IMPLICATIONS FOR Clinical Social Work

For clinical social work professionals, one of the most important reasons to be extremely careful regarding one’s online activities is to respect the integrity of the therapeutic relationship. Social media use on the part of a therapist can lead to unintentional bidirectional disclosures of personal information by a client and therapist, complicating natural transference and countertransference responses and potentially leading to trust violations. It is social workers’ professional responsibility to attempt to maintain appropriate clinical boundaries online as much as possible to protect both their privacy and the privacy of their clients.

Despite these privacy concerns, social media has a broad range of utility in clinical social work practice, such as the use of online content for psychoeducation with clients and families.

IMPLICATIONS FOR Macro Social Work

Social media has many practical applications in macro social work to help social workers with education, advocacy, outreach, mobilization, fundraising, evaluation work, and many other types of initiatives. Social media can provide a low-cost, interactive way to get the word out about events, connect with community members, distribute surveys, and raise awareness about policy changes.

Macro social workers still need to be careful about how they may be “branding” their agency or project to the online community, and should be attentive to preserving the distinction between their personal and professional online worlds.

Useful Resources


Guidelines for Responsible Use of Social Media

School of Social Work
Office of Field Instruction
1080 South University, Room 1704
Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1106
Phone: (734) 764-5331
Fax: (734) 763-4885
ssw.of@umich.edu
Using an Ethical and Professional Lens

**PROTECT YOUR PRIVACY**

- **Google yourself** so you will know in advance what information can be found about you
- **Create a professional website** to maintain some control over your professional reputation online
- **Consider using a pseudonym** for some or all online activities
- **Keep your professional social work role in mind** when posting anything
- **Utilize strict privacy settings** whenever possible
- **Create agency policies for social media use** and discuss them with clients/consumers

**PROTECT YOUR CLIENTS'/CONSUMERS' PRIVACY**

- **Do not search for clients online** without their consent unless you have a clinically-significant reason for doing so (e.g., to ensure the safety of a client)
- **Carefully manage client information** that is found online accidentally
- **Do not “friend”/“follow” a client** under any circumstances
- **Warn clients that email is not secure** and may not necessarily be as private as they may think

### Questions for an agency’s social media policy:

- What do I do if a client “friends” or “follows” me?
- When is it ok, if ever, to look for information about a client online?
- What do I say if a client inquires about personal information about me they found online?
- How do I document accidental contact that occurs online?
- What is ok for me to share about my profession/agency online?
- How can our agency use social media to support our goals/clients?
- Who is designated to maintain the organization’s social media pages?

### Areas for Risk Management

- The use of online dating sites
- Consumer reviews about you or your organization
- Posting on blogs
- Things friends/family may post about you (whose privacy settings may not be as strict as yours)
- Loss of context with images and the written word leads to possible misinterpretation of online content
- All social media is in the public domain and can be accessed by anyone

### Social media is a great resource to help social workers

**REACH OUT, RAISE HOPE, and CHANGE SOCIETY.**

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**The NASW Code of Ethics and Ethical Social Media Use**

**Relevant sections...**

- “Social workers should not engage in dual or multiple relationships with clients or former clients in which there is a risk of exploitation or potential harm to the client.”
  
  *Section 1.06(c)*

- “Social workers should respect clients’ right to privacy. Social workers should not solicit private information from clients unless it is essential to providing services....”
  
  *Section 1.07(a)*

- “Social workers should take precautions to ensure and maintain the confidentiality of information transmitted to other parties through use of computers, electronic mail, [etc.].”
  
  *Section 1.07(e)*

- “Social workers should make clear distinctions between statements made and actions engaged in as a private individual and as a representative of the social work profession, a professional social work organization, or the social worker’s employing agency.”
  
  *Section 4.06(a)*

**...may apply to...**

- “friending” or accepting online friend requests
- conducting online searches
- email
- comments/posts made on blogs and other sites