

Ethics and Internet-based Therapy  
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The GWSCSW Ethics Committee recently researched a question from a member on whether it would be a violation of the Clinical Social Work Federation (CSWF) Code of Ethics to engage in on-line counseling. We believe this information may be of interest to other members who might also be considering conducting internet-based therapy.

A CSWF 2001 position paper on text-based counseling (<http://www.cswf.org/www/therapy.html>) states unequivocally that the Federation is opposed to the practice of internet-based treatment, defined as “psychotherapy services that are limited to text-based exchanges between therapist and client.” The position paper states that the Federation is not expressing a position on other “forms of electronic communication when used as an adjunct to the therapeutic process,” and the paper allows for future amendments to the stated position “as new forms of telehealth develop.”

The best guidance currently available to Society members regarding online/electronic treatment modalities is this 2001 position paper. Keith Myers, chair of the CSWF Professional Standards Committee, notes that it is “*not a technical violation of the Federation’s Code of Ethics to engage in internet based therapy.*” He points out that the position papers of the Federation “*are intended to fill in the gaps between revisions of the Code and are as such, advisory.*”

In the case of Internet Therapy, Mr. Myers reported that over 70% of the Federation’s board voted in favor of adopting the 2001 position paper with its strong opposition to Internet text-based therapy.

*Mr. Myers suggests that if a legal issue came up for a clinician practicing Internet text-based treatment, he or she would have a difficult time raising the defense that the code of ethics is silent on the issue because of the existence of the position paper.*

It is strikingly clear that there is no unanimity among mental health professionals about the efficacy, appropriateness, and ethicality of online counseling or online psychotherapy in any of its many manifestations. For example, the International Society for Mental Health Online, a group formed in 1997 to “promote the understanding, use and development of online communication, information and technology for the international mental health community” is a strong advocate for on-line clinical work. However, even with their strong advocacy, the ISMHO has a provocative caveat nestled in its descriptive material:

“ISMHO does not endorse or hold any official position about the legitimacy or usefulness of e-therapy (or online counseling).”

The wealth of online material from ISMHO makes it clear that their members see themselves as ardent polemicists for online practice. However, the “official” position of this organization ultimately leaves it up to clinicians to deal with the ambiguities and paradoxes of online practice. An example of one of these paradoxes is the issue of licensing as it relates to on-line clinical work: there is always the chance that the person being treated may live in a jurisdiction other than the one in which the clinician holds a license.

We expect there to be ongoing dialogue within our clinical social work community on *when-if-how* to incorporate Internet psychotherapy into our practices.