

Social media, digital technology and the counselling professions

Good Practice in Action 040
Commonly Asked Questions

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Context

This resource is one of a suite prepared by BACP to enable members to engage with BACP's *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* with regard to working with social media and digital technology in the counselling professions.

Using Commonly Asked Questions resources

BACP members have a contractual commitment to work in accordance with the current *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions*. The Commonly Asked Questions resources are not contractually binding on members but are intended to support practitioners by providing general information on principles and policy applicable at the time of writing, in the context of the core ethical principles, values and personal moral qualities of BACP.

Specific issues in practice will vary depending on clients, particular models of working, the context of the work and the kind of therapeutic intervention provided. As specific issues arising from work with clients are often complex, BACP always recommends discussion of practice dilemmas with a supervisor and/or consulting a suitably qualified and experienced legal or other relevant practitioner.

In this resource, the word 'therapist' is used to mean specifically counsellors and psychotherapists and 'therapy' to mean specifically counselling and psychotherapy.

The terms 'practitioner' and 'counselling related services' are used generically in a wider sense, to include the practice of counselling, psychotherapy, coaching and pastoral care.

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1 An introduction to working with social media in a post-pandemic world: What does the *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* say about the use of social media?

Recent years have witnessed a revolution in the use of digital technology across all areas of communication. This has impacted on all aspects of our personal and professional lives, no less for those working in the counselling professions than in any other arena. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the speed of change, leading many practitioners to engage with a far wider range of digital devices and platforms than ever before. For many months during lockdown, online or telephone-based communication became the only means available of maintaining connections with clients and colleagues, of participating in training and of undertaking research. Practitioners grappled with digital technology, often with minimal experience and little training. This was challenging but also sometimes unexpectedly effective, leading many to introduce innovative approaches to their practice which they have subsequently chosen to maintain and develop (McBeath et al, 2020). Practitioners find themselves less constrained by some of the more traditional boundaries of face-to-face work (for example, of location, setting, office hours) but face significant new challenges (relating to matters of security, confidentiality, containment, self-disclosure and much more).

Clients' personal and professional worlds have changed in parallel ways, as the worlds of social media and digital technology have evolved to occupy more dominant and influential positions in all areas of life. Social media have facilitated a wider and more open discourse concerning many aspects of mental health, wellbeing, social inclusion and openness, creating and facilitating new spaces where it is possible to challenge historic issues of stigma and prejudice. In these same places, however, we sometimes find conflict, bullying and angry confrontation where different groups and individuals run the risk of being marginalised. Contradictions and disparities arise, which present different challenges, some of which are particularly pertinent for those working in the counselling professions.

Good general advice about online safety and the use of social networking and online forums is available from the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) – links can be found at the end of this resource.

The *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* commits members to fulfil certain ethical principles and values:

'...regardless of whether working online, face-to-face or using any other methods of communication. The technical and practical knowledge may vary according to how services are delivered but all our services will be delivered to at least fundamental professional standards or better.' (Good Practice, point 20).

This statement emphasises the importance for practitioners of maintaining professional principles and values and provides a basis for critical decision-making affecting psychotherapeutic practice *whatever the setting and medium of the work*. As we reflect on new forms of communication, these principles and values can therefore help shape how we make new choices and assess their outcomes.

This resource specifically addresses the use and application of social media within the counselling professions. This forms just one element of the broader field of digital technology and communications. It is one of a suite of Good Practice resources which address the use of digital technology within the counselling professions. More general information about working online can be found in Fact Sheet GPiA 047: *Working online in the counselling professions*. This is supplemented by two further Clinical Reflections for Practice resources: GPiA 124, *Social media, digital technology and the counselling professions* and GPiA 125, *Working online in the counselling professions*, which present some vignettes illustrating the challenges described in both this resource and GPiA 047. It is also informed by the *Online and phone therapy (OPT) competence framework* (BACP, 2021).

2 What do we mean by social media?

There are many definitions of social media. It is a collective term for interactive technologies and applications that facilitate the sharing of information, ideas and other forms of expression through virtual communities and connections.

The term describes Web 2.0 internet-based applications that rely on content provided by users, and which are also influenced by the service-specific profile of the social media organisation, through its algorithms and programming. Social media promote the development of social networks through the connection of a user's profile with those of other individuals and groups.

Social media sites employ many different approaches to the sharing of ideas through text, video, audio and imagery, which are increasingly incorporating material from the worlds of artificial intelligence and virtual reality. They differ from traditional media in that they generate a continually evolving and changing output (unlike, for example, the publication and sharing of a book or journal or the broadcasting of a radio programme, which remains the same unless centrally re-edited and re-issued). Social media create opportunities for individual voices to be heard and can help promote greater equality and diversity across traditional divides; however, these opportunities also carry risks through the instantaneous and often unmoderated nature of the material shared. There is an ongoing tension that arises between upholding the right to freedom of speech alongside the need for online safety, particularly for young people and vulnerable adults. The Online Safety Bill currently passing through parliamentary procedures has been developed in response to these needs and will provide important guidance for practitioners. For further details see the References section at the end of this resource.

