

Psychology, Ethics and Your Web-Presence

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In the spring of 1999, I made the decision to leave the large group practice with which I had worked for twelve years to open my own office. One of the first steps I took in preparation for that move was to create a website. This article is about my experience on the web, and the costs and benefits of one psychologist's presence in the digital world.

It has been my purpose since conceiving this practice to simplify. I traded in my cubby in a warren of offices for a space of my own. I traded in a covey of office staff for an answering machine and e-mail. And I traded in the inefficiencies and impositions of paper for a universally accessible, infinitely flexible, consumer-friendly place on the web. The decisions that have led me here are not for everyone. Indeed, there are down sides to the sort of practice that I run. There are, however, many excellent reasons that each of us should carefully consider establishing a web presence, no matter how we practice.

Some Statistics can be astonishing. Nearly 426.5 million users were estimated to have access to the internet worldwide in July, 2001. Nielsen/Netratings (see <http://cyberatlas.internet.com>) estimates that in the U.S., more than 75 million active internet users logged on (that is, accessed the internet on their computers) six times for a total of three hours and twenty minutes on average during the week ending September 9, 2001. Of these, about 52 percent are women.

When I decided that presenting statistics here would be useful, I clicked on Internet Explorer and used Lycos to search for facts. It took twelve minutes to sort through the deluge of information, (some irrelevant, most too general), to find what I needed. In the same way, when a man, woman, parent, spouse, child or neighbor grows concerned about his or her own mental health or that of a loved one, the internet is among the first places they search. Why? It's easy. It's quick. It's there at two a.m. when they can't sleep and, perhaps most critically, it's anonymous.

Don't be daunted by the prospect of creating a web site. It really is simple and inexpensive. With no prior web-authoring experience, I created and maintain mine using the free tool that accompanies Netscape, called Netscape Composer. I downloaded a free program called WS_FTP Limited from www.tucows.com (a wonderful warehouse for software) which allows me to communicate with my site. I pay my e-mail provider about ten dollars a month to post (that is, keep up and running) my site. Alternately, professional web masters can produce and maintain a very sleek product for you at a highly variable cost.

Why a website? Because it educates the public, promotes your services and -surprise!- it may be the single best way of meeting many of the 1992 APA Ethics mandates (cited below in brackets):

1. Public Education. We live in the information age. People crave sound and accessible information, especially in matters of personal health and well-being. Psychology has an ethical obligation to educate others about mental health and mental illness [Principle F] and the internet is the ultimate tool for providing such information.. These data can be presented as content on a

site or as links to content on other sites. A professional website can become an invaluable resource to millions of consumers worldwide (and yes, it really works that way, I receive e-mail from people all over the world who find my website!) Either way, it is critically important that the information you make available via any media be up-to-date and accurate [3.03 and 3.04].

2. Professional disclosure. The folks who come seeking professional psychological services are generally more likely to ask questions about the next car they buy than about the mental health professional they consult. Prospective clients and patients (and their loved ones) are routinely disorganized and in distress. They are commonly embarrassed and/or intimidated by the time they get to our offices. Much as psychologists are responsible to disclose levels and limits of competence [1.04], and much as the outcome of any psychotherapy might be predicated reasonably upon the goodness-of-fit between therapist and patient, I believe that too little is said up front. Time is rushed. The (managed care) clock is ticking. By posting information about your professional experiences, areas of expertise, publications and -to whatever extent that you choose, personal data- prospective clients can learn as much as they wish on their own.

3. Informed Consent. How much of your professional time, effort, and money is devoted to patient forms? The sheer quantity of information we are required to provide in the interest of informed consent [4.02] staggers many providers and simply overwhelms many clients. In truth, the distressed and disorganized (not to mention the psychotic, dyslexic, attention disordered and illiterate) client handed a clipboard-full of papers to sign in a crowded waiting room fifteen minutes before an anxiety-filled first meeting is very unlikely to understand more than a fraction of the tiny print you've asked him or her to review and sign. By making these forms available on-line (I use Adobe Acrobat so that everything prints out formatted nicely) much of the pressure can be relieved. As part of the intake phone call, a prospective client can be directed to print out, carefully review, sign and bring in all appropriate forms. For those few without internet access, identical papers can be mailed, faxed or completed in person. In more than two years of operating this way, I have had fewer than a dozen requests for hard copies of my preliminary office forms (and I have saved huge printing and paper costs in the process).

4. Self-Assessment Tools. By the same token, clients can complete self-assessment tools on-line, either in advance of the first meeting or as process measures across time. Certainly copyright restrictions and the ethics of testing [2.0 through 2.10] will inform what you are able to post and how it can be used.

5. Promotion. We are business-people, albeit possibly the least well-trained, most self-effacing and ambivalent among business-people. Your website is an advertisement. Within the prescribed limits of advertising [3.0 through 3.6], it may be the most effective and least expensive form of advertising. As advertising, it's not sufficient, however, to simply create and post your website. If you want people to discover your site using conventional search engines (e.g., Yahoo, WebCrawler), you'll need to register your site. This means explicitly adding the data from your website into the databases available to each engine, a tedious task, even if its not very complicated (usually accomplished by clicking on-line checklists). Instead, I choose to pay a small fee to a service (<http://register-it.netscape.com/>) to do this for me on a regular basis, assuring that my site comes up for anyone, anywhere, using any search engine, seeking information relevant to what I do. Case-in-point: a mental health professional in Maryland used

the internet to look for other professionals with experience helping kids through divorce. She found me, sent me an e-mail, and we have maintained a mutually beneficial collaboration ever since.

The downside? Aside from the cost (minimal), the effort (moderate to get started; then minimal, even if you update once a month or so as I do), and the anxiety (huge before you learn more; negligible once you've started), a carefully constructed website compliant with ethical guidelines, state and local practices carries very few negatives. They are:

1. Too much information. The internet is an unregulated, decentralized medium. Anyone can look at what you post anywhere anytime for any purpose. Take care not to post anything private. Even the public information that you carefully choose to post, can be misused. There is such a thing as a web-stalker. Beware that anytime you make yourself public, there is a risk that someone will use the information you provide to your detriment.
2. Client Self-Selection. This is a different form of the “Too Much Information” issue. Your web site is likely to prompt some users to decide against walking in your front door. It may convey that you don't provide what they need or that you don't present yourself the way they had hoped. While I believe that this is actually positive since it improves the likelihood of clinical success, it can decrease numbers. If your practice thrives on numbers, anything more than a general name-address-phone website may work against you.
3. Inaccessibility. Despite the statistics, certain populations still have very limited access to the internet. If you work with these populations primarily, the cost, time, effort (and anxiety) of creating and maintaining a web site may not be worthwhile. While I am not aware of any studies of the matter, it is reasonable to assume that the more rural, elderly and severely (physically and mentally) impaired populations have less need for or access to the internet. Nevertheless, the information you post may still serve the purpose of education and even promotion in instances where others are likely to reach you about services for members of these populations.

Looking back over these two years, I believe that establishing my website (www.healthyparent.com) laid the foundation both for the practice I have since developed and the means with which I communicate with my community. New patients, colleagues and allied professionals routinely thank me for providing a great deal of valuable data, for making the preliminary paperwork a user-friendly, comfortable process and for guiding them to valuable resources elsewhere in the community and on the web. Continuing patients value my web presence, some even confessing that my site serves as a valuable transitional object, quite apart from its content. These folks like to feel that I am “present” when anxiety rises and, who knows, perhaps this kind of digital hand-holding will become its own kind of therapy.

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