



# NATIONAL BOARD FOR CERTIFIED COUNSELORS (NBCC) POLICY REGARDING THE PROVISION OF DISTANCE PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

## INTRODUCTION

The National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to the identification of counselors who have voluntarily met national standards based on research in the profession. NBCC's mission also includes the promotion of quality assurance and professionalism in counseling practice.

In connection with the mission to promote quality assurance, NBCC recognized the potential impact of computers on the counseling profession decades ago. After conducting research with experts in the field, NBCC adopted the *Standards for the Ethical Practice of WebCounseling* in 1997, the first of such standards in the mental health profession. Given the evolution of the technology in this area, the NBCC Board of Directors has regularly reviewed these standards and adopted revised policies such as *The Practice of Internet Counseling*.

The most recent review of the practice of internet counseling supports a revision in the standards, and the resulting information demonstrated the following fundamental concepts:

1. Counseling through distance means presents unique ethical dilemmas to professional counselors.
2. Related technology continues to advance and be used more by increasing numbers of professional counselors.
3. Use of technology by counselors continues to evolve.

In light of this information, the policy regarding internet counseling has been revised, and this document, the *NBCC Policy Regarding the Provision of Distance Professional Services*, replaces previous editions.

One of the most recognizable differences in this policy is the use of the term "distance professional services." Rather than focusing only on the provision of "internet counseling," this policy expands the terminology to include other types of professional services that are starting to be used more in distance formats.

Other key terms with regard to this policy include:

*Face-to-face* refers to services that involve the synchronous interaction between an individual or groups of people using what is seen and heard in person to communicate.

*Distance professional services* involve the use of electronic or other means (e.g., telephones or computers) to provide services such as counseling, supervision, consultation, or education.

*Counseling* is a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals.

*Supervision* is a contracted, hierarchical relationship between two or more professionals. The intended focus of supervision is on the augmentation of a supervisee's professional services.

*Consultation* is a deliberate agreement between two or more professionals to work together to increase the effectiveness of professional services in relation to a specific individual (client, student, or supervisee).

Common methods for the provision of distance professional services include the following:

- *Telephone-based* refers to the synchronous distance interaction in which information is received only through audio means.
- *Email-based* refers to the asynchronous distance interaction in which information is received through written text messages or email.
- *Chat-based* refers to the synchronous distance interaction in which information is received through written messages.
- *Video-based* refers to the synchronous distance interaction in which information is received via video and audio mechanisms.
- *Social network-based* refers to the synchronous or asynchronous distance interaction in which information is exchanged through social networking mechanisms.

All of the above-mentioned examples of distance professional services may be conducted with individuals, couples, families, or group members.

*The NBCC Policy Regarding the Provision of Distance Professional Services* identifies specific actions National Certified Counselors (NCCs) must take when providing distance services. NBCC recognizes that some counselors provide a combination of face-to-face and distance services even in the context of one particular client or supervisee; therefore, the standards described in this policy supplement the directives identified in the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) *Code of Ethics*.

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## STANDARDS FOR DISTANCE PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

1. NCCs shall adhere to all NBCC policies and procedures, including the *Code of Ethics*.
2. NCCs shall provide only those services for which they are qualified by education and experience. NCCs shall also consider their qualifications to offer such service via distance means.
3. NCCs shall carefully adhere to legal regulations before providing distance services. This review shall include legal regulations from the state in which the counselor is located as well as those from the recipient's location. Given that NCCs may be offering distance services to individuals in different states at any one time, the NCC shall document relevant state regulations in the respective record(s).
4. NCCs shall ensure that any electronic means used in distance service provision are in compliance with current regulatory standards.
5. NCCs shall use encryption security for all digital technology communications of a therapeutic type. Information regarding security should be communicated to individuals who receive distance services. Despite the use of reasonable security safeguards, distance service recipients shall be informed of the potential risks of distance communications. Not the least of these considerations is the warning about entering private information when using a public access or computer that is on a shared network. NCCs shall caution recipients of distance services against using "auto-remember" user names and passwords. NCCs shall also inform recipients of distance services to consider employers' policies relating to the use of work computers for personal communications.
6. To prevent the loss of digital communications or records, NCCs who provide distance services shall maintain secure backup systems. If the backup system is also a digital mechanism, this too shall offer encryption-level security. This information shall be provided to the recipient of professional services.

