

## *Social Media, information and communication technologies: Part 1*

### **Email, text message and mobile phone use: Blurring the boundaries**

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This ethical guideline will focus on communicating with clients via email, text message and telephone (mobile phone).

Individual social workers and organisations that employ social workers need to be especially aware of the additional ethical considerations that arise through the use of the information technologies to communicate with clients.

While changes and developments in the information technologies have certainly made communication much easier, more efficient and more immediate, they should not always replace the more traditional forms of communication. If, for example, a social worker is to advise a client that the professional relationship needs to be terminated and/or provide details of an alternative social worker/s that the client could be referred to, it may be more appropriate to write the client a letter instead of an email or text message. Similarly, for example, if a social worker needs to discuss a sensitive issue with a client or holds concerns about a client's wellbeing, it may be more appropriate to arrange a face to face appointment to have this conversation, rather than calling the client's mobile phone to have this discussion.

If a social worker intends to communicate with clients via text message, email or have provided clients with a mobile phone number they can contact on, it is important that the social worker set very clear and specific boundaries around the use of these communication methods at the outset of the client relationship. The Code of Ethics (2010) clearly states in section 5.1.6c (Professional boundaries and dual relationships), that:

***Social workers, not their clients or former clients, are responsible for setting and maintaining clear and appropriate professional boundaries in all forms of communication including... telephone and online communication.***

Email and text message based communication can often be perceived as being more informal in nature than more traditional forms of communication such as a written letter. Their instantaneous nature and the ability to make contact with the recipient from anywhere at anytime, has created a cultural perception that people are contactable and available at any time. Social workers, therefore, need to be especially aware of the potential for 2 professional boundaries to become ambiguous through the use of these communication methods.

## **Contracting at the commencement of the professional relationship regarding use of mobile phones and text based communication**

It would be advisable for social workers to routinely discuss this with clients and to create a contractual arrangement, based on the private practitioner's own or the organisation's policies and procedures, around the use of text message, email and phone for communication purposes. For example, social workers might need to create policies, contract around, or at least consider the following:

- To determine and agree on what type of information can be exchanged or discussed in an email. For example, it may be contracted that email exchange will only contain information relating to the confirmation of an appointment, the cancellation/postponement of an appointment or change in appointment time. If the therapeutic or social worker/client relationship is face to face in nature, it would be important to keep the relationship contained in this forum as much as possible in the maintenance of professional boundaries. It also protects the client's confidentiality to some extent, in that if a third party were to access their email account, there would be no revealing information about the client's personal circumstances or reasons for their accessing a social work service.
- Social workers may also consider a contract around the amount of notice required, for both the client and the social worker, to change or cancel an appointment, the methods by which appointments can be changed or cancelled as well as a contract around the maximum time it will take for an email to be read and responded to.
- Social workers may need to determine and agree on what type of information can be exchanged or discussed in a text message. It could be agreed that, as is mentioned in the first dot point regarding email, this will only be in relation to appointment confirmation, cancellation or change. As with email, it also protects the client's privacy to some extent if a third party had/gained access to their mobile phone.
- It may also be worth considering contracting around the time in which text messages can be sent and will be answered. This may be set between business hours for example, so as clients are aware of the boundaries around text message sending and when they can send a text and expect a reply and when they cannot. The same might apply for emails.
- A further consideration might be to have a work mobile phone that is separate to a personal phone. The social worker will then have the option to switch off their work phone outside of the hours contained in the contract so as to ensure that the boundaries remain firm and clear for both parties. It would be advisable to provide clients with a 24 hour crisis line phone number available to the public that they can call outside of these hours. It would also be recommended that social workers in private practice have a work email address that is separate to their personal email address.
- It would also be important to discuss with clients, and ensure that they fully understand, that in the event that any records are subpoenaed, this could include records of communication via email or text message as they would form part of the client's case record.

