

## Supplementary Text Support FAQ

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Disclaimer: This resource was developed by Amie Kroes for the OCRCC. All of the below are examples and not exhaustive lists. I have attempted to provide as much detail as possible without being terribly overwhelming. More detail/clarity provided upon request.

### 1. How do we ensure privacy and safety when using an unsecure medium?

Privacy in this medium is regulated as much as possible through the technology. However, unlike accessing a secured webpage, or using encrypted online chat systems, there is inherent risk in using text message technology. This is something that needs to be communicated with a client, through the informed consent process before using this option. Much like how informed consent is used before any interaction.

Things to consider is how messages are communicated. Not asking for any personal information, and making it known that the client should not share any personal information, such as last name, address, name of workplace, name of school etc. over text may be important for them. Further, when crafting messages about appointments, consider some of the language you may use when leaving a voicemail on a shared machine. Do you need to communicate where the appointment is? Or would it be enough to say "Hello Claire, this is a reminder that you have an appointment with us at 2pm on Thursday. See you there!". It is likely that you have already communicated with the client before, and they know who you are. As one can likely tell, this ensures a lot more privacy than the following example: "Hi Claire, you have a counselling appointment at the sexual assault centre on Thursday at 2pm".

If by privacy you mean confidentiality, like any service you provide, your agency has steps and measures in place for protecting any type of transcript or case note.

If by privacy you mean safety, then consider your informed consent process. Informed consent is something that counsellors use daily. Text support is not different. Ensure that clients know what to expect from the text relationship (who they will talk to, what they can talk about, how long they get, what is appropriate vs inappropriate, what privacy and confidentiality assurances there are), what some of the benefits and risks are, and give them an opportunity to ask questions and opt in/out. I would

recommend going over the informed consent process in person before the utilization of this communication mechanism.

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## 2. How do we screen clients for this service?

There are many factors to consider when thinking about which clients may be most appropriate for supplementary text support services. There are no hard and fast rules, but as an agency, I would recommend that you have a conversation about the following:

- Anyone who asks to use this service should be given consideration – but just because they want to does not mean that they are appropriate for the service – consideration should be given to the motivation of the client.
- People who are already comfortable with texting technology can be both a positive and negative contributing factor. People who already text, use text in a certain way. Generally informal communication with friends and family. Meaning, you will need to do the most work on creating and maintaining boundaries with people who are frequent text users. This is neither inherently good or bad, just something to consider.
- People who struggle to remember appointments are the group of people who research says supplementary text support helps the most. One study showed that no-show rates for appointments decreased to 0% with appointment reminders via text and email (clients either attended, or texted back that they needed to reschedule). Anecdotally, the effectiveness of text reminders has become so well known that practitioners of all kinds (optometrists, dentists, veterinarians, and specialist doctor's offices are all using this technology).
- People who can benefit from check-in's between sessions and clients who need "extra support" are another category of clients who research supports giant gains in treatment with the use of supplementary texts. Some of these could be having the client rate their mood, or be held accountable to a homework assignment that needed to be completed between sessions etc. This takes the therapeutic process out of the office and into their lives. However, this group also needs the most structure around boundaries, and will require a counsellor who is able and willing to hold boundaries.
- People who are lonely, or requesting a check-in, not for a specific therapeutic purpose, but just because they need someone to talk to would be a group I would recommend being very careful using this technology with. If there is no specific goal or purpose that you can point to, then it becomes very difficult to create and maintain boundaries. For these individuals, I would recommend online or telephone hotlines (not crisis chats if they are not in crisis).
  - This is where a client may ask to participate but a clinician needs to use their judgement about whether there is a purpose.

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### 3. How do we create boundaries for the service?

Boundaries are possibly one of the biggest considerations for supplementary text support as you do not want to be having counselling sessions via text, and as the person's counsellor, this could be an easy place to get drawn to. Not only do you have to help create and negotiate boundaries with the client, but you need to be ready to uphold them, even if the client prompts you with something that concerns you – and they will.

