

Online 'sharing' demands caution

By Jeffrey E. Barnett, Psy.D.

Q: I recently established a MySpace profile after several months of hearing about this. I know it is a good way to keep in touch with friends, family and colleagues socially, but I just had a client request to be my "friend" online. This seems like a great way to keep in touch and learn more about my client. Are there any ethical issues or concerns I should be considering before acting on this? Also, what about including former clients on my friends list? Would that make a difference?

A: Online social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook are a big part of many Americans' lives these days. In fact, MySpace is presently the sixth largest "country" in the world with more monthly visitors and faster growth than any other website in history (Rosen, 1997).

As such, it is not only likely that many of us will participate on social networking sites but many of our clients will as well. For those working with young adults and adolescents, it may seem like every one of our clients has a MySpace profile. So, requests from current and former clients to include them on our friends list (and thus, let them have access to what we share in our profile) will be increasingly common for many of us.

This raises a number of ethical issues. While we each certainly have the right to participate in various types of social networking activities in our personal lives, the issue of what we do in our professional lives is different. Unfortunately, in the Internet age we can not always keep the personal and the professional completely separate.

Many clients will conduct Internet searches to find out more about us. Many individuals regularly use the Internet to obtain health care related information. Visiting a professional's web site is a great way to make decisions when searching for a health professional. But, websites contain information we intentionally share with the public for the purposes of educating them and marketing our practice.

Social networking sites are quite different. They are intended for the sharing of personal information. As Lehavot (2008) shares, they make socializing quite effortless. But as she points out, "unwanted personal information may leak out into professional lives" and "the Internet redefines the process of self-disclosure." She importantly highlights that the issues of boundaries and multiple relationships are important to consider here.

Most psychotherapists give careful consideration before engaging in personal self-disclosure with a client. Issues considered frequently include whose needs are being met, what the clinician's motivations are, if the planned self-disclosure is consistent with the client's treatment needs, what options and alternatives exist and the likely impact of disclosing or not disclosing on the client and the psychotherapy relationship and process (Barnett, 1998).

The same factors should be analyzed when considering "friending" a client or former client online. How much personal information should one share with clients? Is friending online substantively different from other types of multiple relationships or is this just a new type of multiple relationship?

A review of the APA Ethics Code (APA, 2002) provides guidance. Relevant standards include those on Informed Consent, Multiple Relationships, and Confidentiality. Further, the aspirational General Principles provide guidance in Beneficence and Nonmaleficence, Fidelity and Responsibility, Justice and Respect for People's Rights and Dignity.

We must ensure that multiple relationships do not cause exploitation or harm and that the crossing of boundaries is not clinically contraindicated (Zur, 2008). We should also be mindful that our former clients can come back to us as clients and our decisions about what to share with them on the Internet may thus impact potential future therapeutic interactions.

Social networking sites may also be utilized for a client's benefit. Keep in mind that the sharing of personal information flows in two directions. It may be especially helpful to learn more about clients through access to their online profiles. We can confirm the veracity of information they share in treatment sessions, see photos of them engaging in activities in their personal lives, read

their Internet postings to gain further insights into their thoughts and behaviors and the like.

But this should only be done after open discussion with the client and never surreptitiously. While learning more about a client may seem helpful to our clinical work, the possible impact on trust and potential harm to the psychotherapy relationship are great if the client does not consent to our having this access. It is also important to include such issues as part of the informed consent process so that clients understand the potential impact and implications of such disclosures.

Some recommended steps to take include:

- * Make thoughtful decisions about who you accept on your friends list and thus, grant access to your personal information.

- * Consider using some form of restrictions to your online profile such as utilizing private or friend-only access or using a pseudonym.

- * Keep in mind that whatever you share online may be available to numerous individuals and once out there, it can't be taken back.

- * Consider online relationships as similar to in-person ones with clients and former clients. Don't overlook the potential impact of online relationships on the professional one.

- * Never access a clients' personal information without obtaining permission. Ensure they understand the potential impact of online disclosures on the psychotherapy relationship.

- * Utilize the APA Ethics Code and consultation with colleagues to guide decision making.

- * Create a policy for the use of social networking sites, share this with clients who ask and follow it carefully.

Further, as Lehavot (2007) suggests, your responses to the following questions provide a good place to start as you reflect on the implications of online disclosures:

- * What are the costs and benefits of posting the information?

- * Is there a high probability that clients will be significantly and negatively affected?

- * How will the disclosure affect my relationship with my clients?

- * Does the disclosure threaten my credibility or undermine the public's trust in the field of psychology?

In general, it is suggested that contacts with clients and former clients on social networking sites should be viewed like any other multiple relationship. And as the APA Ethics Code (APA, 2002) states in Standard 3.05, Multiple Relationships, "multiple relationships that would not reasonably be expected to cause impairment or risk exploitation or harm are not unethical" (p. 1065).

Psychologists should therefore give careful consideration to social networking with current and former clients and only engage in them if not clinically contraindicated. When participating in them, the use of online restrictions is recommended.

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