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COSCA Guidance on COVID - 19 – Updated 17 February 2021

Introduction

This is an update to guidance on COVID-19 previously issued by COSCA (Counselling & Psychotherapy in Scotland).

During this pandemic, as individual and organisational members and workers of COSCA, we should:

- act to ensure that the most vulnerable amongst us are protected and losses to the community are minimised

- avoid imposing risks on others, especially those who are vulnerable and close to us take the precautions and most up to date advice offered to us by the recognised medical experts and those whom they are advising

- set up contingency plans for any ongoing impact of COVID -19 e.g. consider alternative delivery methods of our services using, for example, Zoom, face time or 'go to meetings. **Please see COSCA's Guide on the Use of Technologies – see www.cosca.org.uk under guidance and policies**

- follow the guidance below on returning to face to face work with clients. The Scottish Government is currently allowing this to take place for the delivery of only essential counselling services with remote services being the default position, provided its social distancing measures are followed. Please see below under Useful Resources below for the links to the latest updates on the pandemic.

COSCA Membership

In respect of meeting the standards for on-going membership of COSCA, we will be supportive on a case by case basis towards existing members, and applicants for membership, whose level of practice, supervision and CPD have been affected by COVID -19.

COSCA Validated Training Providers

COSCA validated training providers should make mitigating accommodations for the students on their courses who may be temporarily unable to attend the course due to restrictions placed on them related to possible exposure to the virus that causes COVID -19. These may include extending due dates for assignments, sending work to students who are in self-isolation or unwell with the virus, giving students a chance to catch up during breaks, and using technologies where possible. Please see the latest more detailed guidance sent to all of our validated training providers.

COSCA Events and Meetings

COSCA's future events and meetings will be held online until further notice, and details are on our website under events. The following events will be online:

- COSCA Trainers Event on 8th June 2021
- COSCA Recognition Scheme Standards Event on 12th August 2021
- COSCA AGM on 8th September 2021.

Guidance on returning to work face to face with clients

The Scottish Government currently allows essential counselling services to be delivered on a face to face basis to provide essential services following relevant Scottish Government guidelines and with physical distancing – see under Useful Resources below. However, the delivery of remote services remains the default position.

Counsellors should also consider COSCA's guidance provided below, including the social distancing measures included within it. Please also see the links below to the most up to date information on the Scottish Government guidance, and please note that the information in these links is kept up to date.

Counsellors and psychotherapists are generally less exposed to disease in normal times than other workers e.g. front line healthcare workers. The latter workers are more likely to use personal protective equipment (PPE) like masks and gloves, and follow strict hygiene methods like washing hands.

However, counsellors do work in closeness to people (often less than 2 metres) and also potentially with those who have COVID-19 when delivering face to face counselling, but there is not an existing culture of regular hand washing and wearing PPE.

The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) has issued further guidance during the COVID 19 recovery period. The guidance gives organisations information on how they may collect data lawfully and proportionately when implementing testing or other screening measures for COVID 19 in the workplace and includes a number of FAQs to help organisations understand and comply with their data protection obligations.   The link to the guidance is here.

In preparation for returning to face to face work (full time or in a blended way with online and/or telephone counselling, or when delivering essential services), individual and organisational members should carry out a risk assessment of the service offered and record the actions taken to mitigate the risks. The information provided below will help this to be done.

Mitigating Actions

The following list of mitigating actions is provided to members to help them carry out the above risk assessment.

The recommended mitigating actions include:

Reception/waiting rooms (if applicable)

- ensuring that clients arrive for appointments at the scheduled time and not earlier and providing if possible outside covered area or information on nearby cafes etc. for those who do unavoidably arrive early

- providing if possible additional parking or other facilities, such as safe bike storage, to help counsellors and clients to walk or cycle to the premise

- providing only restricted and pre-arranged access to waiting rooms and buildings, with clients spending only a brief time outside of the counselling room

- providing face covering on entry for those who do not have them and checking that they are of the appropriate standard

- further increasing the frequency of hand washing and surface cleaning of waiting rooms between clients, including disinfecting of heavy footfall and frequent touch points, with particular attention to toilets/restrooms, and using if possible spray machines which quickly cover large areas

- providing hand sanitiser in all areas where there is poor access to hand washing, as not all sinks are accessible to those with a physical disability

- limiting the number of counsellors and clients that can be in a building at any one time

