



*Practice Matters was created as an educational resource for social workers in Newfoundland and Labrador. It is intended that this resource will generate ethical dialogue and enhance critical thinking on issues that impact social work practice. Practice Matters is provided for general information.*

## **Ethical Considerations in the World of Social Media**

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Social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter have garnered national and international attention with millions of people using these sites to connect with family, friends, and businesses. As this mode of technology continues to evolve and expand, social workers will be challenged to examine social media within the realm of professional practice.

According to Garrison (2011), “social networking can challenge professional and personal boundary issues and lead to potential conflicts of interest”. The overall purpose of this edition of *Practice Matters* is to highlight and address some of these ethical challenges and considerations that social workers face as social media intersects with social work practice, and to provide an open forum for further discussion, debate and education.

### **Ethical Decision-Making**

When faced with an ethical dilemma or question involving social media in practice, social workers have several tools at their disposal including the CASW Code of Ethics (2005) and Guidelines for Ethical Practice (2005), various ethical decision-making frameworks, and relevant social work literature.

The CASW Code of Ethics (2005) speaks to the values and principles of the social work profession. Integral to the discussion of social media are Value 1 (Respect for the Inherent Dignity and Worth of

Persons), Value 4 (Integrity in Professional Practice) and Value 5 (Confidentiality in Professional Practice). As with other ethical and practice dilemmas, there are few black and white answers when it comes to social media use in practice. Social workers must also use professional judgment in resolving these issues.

Consider the following case scenarios:

### **Scenario #1**

*Jane, RSW recently received a friend request from a client on her personal Facebook account. This individual has been a client of Jane's for 6 months. Jane wonders how she should handle this request.*

At first glance, the resolution to this request may seem fairly straight forward. One may decide to hit the decline friend request button or accept the invitation. Yet, this particular case scenario is much more complex and fraught with many ethical dimensions.

One question for consideration is whether accepting a friend request from a client constitutes a dual relationship. According to the CASW Code of Ethics (2005) "dual or multiple relationships occur when social workers relate to clients in more than one relationship, whether professional, social or business" (p.12). While there is some debate about the use of the term "friend" on Facebook, accepting a friend request from a client or former client through one's personal Facebook account does constitute a dual relationship.

While not all dual relationships are harmful or unethical, it would be the responsibility of the social worker to determine if there would be any negative impact on the client by accepting the friend request. Questions to consider might include:

- 1) How would the social worker deal with information obtained about the client through Facebook that has not been discussed in therapy but does impact client goals and interventions?
- 2) Would client confidentiality be impacted?
- 3) What is the 'intent' (real or perceived) of the friend request?
- 4) How might the social worker feel about a client knowing details about his/her personal life that wouldn't normally be shared within the context of the social work relationship? How does this impact on professional self-disclosure?
- 5) How might this be viewed by the social workers' colleagues and peers?

In resolving this ethical dilemma, it would be important for the social worker to reflect on each of these questions and to consult the CASW Code of Ethics (2005), organizational policies and colleagues.

It would also be important for the social worker to have a conversation with the client about the real, perceived or potential risks of accepting friend requests from clients and former clients, and to document this in the client file. Apprehensions the social worker may have about accepting the friend request and documenting this in the client file may be an indicator that this decision is not right for the client and the social worker.

While some may feel that declining a friend request from a client or former client can have a negative impact on the client, having a conversation with the client about their reasons for declining a friend request can actually enhance the social work relationship and is in keeping with Value 4 of the Code of Ethics (Integrity in Professional Practice), as outlined by the following excerpts:

*“It is the responsibility of the social workers to establish the tenor of their professional relationship with clients...”*

*“Social workers establish appropriate boundaries in relationships with clients and ensure that the relationship serves the needs of clients.”*

*“Social workers value openness and transparency in professional practice and avoid relationships where their integrity or impartiality may be compromised...”*

Given that the social worker received this friend request through her personal Facebook account, the social worker may want to consider setting her privacy settings to the highest level to ensure her own privacy and confidentiality. (Please see attached document, *Internet Savvy and Social Media*, for more helpful tips).

## Scenario # 2

*Karen, RSW is concerned about a current client who has missed his last three scheduled appointments. Karen has not been able to reach the client by phone. Knowing that this client has a Facebook profile, Karen questions whether she should search the client's Facebook page to check in on the client.*

One of the first points of consideration for resolving this dilemma is whether or not the social worker's use of Facebook to 'check on' clients had been discussed within the informed consent process with

the client and documented in the client file.

