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Online consultations

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Practical and professional aspects

Updated 8th January 2021

1. Online platform

I offer consultations, psychotherapy and clinical supervision online locally in South Africa and internationally. For this, I use Zoom, to which I have a paid subscription. **This means there is no charge to you. You do not need to have a subscription to zoom yourself**.

2. Bandwidth

Using internet videoconferencing media depends on both of us having good quality access to the internet. *It is best to use a connection that offers a speed of 10mbps, though a lower speed such as 4mbps can produce an acceptable connection*. With lower speeds the pictures may not transmit at all and the sound may fluctuate. Even if we both have a high speed internet connection there may be times when internet bandwith is limited or unavailable for various reasons. Sometimes the Zoom server is not available (the same can also happen with Skype and other platforms) Sometimes, your internet speed or mine may fall below the speed you are paying for or get interrupted altogether. When this happens we may have to abandon the session and reschedule it. In such cases I do not charge for the abandoned session (or charge on a pro rata basis if it has continued for at least 15 minutes) and will make try to find an alternative time to replace the time that has been missed.

3. Joining the meeting

I will email you a URL link like this: https://zoom.us/j/485352423   (it won't be that particular meeting number). You will also see **Meeting ID: 485-352-423** which is the same number as on the meeting link. You can connect from a laptop or smartphone or tablet. On a smartphone or tablet or Mac computer there is an app that you can get. Open the app and enter the Meeting ID or you may just be able to click on the URL link. On a PC you just click on the link and you will be taken to zoom on your internet browser (Chrome, Edge, Firefox, etc.). You can also join the meeting by typing in the access code at https://zoom.us/join

Meeting password: Because of security concerns I use high security settings which include asking for a meeting password. The password is usually embedded in the URL you will be sent but you will also be informed of the password for your meeting.

Waiting room: I will usually open the meeting shortly before the set time, but if you enter the meeting before that you will get a message to wait for the host to start the meeting. I also use the "Waiting room" option which means that you will enter a virtual waiting room and I will have to admit you to the session. This is an additional security feature, as no one else could join the meeting without being identified. Once you join you will see a panel with images from your webcam, my webcam and those of any others who are taking part.

From most countries you can also connect by phone using a local number. In that case, of course, you will only have a sound connection, and there will be no picture. The number for your country may be displayed in the invitation email. The invitation email will also have a link to zoom's international dial-in numbers so you can look up dial in numbers from other countries too.

4. Technical aspects

▸ It's best to use a **headset with a microphone**. Otherwise there may be echo or noise distortion or there may not be sufficient volume unless you are close to yoyr device. I use a Logitec Bluetooth wireless headset (H800) on my laptop that delivers excellent quality. The H600 is also good and very portable. You can get them at www.wantitall.co.za. But there are plenty of other options.

▸ In the top right hand corner of the zoom screen you can control whether you view the panel as **full screen** or as a **reduced size screen**. You can drag the reduced size screen to any place on your screen and change its size by dragging from the top or bottom or either side.

▸ Also in the top right hand corner is an icon that allows you to switch to **gallery view** (all images of meeting participants are the same size) or **speaker view** (there is a large image of the person speaking and a much smaller one of the other (or others).

▸ The **microphone icon** at the bottom right of your screen allows you to mute and unmute your microphone. To control which microphone is connected to zoom (laptop mic, headset mic etc), click on the upward arrow on the right of the mic icon.

▸ On the right of the mic icon is a **webcam icon**. You can click on it to turn your camera off and on. Click on the upward arrow on the right to select which webcam is connected.

▸ If you don't see the images, look for the **Zoom icon** (image on the right) on your taskbar (bottom of your screen). Click on this to bring the images back to your screen.

Zoom allows me to record the session (video and audio) and afterwards I can forward the recording (usually just the audio) for you to listen to later. Many supervisees find it useful to listen to some of the recording again to revisit points that they might have missed. The audio is in m4a format. If you need it in another format such as mp3 you can easily convert it using, for example, VLC media player available free from https://www.videolan.org/vlc/index.html.   If you do not want the session recorded you can inform me of this.

5. Security: Legal and professional issues

There are security concerns with respect to online consultations because communication over the internet is not completely secure. Even highly secure systems like internet banking sites get hacked from time to time.   At the same time, with such a mass of information flowing over the internet, the probability is low that someone would try to eavesdrop on your consultation with me.

Zoom is designed for use in corporate environments and is set up in such a way that it offers a high

level of security. My understanding is that it is a much more secure system than Skype.

- ▸ No information about the content of the meeting itself (video or audio of the conversation) is stored on the Zoom servers. Information that there was a meeting and who the participants were (IP addresses, display name, email addresses) are stored by Zoom, but that is all.
- ▸ Zoom uses end to end encryption which is enabled for all zoom sessions.
- ▸ For therapy clients, I give a unique meeting number. No one else has that number so no one else can try to join the meeting.
- ▸ As indicated above, I set a meeting password and admit participants from a virtual waiting room. This means that in the unlikely event that someone did get the meeting ID, they would not be able to join and their presence would be immediately known to me as meeting host.

In April and May 2020 Zoom made a considerable upgrade on its security features and these are incorporated in Zoom 5.0 and any updates after that. The zoom app or zoom client software will usually update automatically and include whatever new features have been added.

In the United States Professional security of information relevant to health (including mental health) status is covered by the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA). In South Africa the Protection of Personal Information Act of 2013 serves the same purpose. This largely refers to the security of records of personal health data (including diagnoses) that may be stored digitally (on a computer, for example or on a cloud storage system). In terms of HIPAA, online platforms such as Zoom can provide a security contract called a BAA which guarantees that they will take responsibility for any security breaches. This contract is very expensive and I do not subscribe to it. However, as I understand it from discussions with Zoom consultants, the actual level of security is the same with or without the contract. As already mentioned, Zoom does not store any personal information beyond your email address and IP address.

6. Other internet meeting options

These can be useful if Zoom is offline but they do not allow sessions to be recorded and most are likely to be less secure. Some clients may prefer to use one of these for practical reasons though my preference is always to use Zoom. These are just some examples:

Skype: Perhaps the best known of the internet communication systems. If you don't have it on your computer, go to http://www.skype.com/en/download-skype/skype-for-computer/ There are apps for tablets and smartphones too. You set yourself up with a Skype name and can easily connect with others already on Skype. My Skype name is davidjaedwards. The basic service is free but Skype offers a range of other services for which there is a charge. Quality is variable and it has been reported that the security level of the free version is lower than with Zoom.

VSee is designed for medical settings. It has a high level of security built in and may offer more security features than Skype. The Basic version is free. Go to https://vsee.com/features to find out more. You can download it at http://vsee.com/ and click on "Free sign up".

Facetime: This is the Apple system built into iPads and iPhones. I have an iPad so I can connect with you on Facetime provided I have a wireless signal (which I normally do at my office).

Whatsapp Video: This popular social media platform is easy to use on a smartphone.

7. Implications for your contract with me

If you choose to have online meetings with me for any form of consultation, supervision or psychotherapy, it is important that you understand the level of security that is provided by the above and accept it as part of the contract for our work together. If you request to meet via Skype or another videoconferencing or social media platform, you accept the level of security that comes with that platform (which is most likely not as high as with the Zoom settings I am using). Of course if you have concerns about security and privacy please feel free to discuss them with me at any time.