According to the Pew Research Center, 79 percent of adults use the Internet and 59 percent of those users are on at least one social networking site. So psychologists and their clients are sure to cross paths online. More practitioners are instituting a social media policy as part of their informed consent procedure, with many using or adapting the policy drafted by Keely Kolmes, PsyD.

Dr. Kolmes is in private practice in San Francisco, where she writes, blogs and tweets to her approximately 88,000 followers extensively on mental health professionals’ use of social media.

**Why is a social media policy important?**

**Who needs one?**

Anyone who is on the Internet and providing clinical care should have some type of social media policy for their practice, even if they are only using email or accessing the Internet for personal use. It can just be a brief statement or paragraph and need not be a long document.

The research is showing us that clients and clinicians are having incidental contacts all of the time on the Internet. Clients are frequently searching for information about their therapist online and they often discover personal as well as professional information. The research is telling us that some clients experience shame and discomfort with finding personal information and for having engaged in the searches, and that the majority do not bring this up with their providers.

Introducing a social media policy in treatment helps frame these encounters as an issue that can be discussed together; it helps normalize the experience of incidental contacts, and it creates boundaries and sets expectations for both parties in the clinical relationship.

**How has your social media policy evolved?**

Shortly after writing my social media policy, I deleted my Facebook business page, so that part of my policy is no longer applicable. I decided that I did not want to have to attend to who became a fan of the page and I had some experiences in which friends posted information on the page that was too personal for my comfort. Monitoring and cleaning up my page activity became more trouble than it was worth to me.

However, nothing else has really changed in my policy since I created it.

I do plan to implement something new during informed consent to obtain permission from clients to send them post-treatment surveys about their experiences with me as a provider of psychotherapy services with a notice that I may post aggregate data (but not testimonials) on my website. This won’t be part of the social media policy, per se, but it is relevant to social media, consent and treatment. I see this as a way to continue to develop my skills as a clinician, to be transparent with potential clients about my strengths and weaknesses as a provider, and as a way to provide an alternate to the types of information found on consumer review sites such as Yelp. Since this will be an exchange that I have directly with a client, it will be part of the treatment interaction, rather than something that occurs outside of treatment that I find out about later. I will also not be disclosing people’s words or identities to the public or their friend networks.

**What is especially important for psychologists venturing into social media to do/avoid doing?**

Do not discuss anything related to a client’s treatment in a status update. Even without identifying data, posting about...
your feelings about “my last session” or whether or not you met with someone with a particular diagnosis on a certain day can both influence your relationship with that client and potentially identify them to others who may know they seek care from you. Do not post quotes from clients or complain about your work. We have a right to personal social networks for friendship and support, but we also have a responsibility to represent our profession and understand how it impacts public perception of our work if we use social media to vent about the challenges of our job or otherwise objectify the folks who seek our care.

**What issues related to social media do you think practicing psychologists will have to grapple with in the future?**

I see two huge hot-button issues for psychologists right now that I expect to continue to present challenges in the future. The first is varying beliefs on whether it is ethical to use Internet searches and social media profiles to gather additional data on clients and whether clients should be informed of this practice. It is a strong belief of mine that clients have a right to know if you use the Internet to collect information about them that you will use in treatment.

The second issue is the worry and helplessness psychologists experience when they get negative reviews of their services on consumer review sites since they cannot respond due to confidentiality restrictions. I believe that the best way to manage this is to develop standardized ways to collect this information directly from clients and to find ways to ethically incorporate the information into your own web presence with informed consent and share this feedback while protecting confidentiality.

**What guidance on social media do psychologists solicit most from you?**

I get a lot of consultation requests from people who have had a negative review from a client, looking for some way to respond or have the review removed. I also hear from people who need assistance making sure their Facebook profiles have the privacy settings they want. So I sometimes provide tech support and check their profiles to ensure they are using the privacy settings they want. Sometimes people contact me after discovering a sensitive social overlap via social media and want help on how to bring this up clinically. I help them work through whether it seems important to bring this back into the treatment relationship and how they might do so.

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Creating a ‘Hybrid Practice’ continued from page 3

alertness (conscious and unconscious) for opportunities and
an ‘ability to connect the dots’ in order to bring opportunities
together from seemingly disparate areas.”

Psychologists are well suited for entrepreneurship, according
to Walfish. They can use their “therapy skills, research skills,
teaching skills, consultation skills and … ability to develop
products that people want in order to branch out,” he says.

Get the proper training. Psychologists are ethically obligated
to build the competencies necessary for any work they en-
gage in. This can be achieved through a variety of channels,
including formal coursework, continuing education, getting
supervision from an expert in the area in which you wish
to practice, having a mentor, self-study—such as reading
journals and other publications—and peer supervision.

In his book *Earning a Living Outside of Managed Mental
Health Care: 50 Ways to Expand Your Practice*, Walfish
presents essays by 50 practitioners who also share the
additional training they undertook to branch out. For
example, a psychologist who offers a marriage skills
workshop advises those who are interested to “first
become expert in emotional regulation, cooperative
communication and conflict resolution skills.”

More psychologists are branching out, fixing their sights
on ventures that are a good fit for them and their practice,
external environment and target market. When Graham
got into practice 35 years ago, his business partner
counseled him never to have all his eggs in one basket.
“That has held for me,” he says. The variety of work keeps
his finances on even keel and “it’s never dull.”

Social Media: What’s your policy? continued from page 11

*How do clients respond when you introduce your social
media policy? What questions or concerns have they
raised?*

Most clients don’t say much about it, although some have
said that they thought it was really “cool” that I spelled
it all out for them so there were no surprises. A few have
expressed reassurance that I won’t be Googling them without
their knowledge. Since I live in San Francisco, which is a bit
of a social media bubble, many of my clients work in tech.
I think that for these folks, having a psychologist who has a
social media policy feels pretty comfortable and helps them
understand the choices I’ve made in more consumer-friendly
language. Some clients specifically choose to work with me
since I seem so attuned to social media issues because this
is becoming such a common space for relationship issues to
arise for them.