

## Audio Transcript

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Guest:	Cindy Woolverton, PhD
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Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Welcome to the PTSD Bytes podcast, where we talk to experts about posttraumatic stress disorder and mental health, and how technology like mobile mental health apps can help. This is your host, Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport, clinical psychologist at the Veterans Affairs National Center for PTSD.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

In this episode, we will be talking about mental health appointments that take place via video, and how to make the most of them. I'm joined today by Dr. Cindy Woolverton, who is a staff geropsychologist with the Michael E. DeBakey VA, and works with the South Central Mental Illness Research Education and Clinical Center, or MIRECC, in Houston, Texas. She's also an Assistant Professor with Baylor College of Medicine. Welcome, Dr. Woolverton.

Dr. Cindy Woolverton:

Thank you so much for having me today.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

So we know that telehealth appointments, or visits with your healthcare provider conducted via video, increased pretty dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic. But now that we are no longer in a state of emergency, are people still choosing to meet with their mental health providers via video?

Dr. Cindy Woolverton:

Yes, we have found that people are still choosing to meet with their mental health providers using video technology.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Yeah, and why is that? What are the advantages of telehealth appointments?

Dr. Cindy Woolverton:

People may find that video visits are more convenient and easier to fit into their busy schedules. Especially for people that live far away, or if they just want to avoid a long commute, getting care through video telehealth can really open up opportunities to receive care that they otherwise might not get. I work primarily with older Veterans and their care partners, and offering these video appointments has allowed for those who might be homebound or living in rural areas to engage with their healthcare team.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Yeah, that is an important benefit. And what does science say about mental health visits via video? Is it just as effective as in-person care?

Dr. Cindy Woolverton:

Yeah, so studies have shown that patients can reap the same clinical benefits as in-person care. We've also found it to be really important for people to be able to see their therapists or mental health counselor through video. That is one of the key features that both in-person appointments and video appointments share. It allows for the ability to share non-verbal cues, see each other's reactions and emotions. We've had Veterans tell us that being able to see their providers makes a real big difference in the quality of their appointments.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Can you say a little bit more about why it might be important for someone to be able to see their provider?

Dr. Cindy Woolverton:

From what I've heard from Veterans, is that they are able to develop a connection with their provider using video, and they're able to see their provider and communicate face-to-face even if they're not in person. And this can really help to establish that beginning relationship that you would hope to establish with any mental health provider.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

So it sounds like having a mental health session over the phone really wouldn't be the same as a telehealth session with video.

Dr. Cindy Woolverton:

No, it really isn't the same. And so some of the things that we've heard from patients is that being on the telephone, sometimes they can get distracted, especially if they're having their appointment in their home. Maybe they'll try and multitask at home and so they can really get distracted on the phone.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. So now I'm thinking, you've talked about the advantages of video mental health appointments and that they're just as effective as in-person therapy sessions. But what about the opposite? What kinds of limitations or considerations might there be for video appointments that are different from in-person visits?

Dr. Cindy Woolverton:

Thinking from the therapist's point of view, there are some limitations to how much we might be able to view in a video visit compared to in-person. For example, we might miss seeing an anxious patient tapping their foot or other types of body language that is off-screen that we might catch in person. Another limitation may be that telehealth can be a new experience for people and there may be some initial concerns about feeling comfortable with opening up to a new mental health provider using video. And these concerns may include privacy concerns. For example, if a person is unable to find a private location to meet with their provider in their own home. I often find that it's helpful to discuss these concerns with your mental health provider, as the VA does offer different options for folks to engage in their mental health care

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And keeping that in mind, are there any people for whom video visits might not be appropriate?

Dr. Cindy Woolverton:

I think there is a lot of mental health treatment that can happen over video telehealth. Rather than thinking about inappropriate versus appropriate, what ends up maybe being the primary question is, does this person have everything they need for a telehealth appointment? We may need to begin with ensuring that a person has the tools and resources needed to be able to engage with their healthcare teams, uh, using telehealth. I'd encourage folks to voice their preference for their care as there are many options for engaging in mental health care now, with this addition of using video visits. The VA also offers in-person care if that is something that would work out better for that person.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Yeah, it's all about choice, that's super important. Now, what if I'm someone who isn't particularly comfortable with technology, is telehealth not for me?