At the earliest opportunity and throughout the duration of the social work relationship, it is important that social workers engage clients in conversations about how and when information will be accessed about them. This is in keeping with Value 1 of the CASW Code of Ethics 2005, Respect for the Inherent Dignity and Worth of Persons, as outlined in the following excerpts:

*“Social workers uphold each person’s right to self-determination, consistent with that person’s capacity and with the rights of others.”*

*“Social workers respect the client’s right to make choices based on voluntary, informed consent.”*

If the issue of ‘Facebook check ins’ has not been discussed previously with the client, the social worker must use her own professional judgment on whether or not the client is at risk for serious, foreseeable and imminent harm at this point in time. It might also be helpful for the social worker to consult with colleagues and relevant organizational policies.

As the professional relationship continues, the social worker would need to have a conversation with the client on how, when and for what purposes personal information is accessed (informed consent) to ensure client self-determination. It would also be helpful for the social worker and client to develop risk management strategies in crisis situations. All this information would need to be documented in the client file.

If the situation were different and the social worker was provided with information from a client’s Facebook profile by another party that indicated there was a risk of serious, foreseeable and imminent harm, or there was a child in need of protection, the social worker would have an ethical obligation to respond to this information.

### **Scenario # 3**

*Peter, RSW has a personal Facebook account and often ‘rants’ about his day at work. While he doesn’t specifically mention client names in his postings, he has commented on some of his sessions with clients. In addition, he has made negative comments about some of the policies and programs of the organization where he is employed saying that decisions are not being made in the best interest of clients.*

There are several aspects to this case scenario that warrant consideration and discussion. The first

relates to client confidentiality and privacy. Even though a client's name is not used in the Facebook postings, Zur (2010) highlights the need for professionals to be more attuned to issues of privacy when using social media sites because of their interactive form. Kolmes (2009) notes that even if client information is posted without disclosing a person's name, age or ethnicity, given the nature of the public forum, this may not be enough to protect confidentiality and privacy. The social worker must assess how this would impact on the social work relationship if the client were to come across this information on-line. It is important to remember that once something is posted on-line, the social worker is not able to control where the information goes.

The second element to this scenario is the postings related to the policies and programs of the organization where the social worker is employed. One must reflect on the purpose of posting this information on a public site and the risks of doing so. The social worker in this scenario has written that decisions being made by the organization are often not being made in the best interests of clients. Not only can these statements open the organization to potential liability issues, this may also have professional implications.

When social workers have concerns about the policies or programs of an organization in which they are employed, it is the responsibility of the social worker to bring these issues to the attention of the organization using the appropriate channels (CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice, 4.1.4). One must question if Facebook is an appropriate medium for challenging organizational policies given the ethical and liability issues.

## **Conclusion**

This article addressed some of the ethical considerations relating to social media and the interplay between the personal and professional. Social workers are encouraged to use their professional judgment to resolve issues relating to social media in practice and engage in reflective critical thinking. Consultation is also important throughout the resolution process. Consulting the CASW Code of Ethics (2005), CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice (2005), organizational policies and relevant professional practice standards is encouraged.

## References

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## Internet Savvy & Social Media

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Social media continues to evolve and expand. More than ever, individuals, communities, organizations and government bodies are utilizing social media as a communication tool in connecting with friends, family, businesses, consumers and the general public. As with any form of technology, social media brings unique opportunities and challenges. In becoming internet savvy, the following tips and hints may be helpful to you:



- 1) Become familiar with the operational policies of social media sites particularly as it relates to information ownership, confidentiality, and privacy.
- 2) Complete a Google search on yourself to see what information the public has access to regarding your personal and professional life.
- 3) Ensure that your privacy settings are set to the highest levels to ensure your own confidentiality and privacy.
- 4) Keep personal and professional internet accounts separate and recognize when boundaries are being challenged.
- 5) Remember that the internet is permanent and everything you post and write may have a lasting effect.
- 6) Continue to seek consultation and supervision on ethical issues that arise in practice.
- 7) Develop your own risk management guidelines that are based on the values and ethics of the profession.
- 8) Engage colleagues in conversations about social media, including discussions around opportunities and challenges.
- 9) Familiarize yourself with professional standards.
- 10) Contribute to the development of social media policies within your organization/agency and ensure that clients are aware of these policies. If you work independently, develop your own social media policy based on best practice standards.