someone is struggling with suicidal thoughts, ask them if they have any intent or plan to harm themselves. If the person is only having thoughts, but no intent or plan, then:

- Talk to the person about who they feel comfortable and safe with to reach out to in case of an emergency.
- Research with the person the local hospitals or emergency rooms nearest their location.
- Inform them that in an emergency, they can call 911, or call their local crisis support team (in NYC, it is [NYC Well](https://nycwell.cityofnewyork.us/en/): nycwell.cityofnewyork.us/en/; 1-888-692-9355).

Remember to encourage and support them that their safety is important. They now have the resources they need to get a higher level of care or to know what to do in an emergency situation. It is also wise to keep documentation of this conversation in your records in case you need to refer to it in the future.

Responding to an emergency in an online session

If the person you are meeting has suicidal thoughts and also has intent or a plan, then it is an emergency. Your main objective is to keep them safe while also starting off with the least invasive and most collaborative intervention possible. You want to ensure the person gets the help they need right away, while you remain online with them:

1. Make sure the person is safe. Assess their situation and environment to make sure there are no harmful substances or objects in reach.
2. Contact people to inform them of that person's current state, such as:
 - Their psychiatrist, if they have one.
 - Someone they live with whom they would be comfortable sharing their active suicidal ideation with.
 - The emergency contact they mentioned during the session.
3. If the person is willing to go to the ER with their emergency contact, contact one of the person's emergency contacts. Then you both can collaborate on which ER they are going to go to.
 - You can also call ahead and say: *"Hi my name is John Bishop and I am a pastor. My parishioner, Ron Jones, is having active suicidal ideation and he is actually on his way there with his girlfriend, Jane Anderson."*

Action steps for someone resistant to emergency care

If the client is not willing to do any of the above or go to the ER:

- Gently affirm, *“Your safety is really important to me. Because I do not feel confident in your level of safety at this moment, I will have to call 911.”* Remember to verbally affirm your care for them while doing so.
- Call 911 right away while keeping them on the video chat. You can say, *“Hello, I have Ron Jones on a remote counseling session and he is struggling so much that he wants to overdose and he really needs someone to come and help him get to the hospital.”*

Make sure you stay on the line with the struggling person to ensure that someone comes to their home to get them and that there is a **handoff of care**. This might mean that you also contact their emergency contact or have the person do so.

For the most part, online counseling has been a lifeline to people that are in need of care during this pandemic season. It is amazing that even though someone might be located in a different place, you can still be Christ's presence to them through your computer screen. Through active listening and coming alongside the person, you are being present with them in their concerns and struggles. When you ensure that they are safe from harm, even from themselves, you are extending Christ's love and compassionate care to them and affirming that their lives have value and purpose.