Dr. Cindy Woolverton:

We have seen people who are initially uncomfortable with technology that end up loving it. For example, I work primarily with older adults and will often hear statements about not being tech-savvy. And this is usually when they're comparing themselves to maybe younger generations or grandchildren who have been growing up with the newest technology. Technology can feel pretty overwhelming to learn initially, especially with how quickly it advances. I will often share with folks that there are a number of resources that the VA has put together to help people learn how to use tech for their health care. For example, if individuals don't have access to a smartphone, tablet, or a computer with a microphone and a camera, then the VA will offer a loan tablet. The Office of Connected Care offers additional resources and supports to help guide a person through the steps of preparing for their video appointments or to troubleshoot any technology issues that come up.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

It's wonderful to hear about those resources. So I guess I'm wondering, are there any more resources to help people become more comfortable with telehealth or are there things that therapists or providers can do to help their clients feel more comfortable with telehealth?

Dr. Cindy Woolverton:

So, oftentimes we've heard that having a family member help walk them through the first visit can be really helpful for those who feel less comfortable with using technology for their telehealth appointments. We've also heard of providers that go above and beyond to support their patients as they learn how to navigate telehealth. And this can be really impactful for them. Through the VA, some clinics have dedicated personnel that really help patients get set up. And so I recommend asking your local VA or with your providers if there are any resources. We've also heard of clinics that set up booths to give in-person assistance and really show patients how to use their devices for video telehealth. I think one of the best things providers and clinicians can do is to advocate within their clinic to have this kind of dedicated personnel to help patients before their visits so they aren't using time during their appointment for it. As I mentioned earlier, the Office of Connected Care help desk will also work with folks to complete practice calls, help with downloading apps and sharing other resources needed for them to engage in their medical appointment. The number for that's 866-651-3180.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Thank you for sharing that. Now, let's say that I'm someone listening to this podcast right now and I would like to see a mental health provider via video instead of in-person. How should I go about finding a therapist? And this question could be either within or outside of VA.

Dr. Cindy Woolverton:

Great question. So within the VA, a Veteran who is new to the mental health care team may request a consult or a referral from their primary care provider. Talking with your primary care provider is initially that first step for you to connect with mental health providers. There are also some resources outside the VA, which include the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration and also the National Alliance on Mental Illness. And both of these resources offer ways to get connected with care locally.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Excellent. And now thinking about when I'm actually ready to get set up for my video appointment, what would I need? Do I need any special equipment?

Dr. Cindy Woolverton:

So for VA video appointments, we often recommend that a person have either a tablet, a smartphone, or a laptop or desktop computer with a camera and microphone. I often also recommend have headphones as this can really help to increase their privacy, especially if you're having your appointment at home and can't quite find a private location to meet with your mental health provider.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

What if I'm already in face-to-face therapy? Can I make the switch?

Dr. Cindy Woolverton:

Absolutely. If this is something a person wants to change, then I recommend having an open discussion with your therapist about whether they are offering video therapy appointments. And if so, whether you can move your appointments to video. You may find that having an initial face-to-face therapy session may help you feel more comfortable moving forward with video sessions.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

So it sounds like it's possible to do a hybrid, so some face-to-face and some video.

Dr. Cindy Woolverton:

Yes, absolutely. And I, again, I think this is something that can be discussed between you and your therapist and to work together to establish, what would work out best for your therapy sessions.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Okay, great, so now let's say I've got an appointment with my mental health provider. Do you have any other tips or suggestions as to how I can make the most of my video session?

Dr. Cindy Woolverton:

We often encourage folks to put their visit on their calendar, set aside the time to be on time for your appointment. Also recommend that you have tested out your webcam, your microphone and audio

before the visit. And if you're meeting through the VA, potentially do a test call using the VA Video Connect program or whatever software you might be using for your appointment. It can also be helpful for you and your therapist to come up with a backup plan ahead of time, like having the therapist call over the phone if something were to happen with the video link and you're having difficulty connecting over video.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

All right, well I think that is all the time we have for today. Thank you so much for joining us, Dr. Woolverton.

Dr. Cindy Woolverton:

Thank you so much for having me.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And as a reminder to our listeners who may be interested in trying out telemental health, we do encourage you to talk to your provider about this option. For those who may be interested in learning more about VA telehealth services, you can learn more at [www.telehealth.va.gov](http://www.telehealth.va.gov).

Dr. Andrea Jamison:

Hello, this is Dr. Andrea Jamison and I am the executive producer of the PTSD Bytes podcast. Catch new episodes by following or subscribing to PTSD Bytes on your preferred podcast app. Show notes and more information are on [www.ptsd.va.gov/podcast](http://www.ptsd.va.gov/podcast). Thank you for joining us.