## Further considerations

- It is also important to ensure that language used via these channels is kept professional and is as free as possible from slang and more casual ways of communicating. Informal text message and email exchanges, especially during what might be considered non-working hours, may confuse clients about the boundaries in their relationships with social workers.
- Social workers may also need to consider the cost to clients of sending text messages. If a social worker sends a client a text message asking them to confirm an appointment time, for example, there is an expectation that the client reply via text message which may incur an unwanted cost to the client. It would be important for social workers to discuss this with clients and explore other free options of communicating with clients if this were to arise as an issue.
- For a social worker working in private practice, it would be important to ensure that appropriate firewalls, passwords and backup data storage systems are installed on computers as well as passwords for work mobile phones. Social workers would also need to ensure, that if their computer or lap top is for professional and personal use, that any information relating to clients is password protected and restricted from family members or others who may also have access to the computer. It would be important to recommend that clients do the same if at all possible. It should be discussed with clients that firewalls and security systems are not always fool proof, and therefore could potentially limit confidentiality.
- A further consideration or point to be aware of is that communication via text message or email can lack visual cues and non-verbal cues and can make it difficult to portray emotion, context etc. It would be important to have this discussion with clients to further reinforce the importance of maintaining boundaries around what type of information is communicated via text and email.

## Case Examples

***I have a client who is going through a particularly difficult situation at present. I have contracted with her that she can only contact me between the hours of 9am and 6pm Monday to Friday. I was on another phone conversation at 5.45pm and received call waiting. When I hung up there was a voice message from my client in distress asking me to call her. The message was left at 5.50pm, it was now 6.05pm. Should I have returned the call?***

The social worker, in this instance, has contracted with the client the boundaries around contacting him/her by mobile phone. The client has acted in accordance with this contract by contacting the social worker within these time frames and left a voice message.

The social worker would need to consider the level of risk to the client and the maintenance of their therapeutic relationship versus maintaining the boundaries around contact between client and social worker.

The social worker may also need to re-address the contract that he/she has with the client. If the formal therapeutic relationship is face to face in nature, the social worker may need to consider the appropriateness of the client being able to contact him/her during non-appointment times. Is the social

worker setting up an unhealthy dependency? What does the social worker do if they are with another client at the time? How does the social worker usually respond to the client when they call outside of appointment times? How much time does the social worker spend with the client? If in private practice, does the social worker charge this client for any additional service they may provide, even if it is over the phone?

***I am a social worker and I urgently need to call my client to cancel an appointment we have scheduled. My client has not answered. Can I send a text message with the information?***

The social worker would need to ascertain whether the client consented to the social worker contacting them by text message. If the client provided consent to the social worker to contact them via text message, the social worker would then need to check if there were any time constraints in place as to when text messages can be sent.

The social worker should not presume that it is ok to send the client a text message in the event that the client does not answer their phone, if it was not discussed and consented to in any contractual arrangement. The social worker cannot guarantee that a text message will not be intercepted and/or read by a third party. This could be particularly risky to the client if they are in a violent relationship for example.

It would be advisable for the social worker to think through these issues before deciding how to proceed. If the social worker feels that they really need to make direct contact with the client, it might be advisable to keep any text message sent as brief and de-identifying as possible. It would also be advisable to discuss a contract with the client around the use of, and boundaries around, text message to cancel/re-schedule appointments.

***I am a social worker and I am about to finish my therapeutic relationship with a client. During the professional relationship, I communicated with this client via email to schedule and confirm our appointment times. Part of my contract with the client involved writing an assessment report. In our last session, I arranged the time and day that the client could come and collect the report. The client has, today, emailed me and stated that they are unable to come in to collect the report and can I email it to them. Should I do this?***

The social worker would need to consider the risks associated with the transmitting of confidential information via email. If the client and the social worker had contracted around their communication via email to only include information about appointment scheduling and confirmation, they would need to question the appropriateness of sending the client's report via email. The social worker would need to consider the risk that the email would be intercepted or that a third party would not receive the email first and therefore have access to the client's confidential information.

If the client is certain that they cannot come in to collect the report in person, the social worker may suggest to the client that the report is posted via registered post, where the client (and only the client) on presentation of identification, can sign for and receive the report.

If the client is adamant that they want the social worker to email the report, the social worker should warn the client of the risks associated with this and the limits to their confidentiality.

### **Ethics and Practice Standards Consultation Service**

If you have a query about the use of email, text and mobile phones in your practice, you can contact the Ethics and Practice Consultation Service at [ethicsconsult@asw.asn.au](mailto:ethicsconsult@asw.asn.au) or (03) 9320 1044