Informed consent: In the informed consent process, you need to be very clear on exactly what the service is for, and how it will be used, and more importantly, how it will not be used. Things to consider:

- Availability – what are the “open” hours?
- Two-way communication? Are you expecting to use this to send messages, and expecting a response, or not expecting a response?
- Response when prompted? Some agencies say that the message will only be one way, unless instructed. The client needs to know when and how to respond, if they are supposed to.
- Specifically, what is the purpose of text support? This can be contracted with each client individually. Some may only be appointment reminders, some may be for between session checks-ins, some for both, etc.
- Response time – if a client sends a text, what is the anticipated response time. This can link back to availability. If they text at 9am, they may expect a response within 3 hours. If they text at 5pm on a Friday, they may not expect a response until 12pm on the following Monday. The expectation of being immediately available is one that needs to be squashed right from the first conversation with the client.
- Anticipated response if a client violates an established boundary. Make sure the clients know that if they do try to disregard established boundaries, to expect that boundaries will be maintained and communicated (see FAQ #4 for more on this).
- What to do in crisis – supplementary text support is not a crisis support service, ensure clients know this, and have an alternative crisis support option
- Discontinuation – the service is a privilege and if deemed that a client is misusing the service, it can be discontinued-with the possibility of coming back to it when the client is better prepared.
- How to manage conflict or expectation differences. Put in place a mechanism for open conversation on managing expectations. This way, if the client feels that they are not getting what they think they should from the service, or you feel that the client is misusing the service, both parties have a way of communicating, preferably in person, about the conflict. Wording in the informed consent could be something like: “If at any point Claire (client) or Amie (counsellor) want to discuss how they feel about the supplementary text, and their expectations of the service, they will make a note about their feelings, and discuss any feedback at their next in person session.”

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#### 4. How do we maintain boundaries when a client attempts to cross them?

As with face-to-face interactions, it is always important to maintain clear boundaries. However, texting sometimes comes with different expectations for informal behaviour. This is acceptable, but it does not mean that there should be a lack of boundaries in addition to a more informal style of communication.

Just as a client's inhibitions drop via text, yours as a practitioner are likely to as well. Being conscious of this pitfall, and being ready to address your own fluid boundaries with a client will be important as you move forward. You are responsible for your own assessment of professional boundaries.

A few words on boundary creation:

- Give yourself permission – just because someone is requesting more of your time, does not mean you need to give it to them (avoid the tempting rescuer role)
- Consider the goals – is what you are doing helping the client work toward their goals, or are they needing companionship? If you cannot easily identify why you are participating in a certain action/reaction with the client, then consider boundaries and a possible need to uphold one.
- Set boundaries for time – create a 'goal' time and if you need to go over that time, be specific and purposeful about why you need more time. Be conscious of what you are doing, why and for how long.
- Have a clear understanding of where your role as the service provider ends and the client begins. Also, have a clear understanding of the responsibilities of your role as the service provider and communicate them. For example, you can respond and educate and coach, but you should not be the one "doing" the work.
- Stay on topic. It is easy when someone presents with multiple issues, to want to help address all of the things presented. Especially if you have the capacity and time to do so 'today'. You are setting a standard every time you stretch your scope, which in a way, is unconsciously negotiating new and different boundaries. Return to considering the goals (#2 above).

When you are clear on what your boundaries are, and you have negotiated and communicated them with your client, it is almost inevitable that someone will test, confront, or forget. In these cases, consider some of the below suggestions:

1. **Respond quickly and consistently:** It is common that most boundary tests will not be an egregious incident that is easily identifiable. It will likely be something small, such as doorknob communication, where the client discloses something just as they metaphorically have their hand on the doorknob ready to leave, and then you are tempted to spend more time with them. These subtle boundary violations are easy to ignore, but it is important not to. You set up precedent, and then reinforce it every time you do. **Every** time a boundary violation occurs, no matter how small, a quick response is required. We are modelling the maintenance of boundaries with a population group that often has difficulty doing this in their own life.
2. **Reminder of the agreement established:** This is why the pre-work of negotiating boundaries is so important, you can bring that informed consent process, back into the conversation.
  - a. "I hear you have more things you would like to address, but as per our agreement, this text is a reminder of your upcoming appointment".

