



*By now, you may have accepted that virtual care is here to stay and you're thinking about how to best make it work for you.*

*Virtual care is really no different to what you've probably been doing for a while, but formalising it, can be daunting and takes a bit of getting used to.*

*We've accumulated some tips from providers - locally and abroad - that we hope will help you make your virtual consult slicker, more rewarding and ensure patient satisfaction.*

### **1. Be Ready for a Conversation**

Remember that your patient is expecting you to be 100% engaged in the consultation, as if they were in your office. A virtual consultation shouldn't be a cold experience and should have as much care and empathy as an in-office visit. There have been many patients who commented that they find their provider distant or distracted when consulting's virtually. Be ready for a conversation and be in it as much as you would, if you were sitting together in your rooms.

### **2. Have all your Information Ready and be Prepared**

A good way to destroy a virtual consultation is to start looking for patient files, or documents while midway through the meeting. Have everything at the ready. Your patient will appreciate you being prepared and besides, it will cut your consulting time down. Having everything prepared and ready - before you start - will make you and your patient more relaxed, especially if it's the first time. Secondly, ask your patient to do the same. If they need to provide dates, medication lists or past history, ask them to have this ready before the consultation. This is a simple, but so often overlooked step to a successful consultation.

### **3. Virtual background...Yes or No?**

This is often a novelty that tends to wear off over time. Many will find a virtual background to be distracting, especially if you tend to move around a lot. The general thinking is that a natural wall behind you is better and if you happen to be in your office, your patient would prefer to see you there than on top of a volcano or on an island somewhere. Ditch the background and just be natural!!!

### **4. Prepare your Patient**

It may be the case that you are working from home or a venue where noise is just going to happen. Let your patient know that you are home and your children or animals may be heard and assure them that you are 100% invested in the session, and that they should not worry about outside distractions. I have always found that patients will appreciate your honesty and will naturally embrace the fact that you too, have uncontrollable distractions from time to time. Virtual care is different, and patients will be more than happy to overlook your barking dog, so long as they never feel neglected by it.

## **5. Accept the Limitations of Telemedicine**

We've said it many times before.... virtual care will never take the place of an in-office visit. The interpersonal relationship between two individuals sitting in the same room, cannot be replicated within virtual care. Be prepared for that and take a moment to mention it to your patient. You may not experience that connection that one does with a physical visit, however, it is still communication and you may need to work a little harder on choosing the correct words, to make up for the lack of physical interaction.

## **6. Network Connectivity**

This can be a tough one to control. Networks go down at the most unexpected times and there is often not too much that you can do about it. The best you can do is do your best to minimise it. Try and get as close to your router as possible and be aware that the more devices that you have connected to a Wi-Fi, the slower your performance may be. I recall a provider who complained that her network was always slower in the later afternoon. We found that her network was stable, but her children were downloading movies in the afternoon and slowing her connection. Be aware of these situations and know what you are going to do if the network fails. Let your patient know upfront what the plan is if you are disconnected. Who will call who back. I've become used to setting my phone to airplane mode during a virtual call. It's just safer and respectful to the other party.

## **7. Screen Placement**

I prefer looking straight on at a person, as I would in a face-to-face meeting. I don't want to look at you from underneath, or even worse, from a webcam, placed on the side. Try to place your camera, level with your face so that your patient can see you properly. We want this as close to the real thing as possible, so experiment a bit first, before you connect with your patient. Nothing worse than looking up a person's nose for half an hour!

## **8. How to Display Empathy on a Virtual Consult**

Never forget that the person on the other side of the camera is still your patient, who may feel insecure, uncertain, worried and often need your empathy. Empathy is often displayed by body language, but more-so by words...and virtual care is all about words!

Take a few moments to make sure that your patient is comfortable and thank them for using this new way of communicating. Thank them for trusting you to be a part of their virtual journey and thank them for inviting you into their homes, or place of work, where they may likely be for the session. Acknowledge that virtual care may be new and daunting for them and reassure them if need be.

If you're going to type or take notes, let them know before the session starts. They may think you're distracted if you don't let them know what you're doing.

## **9. Finish Up**

Be sure to exit the meeting and close when your consultation is finished. It often happens that providers have forgotten to exit the meeting and the session remains open, leaving the patient watching and hearing everything you do after you think it has been ended...Oops.

On this note, even when the screen ends, the patient can often hear the last few seconds of the session. Remain silent until you are 100% certain that your session is done.

## **10. Dress the Part**

Dress as you would in your practice. Trust me...your patient notices, and you'll feel better. If you're too casual, your patient will notice. Dress the part, as people care about how you look.

## **11. Screen Sharing**

Screen sharing has become popular as people discovered it as a feature in Zoom and some of the other video platform solutions. It can be challenging and there is a theory that attaching material is often more efficient. Interactive material, such as online assessments and sessions that require different presentations and swapping between material, requires screen sharing. As great as it is, it can also completely throw a consult off track. Here is some general screen sharing tips to help you.

- Test it before the consult starts. Far too often, you think you're sharing your screen, only to find halfway through that your patient can't see what you are explaining. Test it first and make 100% sure that it works as expected.
- Before you screen share, let the patient know what you are about to do. Not everyone is used to this functionality. One minute they're seeing their provider, and the next, they are seeing a different screen. This can be confusing and off-putting, so always just give your patient a warning that their screen will change.
- Turn your desktop notifications off. It can be really distracting when you're trying to explain some material and you continuously watch your email notifications come through. Take a minute to switch them off and make your session more professional.
- If you happen to be using multiple screens, make sure that you share the right screen. It happens more often than you think, that a provider shares the wrong screen, thereby giving a glimpse of information that could be confidential or patient related. Make sure you get this right during your testing phase, before the consultation starts
- Close everything before you share your screen. You really don't want to open a screen that shows a bunch of unanswered mails, test results, reports and so on. Clean your screen up, close it all down and then share it.
- If you can't find a specific document or if it happens that you thought of something at the last minute, stop sharing, find the material and then screen share again. This is just so much better than your patient watching you go through files on your computer, looking for a specific document. Your patient will appreciate the quick reconnection anyhow.
- Remember that when you share your screen, you can't always see your patient. This means a loss of visual connection and you have no real idea of what they are doing or even if they are paying attention. It's common for a provider to stop screen sharing every 15 minutes, re-establish visual connection and regroup. Checking in every now and then also reassures your patient that you're with them and not in robot mode.

These are just some tips and ideas to help you make your virtual consultations better and avoid the mistakes that some of us have made in the past.

Most mishaps can be avoided by adequate preparation and trying to anticipate what can go wrong. The good news is that the more virtual consultations you do, the better you become, but herein lies the warning.... sometimes providers become so slick and used to virtual care sessions that they appear to lack empathy and compassion. You have to be super sensitive to this and take care to ensure that every session you do is filled with the attention and care of your very first session.