Practitioners may use social media in a wide variety of ways: to publicise their services, reach out to new client groups, share professional interests with colleagues and other interested parties, engage in peer-to-peer discussion and raise the profile of important issues or engage in research.

It is widely accepted that social media now has a powerful impact on political agenda-setting and the development of society more generally. Many practitioners will have both a personal and a professional online presence and face the challenges of maintaining boundaries between these two areas of self-presentation.

3 Client care and social media

3.1 Is it safe to use social applications for/with clients?

This is an important question for practitioners, but the answer may not be straightforward. In a world of technologically driven communication where therapists and clients have a significant presence and where social networking sites are evolving continuously, it is no longer possible to maintain a distinct division between online and offline worlds. Within social media the potential for blurring of personal and professional relationships is increased, which can lead to negative consequences, if care is not taken.

It is essential for therapists to take responsibility both for the ways in which they use such applications (especially concerning their choice of settings and the material they post) and how they reach agreement with their clients about any mutual use of platforms where they may coincide. The *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* requires that 'reasonable care is taken to separate and maintain a distinction between our personal and professional presence on social media where this could result in harmful dual relationships with clients'. (Good Practice, point 33c). Dual and/or multiple relationships can be created very easily, and sometimes inadvertently, within social networks.

Anything we post online represents who we are and influences how we are seen by others. It can be confusing for clients to experience a very different impression of the practitioner in social media from the one presented to them in their confidential counselling sessions. Zur (2008) observes that self-disclosure is practically unavoidable in online spaces and often unintended. It is often possible for clients to engage with a practitioner's social network(s), either with or without the practitioner's knowledge.

It is important to hold this in mind when posting on any platform, ensuring that, within the post, no identifying information is shared which relates directly to specific client work or which might compromise any therapeutic relationship in any way and that any language/imagery used is respectful and appropriate. Also remember that posts and comments can easily be forwarded to others and shared between platforms. What feels acceptable in one setting may be less appropriate in another and if in any doubt, it is usually better not to post.

Platforms generate opportunities for sharing resources and providing links to other services. Social media generate channels through which clients can navigate to more secure ways of engaging directly with practitioners. Social networks create new and innovative points-of-access for some who have been traditionally excluded from services. At the same time, it is important to remember that issues of digital exclusion may arise for potential service users who have little or no access to the internet or devices if material is not offered in other places and shared in other ways too.

Social networks operate internationally. Data protection legislation and professional practice requirements differ from country to country, and it is important to seek further advice before knowingly promoting counselling and related services overseas. For further information on matters relating both to digital exclusion and also to international working see GPiA 047 *Working online*.

3.2 How do I manage client confidentiality and privacy in social media?

Maintaining confidentiality and privacy can feel particularly challenging on social media platforms, especially when we consider that their aim is to spread ideas and information across a very wide area instantaneously. Those who work in the counselling professions are required to preserve the anonymity and privacy of clients in all contexts. Even in closed groups, we cannot be sure that clients are unable to access posted material. This makes social media spaces inappropriate as a location for discussion of specific client material, even where it is anonymous and heavily disguised. The use of digital technology requires the transmission of data online, immediately rendering these data vulnerable.

Anything that is posted in any online space relating to specific client material becomes part of the client record. Private messaging facilities are insufficiently secure for confidential and/or sensitive information-sharing.

3.3 What steps can I take to establish and articulate my own boundaries in relation to social media with clients?

Setting boundaries is important in this context, and yet this can be particularly challenging too. Practitioners should establish clear and consistent policies relating to their use of social media, which they can share with clients at the outset of their work. Many practitioners publish a digital policy on their website or produce an information page to share with clients at the point of contracting, where they articulate clear boundaries including those relating to activity in social networking spaces, to ensure privacy and non-disclosure. Some make their digital policies freely available online. For further information see Balick (2017).

3.4 How should I respond to clients who may contact me through social media?

Being contacted by a client in this way can raise concerns. Good practice suggests that practitioners should refuse friend requests, or similar, from clients on social media. (This can be clearly stated in a digital policy.)

It is preferable to pre-empt this eventuality through the creation of an initial agreement or shared policy, so avoiding misinterpretation of a refusal to respond to such a request. Caution should be exercised in respect of shared presence in online spaces where a practitioner and client might be linked by association, which could compromise the confidential nature of the therapeutic relationship.

Clients sometimes ask practitioners to view material they have posted online, perhaps in a blog or similar space. Practitioners should exercise caution when responding to such invitations to avoid the possibility of being led into further locations, which could contain information about clients that they have not expected or consented to share with the practitioner.

