

The provision of psychological services via the internet and other non-direct means

Introduction

There has been a substantial and increasing growth in the delivery of psychological services that are at a distance. The rapid development of the internet has accentuated the need to review professional practice with respect to ethical principles. The main question is whether these developments introduce fundamentally different ethical issues, or whether the existing ethical principles and standards, as formulated in the ethical codes of member associations, are appropriate in addressing professionals' behaviour.

Although the internet has been the main spur to action, it is important to recognize other types of communications. These include telephones, fax, TV and radio and written communication. Furthermore, the practices covered include counseling and therapy, assessment, guidance and behavioural interventions.

Also, there are at least two distinct strands. The first concerns the business element rather than the practice of psychology per se (e-commerce). The second concerns the psychological processes involved. There is no single acceptable term: e-commerce is appropriate when considering the former, but the term 'tele-health', while possibly appropriate for health issues does not adequately cover, for example, educational and occupational assessment. As a result, the preferred reference is 'Provision of Psychological Services via the Internet and Other Non-direct Means'.

Recommendations

1. Each EFPA member Association should produce a statement which addresses the ethical issues concerned with provision of psychological services on the Internet or at a distance.
2. This statement should be related to the Association's Ethical Code.
3. The statement should comprise the following principles and specific guidance; an Association may add to these but their guidance should not be in conflict with this statement.
4. Each Association should publish its guidance and review its operation at regular intervals.

General Principles

1. The ethical dimensions of professional practice as a psychologist are the same whether such practice is in person or at a distance, whether via the Internet or some other non-direct means.
2. The same ethical principles as specified in the EFPA Meta-code apply, namely:
 - Respect for a person's rights and dignity
 - Competence
 - Responsibility
 - Integrity
3. Implementation of these principles, and adherence to the standards within the Meta-code requires reflection by the psychologist, with respect to means of service delivery..
4. There is a particular requirement for careful reflection on implementation of ethical behaviour when the psychologist is engaging in a new means of delivery of a service, especially where experience is lacking on the specific ethical questions and dilemmas of that type of service delivery.
5. Each medium poses its own specific profile of characteristics, and hence of ethical challenges, including the degree of appropriateness for any particular form of psychological practice.

Specific Guidance

Each Member Association should offer specific guidance from Associations as follows:

1. Security

1.1 Identity of the psychologist

- 1.1.1 The psychologist should have a means to verify their identity, including specification of a physical location
- 1.1.2 Member associations should develop web links to facilitate identification of websites as belonging to members registered with the Association and/or other official registers.
- 1.1.3 Psychologists should be required to specify their membership of the Association, and any relevant statutory body.
- 1.1.4 Where a service is provided by more than one person, this should be specified, including the codes, professional backgrounds and identities of staff.

1.2 Identity of users

- 1.2.1 A clear identification of the use should normally be required.
- 1.2.2 1.2.2 Anonymity of the user may be appropriate in some circumstances, but in such cases it is incumbent upon the psychologist to take extra care and recognize the increased difficulty in determining the user's vulnerability and legal status (e.g. child).
- 1.2.3 Psychologists should be cautioned about the limits of the services that might be offered to anonymous clients.
- 1.2.4 Psychologists should take particular care to gain informed consent.
- 1.2.5 Psychologists working with children and another vulnerable clients should be cautioned to ensure safeguards are no less than those normally required, e.g. ensuring parental permission is clearly given and is verifiable.

1.3 Protection of the transaction

- 1.3.1 Psychologists should be advised on the security of transactions, including financial transactions and the sharing of psychological and personal information.
- 1.3.2 There should be maximum security on any internet site, telephone line or other medium, including the use of encrypted services.
- 1.3.3 There should be regular reviews and upgrading of levels of security.

2. Confidentiality

2.1 Recognition of limits

- 2.1.1 Psychologists should be advised to inform users of any relevant legislation on data protection, records, the communication of information and limits to confidentiality, e.g. where records are subpoenaed.
- 2.1.2 They should clarify with users what records they are keeping, and the user's rights regarding these.

2.2 Maintenance of records

- 2.2.1 Associations should advise their members to maintain appropriate records (including back ups) and that these be kept securely.
- 2.2.2 Psychologists should be aware when interacting electronically that registration and storage of information can be carried out by both parties.

3. Dealing with the special characteristics of supplying services by the Internet

- 3.1 While these characteristics are largely specific to the Internet, they may be shared in modified form with other means of practice at a distance.
- 3.2 Associations should advise their members to specify the following characteristics.
 - 3.2.1 Whether services are provided in 'real time' via interactive software or by e-mail.
 - 3.2.2 That all services are under the supervision of a psychologist, whether by direct communication or by automated response.
 - 3.2.3 Turnaround time e.g. by e-mail.
 - 3.2.4 The country of location of the psychologist.
 - 3.2.5 The implications, including potential disadvantages, of offering a service outside a national boundary.

4. Appropriateness

4.1 Research base

There are a number of different mediums for practice at a distance. Research is currently limited on the relative appropriateness and efficiency of each means relative either to other 'at a distance' or traditional 'face to face' methods.

- 4.1.1 Psychologists should develop their practice with caution where methods are new and consequently lacking a research basis.
- 4.1.2 Psychologists should be aware of the limitations of the reduced information available by such methods compared with direct face to face interaction.
- 4.1.3 It remains a primary requirement that psychologists practice within their range of competence, to recognize their limits, and to take appropriate action if the expected service goes beyond their competence.
- 4.1.4 As with any advertising, psychologists should avoid exaggerated claims on the success of their service.

5. Further Consideration for Associations

- 5.1 As this is a rapidly developing field, Member Associations should monitor practice in their own country and review their ethical codes and guidance at regular intervals.
- 5.2 Associations should have their ethical codes and guidance available on the internet.
- 5.3 Associations should ensure that there is a Register of qualified psychological service providers who meet the professional and ethical standards of the Association available on the Internet, preferably with access from members' websites.
- 5.4 Associations should consider developing guidance for the public on psychological services and for this to be available on the Internet.