



## COVID-19 AND TELETHERAPY: AN OPPORTUNITY TO THRIVE PROFESSIONALLY

Roger L. Grimsley, M.Ed., CCC-SLP  
Sutter Care at Home  
Alameda, CA, USA

### — ABSTRACT —

This commentary offers the author's opinions on COVID-19 teletherapy and the opportunity for speech-language pathologists of color to embrace technology and thrive professionally.

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Near the beginning of March 2020, I was working and plugging along as a home health speech-language pathologist (SLP) serving the adult population of the Bay Area in Northern California. I serve patients with a variety of disorders from dysphagia to aphasia. Life was good and simple as my only complications were traffic and scheduling patients. Fast forward to the third week of March and it was a totally different experience. The world was changing as COVID-19 spread across the world and specifically in the U.S. like wildfire. As a result, my world as a home health SLP was about to change dramatically.

As the rest of the nation was locking down, SLPs remained on the frontline of the COVID-19 fight. In the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, many SLPs did not have personal protective equipment (PPE) to safeguard themselves from becoming infected. We also ran out of sanitizing materials such as wipes and hand sanitizers. It would take a few weeks before the appropriate PPE would be distributed to frontline workers by employers. It was unclear if employers really understood how contagious this virus was.

A lot has changed since those first few weeks. Now when I go see patients, I wear what looks like a hazmat suit, gloves, goggles, and shoe covers. I must sanitize everything that I touch from my car to my apartment. I even wipe down the gas pumps I use to refill my car. My patient visit preparation is far more detailed now as I give a lot of thought to making sure that I am protecting myself and the patients I treat. Once I arrive at a patient's home, I must keep the

recommended appropriate six-foot distance from that patient and their family. As patients continue to die, I and many other SLPs think about our own mortality. In these moments of reflection, I ask myself questions such as, "Where else will I work?" "Is there another population/setting that I can work?"

In most settings, SLPs provide services face-to-face. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a move to online delivery of services via teletherapy. Teletherapy has been found to be an effective mode of clinical practice (ASHA, 2020a; Boisvert and Hall, 2018). But, while teletherapy is a useful platform to serve our patients, it is unclear how many of us are trained to use it. A recent ASHA survey noted that 61% of SLPs saw delivering clinical services via teletherapy as their biggest challenge (ASHA, 2020b). In my opinion, those same clinicians seem to fit into three categories: (1) those who have been working face-to-face with patients for many years and are believed to have the necessary clinical experience to be successful at the use of teletherapy (I would place myself in this group); (2) those who have no experience with teletherapy but are learning it on the fly; and (3) those who have never thought about using the teletherapy service platform. However, with the present pandemic, it has become evident that teletherapy may be one of the only ways to provide services to clients.

I for one, wonder if SLPs of color are prepared for the challenges and opportunities that may exist in the near- and long-term future. I have worked as an

SLP for two decades. In my judgment, before the pandemic African American and other underrepresented minority SLPs had found their place in the profession of speech-language pathology. Although the numbers of underrepresented minorities in the discipline were not growing significantly, we were thriving and surviving. How will we continue to move forward in the profession in the era of COVID-19? Stated another way, how can we continue to thrive and not merely survive?

I recommend that SLPs of color continue or seek to work at the top of their certification. This term is borrowed from medicine and espouses the ethos of each practitioner using the full extent of their education, training, and experience. SLPs of color have always been told that we must be 'better than' and should always 'stay one step ahead in the workplace'. And we have always had to jump over academic and professional hurdles that have been put before us and deal with microaggressions directed toward our education, knowledge, or competence. For the most part, we successfully faced those challenges.

It is possible that teletherapy may represent a new opportunity for SLPs of color to thrive. My own recent experiences suggest understanding teletherapy is a must or SLPs of color may be left behind. I have recently been through several job interviews where I was asked about my experience with teletherapy. Although I have not had a lot of experience with teletherapy, those who were conducting the interviews gave me the impression that they had many years of experience. When I asked them about their own work with teletherapy I discovered that they learned and got their experience only recently in the last two months or right after the COVID-19 pandemic began. It was at this point that I had a revelation regarding teletherapy. In my work setting, I could see more patients each day via teletherapy (thus addressing productivity issues); reduce personal overhead or outlay of my own funds for gasoline, parking fees, highway tolls, etc.; and provide services for my patients without placing them and myself at risk for COVID-19. Additionally, with the proper technology, I could visualize and hear my patients (and vice versa). Moreover, treatment materials could be accessed and shared with patients and their families via the digital platform (often for free). However, at that time I did not have any significant experience with teletherapy and was viewed as unqualified. That may also be true for other SLPs of color like me. Again, how can we face this challenge and thrive?

What follows are some suggestions that might offer a path (especially for older clinicians such as myself) to enter the arena of teletherapy.

1. Seek out and enroll in continuing education courses/webinars on teletherapy.
2. Reach out to clinicians in your state or elsewhere with teletherapy experience who might be willing to provide guidance, offer tips, mentorship, etc.
3. Identify and consult with members of NBASLH and ASHA with experience in delivering services via teletherapy.
4. Practice simulated teletherapy sessions with fellow SLPs or likeminded clinicians in related disciplines (e.g., physical therapy, nursing).
5. Familiarize yourself with the teletherapy literature and resources; become conversant in any outcome or efficacy literature on teletherapy.
6. Network with and nurture new graduates in the profession who may have gained knowledge and experience in the utilization of teletherapy during their graduate school education.

Practitioners of color cannot become complacent with just existing and working in the profession of speech-language pathology. We must not forget how we got here---through networking, staying one step ahead, and helping and supporting each other. We must help ourselves by embracing and moving forward with today's technology and continue to be proactive about our preparedness in the field of speech-language pathology and in new practice arenas. Through all these means we will continue to thrive in the field of speech-language pathology.

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Contact Information:  
 Roger L. Grimsley, M.Ed., CCC-SLP  
 Email: [grimone1@msn.com](mailto:grimone1@msn.com)