

How to best use digital technology to help your patients

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As psychiatrists, we are increasingly using digital technology, such as e-mail, video conferencing, social media, and text messaging, to communicate with and even treat our patients.¹ The benefits of using digital technology for treating patients include, but are not limited to, enhancing access to psychiatric services that are unavailable due to a patient's geographical location and/or physical disability; providing more cost-effective delivery of services; and creating more ways for patients to communicate with their physicians.¹ While there are benefits to using digital technology, there are also possible repercussions, such as breaches of confidentiality or boundary violations.² Although there is no evidence-based guidance about how to best use digital technology in patient care,³ the following approaches can help you protect your patients and minimize your liability.

Assess competence. Determine how familiar and comfortable both you and your patient are with the specific software and/or devices you intend to use. Confirm that your patient can access the technology, and inform them of the benefits and risks of using digital technology in their care.¹

Create a written policy about your use of digital technology, and review it with all patients to explain how it will be used in their treatment.¹ This policy should include a back-up plan in the event of technology failures.¹ It should clearly explain that the information gathered with this technology can become part of the patient's medical record. It should also prohibit patients from using their devices to record other patients in the waiting room

or other areas. Such a policy could enhance the protection of private information and help maintain clear boundaries.¹ Review and update your policy as often as needed.

Obtain your patients' written consent to use digital technology. If you want to post information about your patients on social media, obtain their written consent to do so, and mutually agree as to what information would be posted. This should not include their identity or confidential information.¹

Do not accept friend requests or contact requests from current or former patients on any social networking platform. Do not follow your patients' blogs, Twitter accounts, or any other accounts. Be aware that if you and your patients share the same "friend" network on social media, this may create boundary confusion, inappropriate dual relationships, and potential conflicts of interest.¹ Keep personal and professional accounts separate to maintain appropriate boundaries and minimize compromising patient confidentiality. Do not post private information on professional practice accounts, and do not link/sync your personal accounts with professional accounts.

Do not store patient information on your personal electronic devices because these devices could be lost or hacked. Avoid contacting your patients via non-secured platforms because doing so could compromise patient confidentiality. Use encrypted software and firewalls for communicating with your patients and storing their information.¹ Also, periodically assess your confidentiality policies and procedures to ensure compliance with appropriate statutes and laws.¹

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Disclosure

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