3. **Be Empathetic:** demonstrate that the boundary is just as much for the benefit of the client as it is for your benefit. You want them to know you care, but also, will assertively adhere to what you have set up as a norm. When you tell them what you cannot do, try to follow-up with what you CAN do.
  - a. “What you brought up is important though, so what I will do is make note of this topic and be sure that we discuss it next time we talk”.
  - b. “Your message is important to me, I will reply during the next available business hours” (often set as an auto response).
  
4. **Clarify your Role and Boundaries:** Be clear about your role as the counsellor, and their role as the client. I know we do a lot of work in sessions to reduce the power dynamic, but when texting, it is important to establish and maintain professional distance. Otherwise, it is very easy to fall into the realm of familiarity and friendship, unintentionally. This is true for both you and the client. Though we want to have a casual, open relationship with our clients, it is not helpful for them to have fluid boundaries with us. Use your professional judgement to assess what level of informality is acceptable, and what is a necessary boundary that you NEED to keep to maintain the professional roles you both occupy to be effective in the work you are doing.
  - a. Client: “Thanks, you are such a good friend”  
Counsellor: “Having trusted me with so much of your life experiences and emotions, it can sure feel like friendship when we talk. I am here for you, but as your counsellor”
  
5. **Offer Follow-up and Feedback:** Help the client realize that they can have their own boundaries as well and use this as an opportunity to check in with them about what would benefit them from an establishment of their own boundaries. If a client is regularly overstepping boundaries, it is likely that this is manifested in their personal life in other contexts. There may be an opportunity here to do some work with them around this as an “issue” by giving them some feedback. This is often best accomplished in a face-to-face setting, not at the time of the boundary violation.
  - a. “I noticed that I have to often remind you of \_\_\_\_, which I do not mind continuing to do, but I was wondering if you have ever noticed other people giving you similar feedback before?”
  - b. “When you called me a friend, and I responded that I was a counsellor, what was it like to hear that response?”; “What kind of boundaries do you normally have with friends?”; “what kind of boundaries do you think it is important for you to have with friends?”

Remember that when you reiterate a boundary, it will often leave the client feeling rebuffed, embarrassed or possibly confused. Taking care of the relationship, while being assertive is very important. This is why the follow-up step is arguable one of the most important ones. There needs to be good conversation and debrief about boundaries, and how just because you need to uphold the boundaries, does not mean that you are not interested or that you do not care. If a client has difficulty with this, I would recommend disengaging from the text support, rebuilding the relationship, and continue to have boundaries as a topic of conversation in relationship to why they are seeking therapeutic support.

## 5. What do I do if a person just stops responding to our conversation?

Working on the assumption that the person is still viewing the chat and may be processing, check-in.

- “Just checking to see if you need more time to explore how you feel about what I just said?”
- “I just gave a lot of information there, do you have any questions?”
- “This can be a really difficult topic to talk about, how are things going over there?”
- “I’m here when you are ready”
- “While you consider what I said, let me know if you need anything from me, such as any clarity”

If they client is no longer viewing the conversation:

- Hopefully you have already said what to do if they get disconnected for any reason.
- Re-read the messages and see if the conversation and any feedback you gave was inappropriate. Learn. There could be lots of reasons they left – this is the same as any aversive response from a client whether F2F or not.
- If you have serious concerns about their safety – follow your policies on breaching confidentiality with the information you have available.

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## 6. How do I respond to complex emotions such as anger/confrontation?

People have a right to feel angry. Just like in Face to face conversations. Consider how you might respond if you were speaking in person. What types of things would you consider? Anger is especially common if a client is asking you to do something, and you need to maintain a boundary by saying no.