- using screens or barriers to separate people from each other. These are particularly appropriate where an individual cannot maintain social distancing and is in contact with a high volume of people such as those working in the reception area of an organisation's office and in counselling rooms where social distancing cannot be maintained

Shared spaces:

- regulating the use of high traffic areas including corridors, lifts, and walkways to maintain social distancing and increasing the frequency of cleaning and disinfection of these areas. For example, using a one way system for entering and leaving the premises and providing adequate signage to guide people could be helpful here as would limiting the maximum number of total staff in a building at any given time

- keeping the activity time involved outside of the counselling room as short as possible

Making an appointment:

- informing clients in advance about what to expect about their arrival in the premise, how social distancing measures will be used before, during and after the counselling session, and that they will be expected to use the hand sanitiser provided and face coverings in circulation areas

- in contracting with clients, ensuring that clients sign that they are agreeing to abide by the social distancing measures in place for counselling and that they will not make any claims linked to coronavirus

- advising vulnerable clients about whether or not they should attend face to face counselling and, if not, offering alternative online or telephone therapy

- advising clients not to attend face to face counselling if they have even mild symptoms of COVID-19 and, if possible, doing temperature checks on all clients on arrival

- prioritising appointments for previous clients who were unwilling/unable to switch to online or telephone counselling without any disruption to the continuity of work with those receiving online or telephone therapy

- handling all paperwork /filing online if possible

- providing alternatives to touch-based security devices such as keypads or even door bells for entry to premises. For example, a text could be sent to clients when it is safe for them to enter the premise (if they have a mobile device)

- reducing maximum occupancy for lifts, providing hand sanitiser for the operation of lifts and encouraging use of stairs wherever possible

- minimising contacts around transactions. For example, consider using contactless payments, and encourage online booking and pre-payment where appropriate

- if using cash, encouraging increased hand washing and/or providing hand sanitiser where this is not practical

Counsellors:

- ensuring that counsellors are adequately prepared and trained to resume face to face counselling using social distancing measures and following the relevant COVID-19 Scottish Government guidance for the practice of face to face counselling

- reducing the number of people each counsellor/member of staff has contact with by using 'fixed teams or partnering' (so each counsellor works with only a few others)

- staggering arrival and departure times of counsellors

- in the case of counsellors (paid and volunteer) who are self-isolating, shielding, or vulnerable offering options to work online and/or on the telephone from home

- reducing the number of counsellors working face to face in the premise by continuing to offer online and/or telephone counselling

- ensuring that counsellors and clients are ready to return to face to face work and offering a staggered return to face to face work along with online and telephone therapy

- checking with the relevant insurance company that working on a face to face basis is covered while social distancing measures are required

- being trauma aware about the possibility that the social distancing measures in place (face coverings, screens etc.) may trigger trauma in clients, and engaging with traumatised clients to explore practical options

- being aware that wearing face coverings by counsellors may not be appropriate in some circumstances e.g. when working with clients who lip read

- ensuring that the Scottish Government guidelines are followed in the event that a client tests positive for COVID-19, including any system in place for tracking others who have been in contact with the person infected

- informing clients that sessions may need to delivered online or by telephone if the counsellor or the client starts to show symptoms or tests positive for COVID-19

Counselling Room:

- using side-to-side (oblique) working (rather than face-to-face) whenever possible while allowing all relevant visual and auditory stimuli to be fully visible to both the counsellor and the client

- making sure that people with disabilities are able to access lifts and the counselling room while social distancing

- providing direct entry into counselling rooms and allowing sufficient time between appointments to ensure social distancing

- in an emergency, for example, an accident, provision of first aid, fire or break-in, people should not have to stay the recommended distance apart if by doing so they would endanger the health of life of another. However, people involved in the provision of assistance to others should pay particular attention to sanitation measures immediately afterwards including washing hands

- not providing water or tea/coffee facilities for clients but encouraging them to bring their own

- cleaning surfaces between sessions

Useful Resources

For up-to-date information and news on Coronavirus/COVID-19 which you are could post on your own websites, see the following websites:

- **World Health Organisation**
- **NHS Inform**
- **NHS UK**
- **Health Protection Scotland**
- **Scottish Government**
- **UK Government**

Brian Magee
Chief Executive
COSCA (Counselling & Psychotherapy in Scotland)
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