

Help is just a click away: The trend of online social networking and support groups, and what it means for the next generation of helping professionals

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Log-in to Facebook. Check friends' status updates. Update my status to let everyone know I am going to present at my first conference today. Log out.

Log-in to supportgroups.com. Enter the eating disorders support groups section, and read about how members of a group are coping and recovering from their eating disorder. Write a supportive message to a member who shares how she successfully ate three meals and three snacks for the past seven days. Log out.

Relationships formed online range from friendships to romantic partnerships. If Facebook were a country, and all of its members made up its population, it would be the world's fourth-largest country. A 2001 study showed that 90 million Americans sought support through online groups dealing with common interests, concerns, and beliefs. Social media, from Facebook to dating sites and online support groups, are not simply a fad; rather, it is a fundamental shift in the way we communicate.

The growth of free online support groups does not mean there is no longer a need for psychologists and counselors. Rather, these new methods of communicating and developing support systems are simply

another tool that we can utilize to better understand behaviour and help patients.

The Internet offers users the chance to be selective and choose with whom and where to interact with others. Online support groups, which began cropping up in the 90's, have become a mass social phenomenon with hundreds of thousands of them based around a myriad of mental, physical, emotional, and social concerns in existence today. People joining these sites form "virtual communities", given the constant contact with peers and depth of relationships formed. The most common type of online support group format is the discussion board, where peers post and answer to postings. Advantages of online support groups span from the flexibility, availability, and convenience of the online format, to the high level of anonymity that is beneficial for stigmatized conditions, and little to no cost attached to the help, information, and support obtained from peers in the group.

Advances in technology can and should be used to our advantage. We must learn more about the type of social support sought out and provided via online discussion boards for a variety of mental health issues, and the mechanisms that make online support groups useful. Further, we need to learn what combination of face-to-face and

computer-mediated help is best for varying ages, genders and presenting problems.

Research is already showing online therapy is helpful for a number of physical and mental health issues. A popular use has been with holding one-on-one face-to-face therapy in conjunction with group therapy for patients with cancer who range in age from late-twenties to early 70's. Recent studies are even looking into the use of therapy via text messaging for bulimic patients.

As we progress through our degrees and careers, we can integrate our experiences in building relations online into our career, exploring the ways communication technology can be used in assessment, intervention and therapy.

In the words of intellect and scientist Albert Einstein, "We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them."