

Digital Policy¹

This document is made for the benefit of my counselling clients, but may also be of use to other psychotherapists or counsellors who are involved in social networking or have any other online or media presence. Though therapists are generally trained to keep their personal lives out of the consulting room for the benefit of their clients, the massive availability of information about us on the internet means that this, virtually at least, can no longer happen. This document acknowledges the complex world of digital media and tries its best to address issues that may impact the therapeutic relationship. The guidelines are based on my own research and the choices I have made with regard to my online life; I am open to changing my positions on it. In the meantime, I ask all my clients to read through this document so they can be familiar with these positions.

My media activities:

It is important for you to be aware that a part of my life outside the clinic is in the public domain. I head-up and volunteer for a charity working with disenfranchised young men, I facilitate groups, I am also a blogger and public speaker with a various public and media roles. As part of this work, I maintain an active social media presence. Online resources such as Twitter enable me to reach a broad swathe of people to whom I can communicate psychological concepts that I hope can be useful in their lives. I hold my duty of care and confidentiality to my counselling clients as sacrosanct and consider my media work to be related to, but completely separate from my clinical work.

Keeping Boundaries:

The nature of an online presence can blur interpersonal boundaries, so it is important to be as clear as possible about how boundaries may be challenged when, as a general rule, I like to keep clinical work in the consultation room as much as possible.

However, the nature of the digital world can sometimes stretch these boundaries, so I offer the best clarity I can below.

Email:

I am not currently using an e-mail encryption programme, so any emails we send to each other may be vulnerable to viruses or human error. For this reason, it is best to be thoughtful about what you include in emails to me, and which email address you choose to use with me. Often, it is best to rely on email for non-confidential communications like setting up appointment times and things like that. In an effort to keep confidential and psychological material “in the room” it is best avoided in emails unless we discuss it beforehand. I will always request your preferred email address from our first session. If you choose to communicate with me by email, be aware that all emails are retained in the logs of Internet Service Providers. Furthermore, they can be vulnerable to viruses and unintended forwarding or replication. If you are concerned about the confidentiality of your emails, you may wish to contact me by telephone instead. Typically, I check emails only during office hours and not weekends. I endeavour to respond to all emails within 24 hours when I am not away, in which case you will receive an automated reply. Emails should never be used in the event of an emergency, in which case you should contact emergency services.

E-invoicing:

I use an online software application to process my invoices that are then sent out to your chosen e-mail address. If you would prefer not to receive these invoices by email, please let me know and I can bring you a printed copy at the beginning of each calendar month.

Text messages:

You may feel free to contact me by text message to alert me if you are running late for a session or for similar reasons. However, because of the lack of context of text messages, it is generally not the best method for communicating with me about more

important matters, so please do phone and leave me a message. As a private practitioner I am unable to offer an emergency service, even by phone.

Should you experience an emergency please contact either the emergency services or if you are feeling suicidal, ring The Samaritans: 116 123. If you feel that this may be an issue, please discuss it with me.

Telephone and Skype:

While I do not generally run my practice remotely, there may be times when we have a session by telephone or video conferencing, for example, if either one of us is abroad or you are otherwise unable or easily able to attend a counselling appointment. Any such sessions will be discussed in advance. I make every effort to choose video conferencing software that is recognised to be adequately encrypted – so this may involve you downloading certain software or logging into a web-based application. When engaging via video conferencing, we both agree not to use any recording devices for remote sessions. It is also crucial that you're sure your environment from which you are conferencing with me is safe and secure. We will discuss these details should we decide to work in this manner.

Social Media:

I maintain a public Twitter profile and Facebook Page as a way of promoting psychological ideas through the media, and to make people aware of workshops, conferences, or other events that I may be taking part in, or that might be of interest to followers. I frequently send across relevant links and sometimes engage in public conversations on these topics. Despite my online presence, I would prefer that our relationship remain as much as possible between us in the consultation room, therefore I will not knowingly follow any current or former clients on Twitter. Whether you follow me or not is of course to your discretion, though I would suggest for reasons of confidentiality and preserving our therapeutic relationship that it's advisable not to. I, like many others, maintain a private Facebook account for personal

reasons, and a Linked-In account for professional ones. I aim to keep my Facebook as private as possible and it would not be appropriate to be Facebook “friends” with former or current clients.

I acknowledge that there can be some overlap across social networks, and that this sometimes comes to light on Facebook. If this were the case, it would be something we would need to discuss in session. As the above, I have decided that it would not be appropriate to add current or former clients as “connections” on Linked-In.

Google:

It is likely that you will have Googled me before you contacted me. While I acknowledge that Googling others is now a generally accepted aspect of daily life, I wish to avoid encountering information about you that does not come directly from you. In general practice I do not Google my clients before I meet them. It is of course your right to Google me. However, if in your search some questions are raised, I would request that you raise them with me at the first opportunity.

The world is changing fast:

Our world is changing so rapidly, and my own responses to it are in constant development. I will continue to update this policy as I learn more, and would appreciate your honesty and input along the way. Should you have any questions or suggestions, please do let me know.

¹With thanks to Aaron Balick whose policy this is adapted from, www.aaronbalick.com