

Use of Technology Brings Ethical Challenges

Q: My group practice regularly utilizes various forms of technology to increase our efficiency. But, recently I realized that there may be some relevant ethical concerns that we have overlooked. Just what are the ethics issues we need to be aware of when using technology in our practice?

A: Over the years a number of technological advances have helped to make our practices more efficient. Most practitioners regularly utilize a range of technological advances to increase practice efficiency and effectiveness. This may include the use of answering machines and voice mail, fax machines, cell phones, photocopy machines, and the use of computers for a range of activities to include the administration and scoring of psychological tests, for documentation and record keeping, to submit claims electronically, to consult with colleagues and communicate with clients, and even to provide treatment services.

The APA Ethics Code (APA, 2002) is very clear in stating that its Principles and Standards all apply to the full range of services we provide “across a variety of contexts, such as in person, postal, telephone, internet, and other electronic transmissions” (p. 1061). This statement makes it clear that we must consider all aspects of the Ethics Code when using technology in our professional roles. Specific applicable standards include those that address informed consent, confidentiality, competence, advertising and public statements, documentation and record keeping, and testing and assessment.

Protecting and preserving each client’s privacy is a paramount concern for each of us as we utilize various forms of technology. This can include ensuring who receives a fax and who may have access to it, who may have access to answering machines and voice mail systems in our practices as well as to those messages we leave for clients, the possibility of cell phone conversations being intercepted by others, and a variety of possible e-mail and computer security concerns.

When using faxes it is important to utilize a cover sheet that states who the intended recipient is, the number of pages, your contact information, a statement regarding redisclosure, and instructions for those who may receive it inadvertently (Brockman & VandeCreek, 1994). It is also recommended that we use the speed dial function or otherwise be very attentive when inputting numbers. It is also recommended that we contact recipients by telephone to ensure others will not have access to the faxes we send. We should similarly limit access to the fax machine in our offices (e.g., not have it in a waiting room).

The use of photocopy machines can also increase efficiency and convenience in our offices. But, often we may have a copy of a document that is too light or dark, cannot be used, and must be discarded. It is of vital importance that all materials containing any

confidential information are destroyed, such as by shredding. To merely crumple up unwanted photocopies and throw them in the trash places client privacy at great risk.

Cell phones are a great convenience. They enable us to be readily accessible when clients need to contact us after office hours. Yet, these conversations are susceptible to being intercepted by AM radios, some nursery monitors, and other technologies. It is important that confidential information not be discussed via cell phone unless we first review the risks with clients and obtain their consent in advance.

When using answering machines and voice mail we should be sure others will not have access to the messages others leave for us. This would include restricting others' access to our answering machines and maintaining the secrecy of voicemail access codes. When leaving messages we should only leave confidential information when we know it is a confidential voice mail. We should be cautious about the messages we leave that others may be able to access.

Computers provide us with great convenience, but bring with them many risks to privacy. We should be sure to limit others' access to confidential materials by having them password protected and storing all disks under lock and key. When discarding old disks we must either destroy them or use a program to wipe them clean. Merely deleting the content on a disk does little to protect confidential information from those with certain computer skills. We should also use the most current firewall and virus protection software to minimize the risk of others accessing our confidential records via the Internet (Barnett & Scheetz, 2003).

The use of E-mail makes contact with clients between sessions much easier, but using encryption with e-mail communications is a necessity. Otherwise, we must assume that others may have access to our E-mails. We also should include the privacy limitations of E-mail in our comprehensive informed consent procedure before utilizing it with our clients.

These are some basic issues to attend to when utilizing various forms of technology in our practices. It is also important to be knowledgeable about and attend to relevant state laws and HIPAA requirements. Ethical and legal issues in the use of technology for providing psychological services will be addressed in the next column.

References

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