

Psychology Blogs: Ethical and Management Issues

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The recent explosion of social networking sites and “web-logs” (“blogs”) of every genre deserves exploration by mental health professionals to develop these forums for the benefit of their clients and the public at large. Ethical and professional standards are just now evolving and there are risks associated with their use by practitioners. Blogs tend to be anonymous and unedited, may contain few reference sources and unedited comments can be freely posted. Considering how best to organize and present the comments posted is important to the intention of the blog and offering information or opinion to the general public.

Blogs have benefits to both the practitioner and to the client or consumer. Professionals can use the blog for sharing their day-to-day frustrations. They can offer topical and accurate information that can supplement and balance other sources of information. Seeking the goal of “giving psychology away” to inform the public the practitioner can reach out and provide educational material that are timely to topics in the community.

Clients or consumers can gain access to professionals in a most direct manner. The interactive nature of a blog posting sequence can help to break down unrealistic expectations about therapy and therapists and allow for a more direct connection. A significant factor in offering on-line comment is that it fits the consumer trend to want to research a topic without having to negotiate verbally. Blogs represent a powerful force for the delivery of information that can be reviewed anonymously, thus increasing the sense of privacy to the visitor while still offering a glimpse into the personality of the practitioner.

However as with all new forms of communication there exists the possibility of problems. Understanding that the reaction of the reader may be influenced by the method of communication and their own interpretation there may be problems. Potential risks involved in blogging include:

1. Confidentiality: The intensity of emotional ventilation by a practitioner can lead to crossing the line of containment of their knowledge of their caseload. The practitioner needs to take care in characterizing clinical cases without breaking client confidence.
2. Area of Expertise: Practitioners are ethically bound to stay within the scope of their practice and avoid comments that may be misinterpreted and lay outside of their clinical competence. Consumers may not have a

- clear understanding of where the expertise ends and general opinion begins.
3. Professional Respect: Some issues that create considerable controversy between professions may not be well-known among the general public. Venting anger and frustration toward another profession or business entity (the lament of insurance, for example) can reflect poorly on the blog author. Challenges that appear to be targeted toward a particular person or business entity may invite the filing of a complaint with the state board.
 4. Commercial Application: Blog authors may offer books, tapes or other products for sale on their site. It is important that disclosure be made about these avenues of financial reimbursement so as to not indirectly exploit the nature of the posting.
 5. Empirical Support: "I found it no the web so it must be true" heralds the problem of biases and unsupported statements offered as "facts" on a blog posting.

Although still in its infancy there are evolving codes of ethics about on-line practices and principles to follow in maintaining Internet operations and subcomponents such as blogs. The Healthcare Blogger Code of Ethics (<http://medbloggercode.com>) provides the following standards:

1. Perspective: A concise and clear statement of the qualifications of the blogger or blog site author.
2. Confidentiality: A stated commitment to adhere to the legal and ethical aspects of confidentiality between the professional and clients.
3. Disclosure: Open and descriptive statement of any commercial interests found on the blog or larger web site where it is hosted.
4. Reliability and validity of posted statements: Offering citations of empirical research that supports statements made by the blog author.
5. Courtesy: The blog author works to maintain a decorum and respect of other professions and blog posters. This may mean that a mediator is used to screen posting so as to avoid discourteous or libelous statements.

Blogs authored by psychologists and other mental health professionals should not be viewed as replacing other sources of information useful to promote consumer knowledge. However such on-line mediums are a fact in our technological society and, as such, need to be integrated into a practice using our professional standards. The on-line community is fast becoming the primary exchange of information and practitioners will continue to be challenged to extend themselves into this medium.