7. NCCs shall screen potential distance service recipients for appropriateness to receive services via distance methods. These considerations shall be documented in the records.
8. During the screening or intake process, NCCs shall provide potential recipients with a detailed written description of the distance counseling process and service provision. This information shall be specific to the identified service delivery type and include considerations for that particular individual. These considerations shall include the appropriateness of distance counseling in relation to the specific goal, the format of service delivery, the associated needs (i.e., computer with certain capabilities, etc.), the limitations of confidentiality, privacy concerns, the possibility of technological failure, anticipated response time to electronic communication, alternate service deliveries, and any additional considerations necessary to assist the potential recipient in reaching a determination about the appropriateness of this service delivery format for their need(s). NCCs shall discuss this information at key times throughout the service delivery process to ensure that this method satisfies the anticipated goals, and if not, the NCC will document the discussion of alternative options and referrals in the client's record.
9. Because of the ease in which digital communications can inadvertently be sent to other individuals, NCCs shall adopt behaviors to prevent the distribution of confidential information to unauthorized individuals. NCCs shall discuss actions the recipient may take to reduce the possibility that they will send information to other individuals by mistake.
10. NCCs shall provide recipients of distance professional services with information concerning their professional credentials and links to the respective credentialing organization web-sites.
11. NCCs, either prior to or during the initial session, shall inform recipients of the purposes, goals, procedures, limitations, potential risks, and benefits of services and techniques. NCCs also shall provide information about rights and responsibilities as appropriate to the distance service. As a part of this type of service provision, NCCs shall discuss with recipients the associated challenges that may occur when communicating through distance means, including those associated with privacy and confidentiality.
12. In the event that the recipient of distance services is a minor or is unable to provide legal consent, the NCC shall obtain a legal guardian's consent prior to the provision of distance services. Furthermore, NCCs shall retain copies of documentation indicating the legal guardian's identity in the recipient's file.
13. NCCs shall avoid the use of public social media sources (e.g., tweets, blogs) to provide confidential information. To facilitate the secure provision of information, NCCs shall provide in writing the appropriate ways to contact them.
14. NCCs shall discuss with recipients the importance of identifying recipient-named contacts in the event of identified emergency situations. As a part of this discussion, NCCs will identify the circumstances in which the individuals will be contacted and what information will be shared with emergency contacts. NCCs will provide recipients of distance services with specific written procedures regarding emergency situations. This information shall include emergency responders near the recipient's location. Given the increased dangers intrinsic to providing certain distance professional services, NCCs shall take reasonable steps to secure reasonable referrals for recipients when needed.

15. NCCs shall develop written procedures for verifying the identity of the recipient, his or her current locations, and readiness to proceed at the beginning of each contact. Examples of verification means include the use of code words, phrases or inquiries. (For example, “Is this a good time to proceed?”)
16. NCCs shall limit use of information obtained through social media sources (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter) in accordance with established practice procedures provided to the recipient at the initiation of services or adapted through ongoing informed consent process.
17. NCCs shall provide information concerning locations where members of the public may access the internet free of charge or provide information regarding the location of complimentary web communication services. In such cases, the informed consent process shall include the required discussion items, including how this affects confidentiality and privacy.
18. NCCs shall retain copies of all written communications with distance service recipients. Examples of written communications include email/text messages, instant messages, and histories of chat-based discussions even if they are related to housekeeping issues such as change of contact information or scheduling appointments.
19. At a minimum, NCCs shall retain distance service records for a minimum of five years unless state laws require additional time. NCCs shall limit the use of records to those permitted by law, professional standards, and as specified by the agreement with the respective recipient of distance services.
20. NCCs shall develop written procedures for the use of social media and other related digital technology with current and former recipients. These written procedures shall, at a minimum, provide appropriate protections against the disclosure of confidential information and the creation of multiple relationships. These procedures shall also identify that personal accounts are distinct from any used for professional purposes.