How do you do exposure therapy for children afraid of vomiting, thunder and lightning and other things impossible to summon up in an office? If you’re Mary K. Alvord, PhD, the answer is easy: You search for videos at www.youtube.com. “I often use the Internet for exposures as part of a treatment plan,” says Alvord, director of Alvord, Baker & Associates, LLC, in Rockville and Silver Spring, Maryland.

Alvord and the 14 other therapists in her office aren’t the only ones finding innovative ways to incorporate the Internet into their practices. Psychologists are pointing patients to online sources of high-quality information and peer support. They’re using the Internet to build rapport and engage patients. Some are even hoping that technology will help more people in isolated areas overcome barriers that prevent them from receiving much-needed services.

Innovative Approaches

For psychologists, the Internet represents a convenient way to educate patients and the public at large.

Simon A. Rego, PsyD, for example, uses his Web site at www.simonrego.com to explain what psychology is, the different kinds of therapists and so on. “I approach information on the Web with a fair amount of skepticism,” says Rego, associate director of psychology training at Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx. “I thought if I could pull together resources, it might serve a useful purpose for people even if they’re not looking for therapy.”

A recent APA Practice Organization survey found that Rego is not alone: 71 percent of respondents also sought information for clients online.

Rego also uses his site as a handy resource guide for patients. “I was always recommending book titles to people and they would say, ‘What was that again?’ or ‘I lost the Post-It® you gave me,’” he says. The solution? An online listing of recommended books and Web sites. (For the results of Rego’s survey of most frequently recommended psychology sites, see http://www.apa.org/divisions/div12/tcp_journals/TCP_60_2_SU07.pdf.)

Rego often prints out information for patients, many of whom lack access to a computer of their own.

Alvord also points patients to helpful sites, including APA’s Help Center at www.apahelpcenter.org. She may even go online with them to print out listings from www.amazon.com or teach them how to search the literature at www.pubmed.gov. But as her work with anxious patients suggests, she goes beyond such uses. She uses the computer to build rapport, for instance. One child upset by his parents’ impending divorce calmed down enough to talk about it only after he and Alvord chatted about the puppy he was going to get and searched www.google.com for images of various breeds. Working on the computer also gets patients involved in their own therapy, says Alvord. During sessions, she often encourages children to type lists of goals or behavioral contracts on her computer. “Kids love computers,” says Alvord, noting that one therapist in her practice sometimes rewards patients for good sessions with a few minutes of computer time. “It’s a great way to engage them, and I’m actually doing therapy at the same time.”

Computers can be sources of support as well as information.

Helen L. Coons, PhD, president and clinical director of Women’s Mental Health Associates in Philadelphia, shows her patients how to use the online tools available on such sites as www.4women.gov. She routinely encourages patients to download relaxation exercises from www.healthjourneys.com onto their MP3 players. Patients can even watch videos of Coons discussing various women’s health issues at www.webmd.com and www.health.com.

Coons also points patients to online support groups on sites like www.breastcancer.org. “Some women may not be
able to find useful resources in their community," she says. “They may have other obligations and aren’t able to get to regular support groups. Or they may like the anonymity of online groups.”

Helping patients pace themselves is critical, emphasizes Coons. “Too much information can be overwhelming,” she notes. She might encourage a woman newly diagnosed with breast cancer to limit herself to seeking information about pathology reports before plunging into information about reconstructive surgery, for example.

Other psychologists foresee a future where consumers with barriers to face-to-face treatment will be able to access psychological services via the Internet.

James A. Cartreine, PhD, an instructor in psychiatry and medicine at Harvard Medical School, is creating an interactive computer program for the most isolated population of all — astronauts.

Funded by the National Space Biomedical Research Institute, the program will guide users through the process of assessing their mental health and then addressing psychosocial problems like depression or conflict with team members.

Eventually, Cartreine hopes, the programs will be available online for general use. Such programs could help people who can’t see psychologists because of geographic isolation, financial barriers or stigma.

Of course, says Cartreine, “the idea is not to put psychologists out of work.” Such programs would ideally be used in conjunction with help from a real-live practicing psychologist.

NOTE: The Web sites noted in this article are examples only and do not constitute endorsements by the APA Practice Organization.