(The *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* requires practitioners 'to build an appropriate relationship with clients by ... respecting the boundaries between our work with the clients and what lies outside that work' and to commit 'to ensuring the integrity of practitioner-client relationships'.)

4 Professional practice and social media

4.1 How is social media being used in the counselling and related professions?

The short answer to this is 'very widely'! Practitioners now use social media extensively to engage in and promote professional practice. Whereas websites were once the primary online publicity tool, it is now not unusual for practitioners to have several professional accounts within social media. These may be used primarily for marketing purposes (as with a Facebook™ business or Instagram™ page) or for professional networking, where ideas are shared, and peer-group discussion is encouraged. Many social networking platforms enable the creation of closed groups moderated by administrators, often with specific membership requirements. BACP's newly set up member-only Communities of practice platform is an example where members can connect, collaborate and network with fellow practitioners in professional discussion, feel a sense of community, develop ideas and share best practice. For further information see www.bacp.co.uk/events-and-resources/bacp-events/communities-of-practice.

Practitioners may choose to post inspirational quotes or links to posts or sources of information; the type of content shared is likely to depend upon the therapist's modality and approach to such ideas more generally. It is helpful to consider whether material posted is consistent with other ways in which the practitioner presents themselves elsewhere, in order to maintain trust and authenticity. The *Ethical Framework* (Ethics, point 11) requires practitioners to demonstrate 'high levels of compatibility between personal and professional moral qualities' in order to 'enhance the integrity and resilience of any relationship' and defines 'Integrity' as 'commitment to being moral in dealings with others, including personal straightforwardness, honesty and coherence' (Ethics, point 12).

Training organisations sometimes encourage student participation in such groups as a source of experiential learning about the impact of social networking behaviour. It can be helpful for trainees to view themselves as 'professionals-in-training' when considering how they present themselves in such places.

Many services and individual practitioners have websites containing links to social networking platforms, using these to widen their reach. Demographic groups vary in their preferences for some platforms over others. It is possible to use such platforms creatively to reach out to minority groups or to those who might not usually be willing or able to search for a therapist's website and make a direct initial contact from that point.

For example, this is seen in young people's services where social media form an integral element of the service provision, often accessed anonymously. Information can be downloaded, and posts or blogs published. Clients can exchange texts or engage in live chat with trained professionals. They may participate in forums relating to a wide range of subjects. Social media have an important role to play when embedded professionally and securely into a suite of available resources. Here we see how social media can be used 'to demonstrate equality, value diversity and ensure inclusion for all clients' and to 'adjust overcome barriers to accessibility... for clients of any ability wishing to engage with a service' (*Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions*, Good Practice, points 22b and f).

Setting up and maintaining an effective presence in social media requires significant time and effort on the part of the practitioner. Because of the instantaneous and continuously evolving nature of the data, it is essential to maintain an up-to-date presence and to remain aware of ongoing activity. For this reason, it may be more manageable to participate in just one or two platforms that best represent a practitioner's aims rather than aiming for a more widespread presence.

4.2 How can I use the *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* to guide me in my professional use of social media?

Using the *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* can help us with any decisions we need to make relating to social media. In particular, the framework sets out a commitment to provide an appropriate standard of service to our clients (Commitment 1a). It encourages practitioners to seek feedback from clients (Commitment 6b), which could include exploring how they feel about the practitioner's or service's presence in social media.

Practitioners are required:

- to demonstrate fairness, through being 'impartial and principled in decisions and actions concerning others in ways that promote equality of opportunity'
- to consider the image they share in order to promote a 'sense of self in relationship to others that forms the basis of responsibility, resilience and coherence'
- to demonstrate respect by 'showing appropriate esteem for people and their understanding of themselves'

(*Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions*: Personal moral qualities).

4.3 How can I keep my personal and professional identities separate when engaging in social media?

Although we may take considerable steps to separate personal and professional identities, this is not easy to maintain due to the nature of social media platforms. Having separate accounts or using different social media channels for different purposes can be helpful, as can careful management of privacy settings. Nonetheless it is important to remember when posting in any setting that all social media carries an implication of publicity and posting also creates a permanent record even if the post is subsequently deleted.

4.4 Is there a code of practice that I can follow when posting professionally in social media?

Many professional organisations have developed a specific code of practice or 'netiquette' for posting on social media. Information for BACP members can be found at www.bacp.co.uk/membership/membership-policies/social-media. (Other organisations use the term 'E-professionalism'.)

The *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* commits practitioners to avoid:

- 'any actions that will bring our profession into disrepute' and when working with colleagues and in teams:
- to engage 'in a spirit of mutual respect'
- to 'treat colleagues fairly and foster their capability and equality of opportunity'
- not to 'undermine any colleague's relationship with clients by making unjustifiable or ill-judged comments'
- to keep all communications 'on a professional basis and thus purposeful, respectful and consistent with the management of confidences agreed with clients' (Good Practice, points 48 and 56-59).

