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Ethical Issues in Dealing with an Online Reputation

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Abstract

Clients who are satisfied or dissatisfied by the service they receive from their psychologists may write an online review for a site such as Yelp or Healthgrades. This article discusses how to respond and how not to respond when the review is negative. The Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (APA, 2010) are cited to show important ethical issues. Vignettes illustrate each relevant standard, covering ethical mistakes that might easily be made.

Consider the following vignette.

Kaja Tyler, PsyD has a psychotherapy practice. She specializes in treating adolescents and young adults with anxiety, depression and assorted adjustment problems to life transitions. She emphasizes mindfulness meditation and spirituality to all her professional interactions with patients. She has been in practice for 30 years. She feels that overall she has been highly successful. In a typical year she supervises three doctoral interns and periodically offers a workshop on spirituality in psychological healing.

Feeling particularly upbeat about her reputation in the community she decided to spend some time Googling her name. Although many comments and reviews were favorable, some were stunning. On Yelp one person who claimed to be a patient rated her as mediocre. Comments indicated that she was minimally competent, a poor listener and unable to relate meaningfully to patients. Several others echoed these sentiments, adding that she was never on time and did not seem to remember patients who missed a few weeks. What she read stung her ego. She felt threatened. She was alternately angry and vengeful. She perseverated over how to respond.

Koocher and Keith-Spiegel (2016, p. 368) reviewed online commentary sites for remarks about mental health professionals. Although many comments were favorable, those that were not fell into three general categories. These were statements about incompetence, lack of understanding/compassion, and financial abuse.

What guidance can we find in the Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (APA, 2010)? When the Code went into effect in 2003 there was little if any online disparagement. The updates in Standards 1.02 (Conflicts Between Ethics and Law, Regulations, or Other Governing Legal Authority), 1.03 (Conflicts Between Ethics and Organizational Demands), and 3.04 (Avoiding Harm) since that time, were all in response to issues involving psychologists in the military. Generally the Code was intentionally designed to cover all professional activities of psychologists but without the specificity that would apply it directly to changing technology.

One possible response is the following, written by hypothetical psychologist Kaja Tyler, PsyD "It is obvious to me who wrote these remarks. Ms Nameless is a super morbidly obese individual who no one likes to work with. When her treatment is not immediately successful she joyfully defames her treating psychologist. These people with distorted bodies all behave like this."

In this response to unfavorable online comments, the psychologist has attempted to find out who wrote the comments and to respond in kind or in person. A first impulse after getting slammed on line is to determine who wrote the comments and to try to rebut them or to correct them. But typically these comments are anonymous. Although it appears as though they were made by a former client there is no assurance that the writer was ever in the office or that she was the obvious client. In addition, if the psychologist is quite confident of the writer's identity, a response directly at that person's online entry might well violate Ethics Code Standard 4.01, **Maintaining Confidentiality:**

"Psychologists have a primary obligation and take reasonable precautions to protect confidential information obtained through or stored in any medium, recognizing that the extent and limits of confidentiality may be regulated by law or established by institutional rules or professional or scientific relationship."

And depending on the comments that the psychologist might write about the reviewer, they could be harmful to both the reader and the writer. This would present a problem with Standard 3.04,

Preventing Harm (a):

"Psychologists take reasonable steps to avoid harming their clients/patients, students, supervisees, research participants, organizational clients, and others with whom they work, and to minimize harm where it is foreseeable and unavoidable."

Clearly it does not matter at this point that the psychologist was harmed by the review, as the Ethics Code only applies to psychologists, not to angry clients.



Reputation

Another possibility is for Dr. Tyler herself to write several anonymous positive reviews. "Dr. Tyler is a wonderful psychologist." "She is patient and understanding." "Dr. G. gave me hope." "Kaja had several ideas for activities I could work on between meetings." "I felt better almost immediately." "I just love Dr. Tyler. She is so concerned about me and her fee is just right." There is something dishonest about writing fake reviews while pretending to be a happy patient. Could this be a problem with Standard 5.01 (a), Avoidance of False or Deceptive Statements?

".....Psychologists do not knowingly make public statements that are false, deceptive or fraudulent concerning their research, practice or other work activities or those of persons or organizations with which they are affiliated."

Apparently the psychologist might not know that the review sites check IP addresses and would find out that several reviews originated on the same laptop and/or network.

Perhaps an associate or professor of Dr. Tyler could be asked to write a positive review instead. Zur (2015) notes that negative reviews, if they are not too numerous, might actually highlight the positive ones, so there should be some that are good. Consider these possibilities. "I was Dr. Tyler's supervisor during her internship. I remember her as hardworking and a person who always puts her patients' welfare first." "Dr. Tyler and I are in the same group practice. Patients tell me that she is known to do a smashing good job with anxiety and depression." "Clients are speaking out in the waiting room about Dr. G's terrific work." But now consider Standard 5.02 (a)

Statements by Others,

"Psychologists who engage others to create or place public statements that promote their professional practice, products, or activities retain professional responsibility for such statements."

This might work, but it appears likely that Yelp (2017) also has an algorithm that can distinguish true client reviews from others.

It seems as though the problems of writing an alternative review, or asking a colleague or friend to do so, could be resolved by just asking current clients, who seem to be doing well, to write reviews for the psychologist. This would be honest and genuine, and not involve

the psychologist or her colleagues with constructing reviews of her service. But now consider **Standard 5.05, Testimonials.**

"Psychologists do not solicit testimonials from current therapy clients/patients or other persons who because of their particular circumstances are vulnerable to undue influence."

What are some more constructive ways to deal with online slamming? Here are a few.

1. Practice mindfulness meditation. Let it go. What has happened in the past is best left there. Take a deep breath and focus on today.
2. Think positively about whether there are any suggestions in the message(s) that might be used to improve ones practice and interpersonal relationships.
3. Cultivate an online presence that might produce links that lead to several affirmative sites about yourself. Write blogs or brief articles. Do some online advertising. (Swenson, 2014). Develop a web site. Populate the web with positive messages that are professional in nature.
4. Zur (2015) suggests posting on the review site words to the effect that you encourage a dissatisfied client to contact you to discuss the matter. This has to be done very carefully. Any public admission of substandard care opens the door to professional liability. Check with your professional liability carrier before trying this.
5. Depending on how thick ones skin is, another way to monitor online reviewing is to sign up for Google Alerts. This solution is not for everyone. For some, more negative reviews can be devastating.

This article discusses the problem of discovering difficult online reviews. Some suggestions are included for ways of coping with them that are consistent with the Ethics Code. The conclusion offers some ideas that might just work. More research is needed on the effect of online reviews on the therapeutic process.

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