- **Normalize:** “It is normal to feel \_\_\_\_\_, it’s okay to let it out in ways that are safe and helpful for you”
- **Externalize from the client:** “You are not an angry person, you are person experiencing anger”
- **Externalize from you:** “I can tell you are frustrated, and I get that I am an easy place to put that anger, but it appears that the anger is really about \_\_\_\_\_ situation and not this conversation”.
- **Redirect:** “Sometimes it is really helpful to sit in our difficult emotions, but sometimes they can be a bit destructive. I’d like to take a break for a second and just ask you to tell me three things you can see right now...”
- **Explore:** “You made a comment there about being unhappy with how this conversation is going, I’d really like to understand that more so we can get back on track”.
- **Be Assertive:** “I know it is hard to hear no sometimes, but \_\_\_\_\_ is what we have agreed to, and it is in both of our best interests to maintain that boundary.”
- **Offer options:** “I hear your frustration. Though I cannot do \_\_\_\_\_, what I can do is \_\_\_\_\_.”

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## 7. How do I respond when someone texts me that they are in immediate danger?

Use your skills in Applied Suicide Intervention. If you have not taken this training, I highly recommend it. This process is not different via text. What do you already do in face to face conversations, or over a crisis line?

What are your agency policies around confidentiality and responding to a crisis situation? Any information you have can be directed to your/their local authorities. Given that they are already a client of yours, you should have enough information to initiate a response if necessary.

If they are still connected, see what information you can gather. Try to help them make a plan for staying safe. Provide resources and referrals, including other online options if that is their comfort zone.

These situations are always difficult, debrief.

ASIST questions:

- **Probe for Context:** “What did you mean by that when you said you don’t want to live in your own body anymore?”
- **Ask directly about suicide:** “What you just said there makes me wonder if you might be considering suicide, are you?”
- **Ask about a plan:** “If you were going to kill yourself, how might you do so?”
- **Ask about their reasons for dying:** “What are some of the reasons you are thinking about dying?”
- **Ask about their reasons for living:** “What are some of the things that make you think killing yourself is not a good idea?”
- **Ask if they have felt this way before:** “Have you thought about killing yourself before?”
- **Ask if they have attempted before:** “Have you ever attempted to kill yourself before? (if so, how? When?)
- **Scale their risk:** “On a scale of 1-10, where 10 is you are going to kill yourself when we stop talking, where would you rate your desire to die?”
- **Reduce harm:** (if they have thought about or attempted before) – What helped you decide to live before when you were considering suicide? (if they have not thought or attempted before) – What do you think would help reduce this urge to die?
- **Offer referral**
- **Create a safety plan:** “I would like to create a plan for how you can keep yourself safe between now and our next meeting. What do you think would help?” (It is imperative that THEY create this plan, not that you create it on their behalf. This may take some time.)
  - Futuristic thinking – get them to think of something they are looking forward to
  - External support – who in their life can they rely on or have as a supporting person
  - Internal resilience – what can they do if they find themselves feeling suicidal again
  - Crisis support – who do they call if their plan does not feel like it is working (crisis-line – not you/yours)
- If you feel their risk level is too high or you have doubts that they will follow their safety plan, you have an obligation to break confidentiality and report this.

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## 8. How do I end a conversation?

Depending on how you are using the text support, endings may be right within the original message.

- “This is a reminder that your next scheduled appointment is at 2pm on May 11<sup>th</sup>.” – a response is not required, but most responses will be some version of thanks or confirmation, or request to reschedule.

If you are engaging in conversation, you need to be able to wrap it up, if things do not end naturally. Think about the ending skills you would use in a face to face interaction. There are certain phrases or statements that indicate ending/closing.

- “These are some great questions, I will write them down and we can talk about them in your next session”
- “I would like to talk about this in person, how about we use our next session to discuss?”
- “I have the information I need to document your homework, I will see you next week”
- “Please remember to use our crisis line if you need any support between now and our next session”

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