These commitments are particularly important within social media settings where comments are often posted hastily and may be reactive.

4.5 How should I manage my digital footprint?

Anything we publish online in a public or semi-public place such as a social network contributes to our digital footprint. (A digital footprint is any data that are left behind when users have been online, whether deliberately posted or passively collected via IP addresses, cookies etc.) It can be helpful for practitioners to schedule a regular review of their footprint which includes the following:

- Entering your name into several search engines
- Revisiting privacy settings
- Creating strong passwords and changing them regularly

- Keeping software up to date
- Reviewing apps on devices and deleting those no longer needed or used
- Keeping an inventory of any smart household devices involving internet access; ensuring that any limits to security and privacy involved are understood and carefully managed
- Regularly 'cleaning up' devices by deleting histories, cookies etc.

(See also GPiA 047 *Working online*.)

4.6 What is the role of supervision here?

While it may seem strange to discuss your social media activity with your supervisor, it can be a way of ensuring that anything posted remains professional, and that personal activity is kept separate. It can be very helpful to seek an outside view of online activity, and the supervisory relationship offers a safe and helpful opportunity to do this. However, some supervisors may be less familiar with the world of social media than their supervisees and, in such situations, you might contact another trusted colleague with relevant experience being careful to respect client confidentiality. Note: that, although supervisors advise their supervisees, the ultimate responsibility for ensuring professional practice is maintained lies with the practitioner themselves unless they're trainees (Good Practice, points 66 and 67).

5 Social media, training and research

5.1 How can social media be used in research?

Social media can be helpful to research in several ways:

- Participant recruitment and data collection: Social media can be used to reach various population pools for participant recruitment (Giota and Kleftaras, 2014).
- Confidentiality: Data collection online affords participant anonymity and easy access.

- Research collaborations: Professional networks, like LinkedIn, can connect researchers across diverse fields or geographical locations to make data pooling and mining possible (Giota and Kleftaras, 2014).
- Research dissemination: Once research is completed, it is possible – via tools like webinars and blogs – to share research results with colleagues in a timely manner (Giota and Kleftaras, 2014).

5.2 What risks and challenges should I be aware of if using social media within my research?

Social media can considerably extend the reach of research ideas. However, there are ethical and procedural issues, which should be considered in more depth when using social media in this respect, in relation to soliciting participants, informed consent, data collection and more. Researchers should seek advice from those with experience and expertise in this area before undertaking such research.

5.3 How is social media impacting on practitioner training and what should I be aware of when engaging in social media in training situations?

As training is increasingly delivered (at least in part) online, it can be helpful for professionals-in-training to gain experience of engaging in social media with colleagues as part of their learning process. All the points raised in this resource should be considered when engaging in such spaces. As with other areas of work, it is important for both professionals-in-training and their teachers to assess the appropriateness of individual platforms for training groups and to encourage thoughtful self-presentation and mutual self-respect in all social media spaces. This is best raised at the outset of training courses, and continually held in mind and reviewed throughout the training process.

6 Summary

The presence and influence of social media within society has expanded exponentially in recent times and particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic. Whether or not we welcome this, it will inevitably continue to feature in all our lives, both personally and professionally. Clients regularly discuss aspects of their online activity and behaviour with practitioners, and some knowledge and experience of such places are therefore invaluable, even for those who choose to restrict their own professional use of digital technologies. Practitioners should take their responsibilities seriously to ensure good practice across all contexts and within all media. They should keep up to date with legislation such as the Online Safety Bill to ensure currency of learning and practice. Members of professional bodies, such as BACP, have clearly stated ethical positions to maintain and can offer guidance and leadership in this arena through their own actions and behaviour.

Exciting new opportunities are created through the global and instantaneous communication that is possible within social media, whilst dangers and pitfalls also abound. It is important to consider all choices made and actions taken within the context of the *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions*.

Creanor (2015), reflects on the fact that we do not yet know the extent to which social media may influence the development of psychological theory and our understanding of human interaction and relationships; only time will tell. She reminds us that 'while the technology is new, ethical core principles remain constant'.

About the author

Kate Dunn (BSc, MA, MBACP) is a psychotherapeutic counsellor, supervisor and trainer/consultant working in private practice, both face to face in the room and online using digital technology. Kate previously worked in a Higher Education setting as a counsellor. She has been working with clients and supervisees online since 2008 and has a special interest in the online therapeutic relationship, which has been the subject of her research. She has contributed to academic publications in this area.

References and further reading

All GPiA resources are available at: www.bacp.co.uk/gpia

BACP GPiA 047 FS: *Working online in the counselling professions*

BACP GPiA 124 CRP: *Social media, digital technology and the counselling professions*

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