



The Mental Health Professional and the New Technologies: A Handbook for Practice Today

Marlene M. Maheu, Myron L. Pulier, Frank H. Wilhelm, Joseph P. McMenam, Nancy E. Brown-Connonlly

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In the last two decades, new communication technologies have dramatically changed the world in which mental health professionals and their patients live. Developments such as e-mail, online chat groups, Web pages, search engines, and electronic databases are directly or indirectly affecting most people's routines and expectations. Other developments are poised to do so in the near future. Already, for example, patients are acquiring both good and bad advice and information on the Web; many expect to be able to reach their therapists by e-mail. And already there is pressure from third party payers for providers to submit claims electronically.

These technological breakthroughs have the potential to make mental health care more widely available and accessible, affordable, acceptable to patients, and adaptable to special needs. But many mental health professionals, as well as those who train them, are skeptical about integrating the new capabilities into their services and question the ethical and legal appropriateness of doing so. Those unfamiliar with the technologies tend to be particularly doubtful. How much e-mail contact with patients should I encourage or permit, and for what purposes? Why should I set up a Web site and how do I do so and what should I put on it? Should I refer patients to chat groups or Web-based discussion forums? Could video-conferencing be a helpful tool in some cases and what is involved? How do I avoid trouble if I dare to experiment with innovations? And last but not least, will the results of my experimentation be cost-effective?

The book includes:

- an extensive overview of legal and regulatory issues, such as those raised by the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA);
- concrete technical, ethical, and managerial suggestions summarized in a seven-step Online Consultation Risk Management model; and
- how to" resource lists and sample documents of use to beginners and experienced professionals alike.

For better or worse, no mental health professional today can avoid confronting the issues presented by the new technologies. *The Mental Health Professional and the New Technologies: A Handbook for Practice Today* will enormously simplify the job of thinking through the issues and making clinically, ethically, and legally prudent decisions.

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