Making the most of electronic mailing lists and interest groups

What’s a good book for an 11-year-old boy going through his parents’ divorce? How can you find a lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender therapist who specializes in couples issues? Is there a psychiatrist on the north side of town who takes CIGNA insurance and is accepting new patients? How can you stay abreast of trends and changes in your specialty? What billing software are other therapists using? Where can you find different models for dealing with bullies? How do you get a recommendation for an attorney and an accountant who are knowledgeable about counseling and private practice in your state? Did Blue Cross/Blue Shield change the precertification process for counseling? How do you market your parenting workshop to other therapists? Where is there a local social service agency that has a sliding fee scale and provides dialectical behavior therapy?

For answers to these and other questions, consider tapping into your colleagues’ knowledge on electronic mailing lists and within interest groups. In many instances, these resources can provide the professional counselor in private practice with a wealth of information quickly, all without leaving the office. (Note that many people use the term LISTSERV to generically refer to any electronic mailing list, but LISTSERV, which was the first e-mail list software application, is a registered trademark.) You can find these great resources through groups.yahoo.com, by asking other professionals in your area or by contacting your state counseling branch, professional societies and national associations. What could be easier?

A number of years ago, we were referred by a colleague to the Chicago Therapist LISTSERV. Even though I (Norm) live 65 miles west of the city, the e-mailing list is an invaluable private practice tool. I can ask a question; see what other therapists recommend in terms of services, products and best practice; announce the dates of our private practice workshops; learn of referral sources … the list could go on and on. By joining the e-list, we can tap the knowledge and expertise of more than 650 counselors, social workers, psychologists and other providers with a single e-mail or simply sit back and read the advice and opinions being offered by other therapists.

Can’t find an e-mail list for counselors in your area? Start one! It’s easier than you think. We spoke with Karen Ross, owner and moderator of the Chicago Therapist LISTSERV, about what’s involved. She suggested the following steps:

1) Choose a domain where the e-mail list will be housed. Ross uses Yahoo! Groups. Go to groups.yahoo.com and click on “Start your group.”

2) Choose a specific shared interest for your group name and goal. Ross chose Chicago Therapist because she wanted to network specifically with psychotherapists in the Chicagoland area.

3) Decide the role you are going to play. Do you want to moderate the group? If so, to what extent? Perhaps you want to recruit members to join you in the ongoing responsibility of managing membership requests, fielding questions, reminding participants about guidelines and so on.

4) Create guidelines for your group. Ross prefers to have group members assist in providing a more democratic and connected feel to the experience we share as a community.

5) Invite as many people as you can to join the group. Use your resources. E-mail colleagues and pass out informational sign-up sheets at continuing education events. Be open with your excitement about the group. Talk about your group with other colleagues you meet. “Eventually, over time, more people came to me requesting membership rather than me hunting down new members,” Ross says.

“I remember being excited when we had 50 members, and now we are approaching 700. It really is an ‘if you build it, they will come’ type of thing.”

According to Ross, expect to devote a few hours per week to monitoring the e-mail list and working with membership issues. This is a good practice-building strategy and a great way to give back to the profession. For more information, contact Karen Ross, a licensed clinical social worker, at firehead4@aol.com.

If you want to connect and network with other counselors on a national level, David Kaplan, chief professional officer for the American Counseling Association, suggests the following e-mail list groups:

- CESNET for counselor educators
- International Counselor Network (ICN) for school counselors
- DIVERSEGRAD for those interested in counseling topics related to multiculturalism and diversity
- COUNSGRADS for graduate students in counseling
- ACESGS for doctoral students in counseling (for information on accessing this group, go to the “Student” section of the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision website at acesonline.net).

Interest networks are another way to stay connected with the global counseling community. Holly Clubb, ACA’s director of leadership services, notes that ACA has the following interest networks:

- ACA Interest Network for Professional Counselors in Schools
- Animal Assisted Therapy in Mental Health Interest Network
- Children’s Counseling Interest Network
- Forensic Counseling Interest Network
- Grief and Bereavement Interest Network
Historical Issues in Counseling Network
Interest Network for Advances in Therapeutic Humor
Multiracial/Multietnic Counseling Concerns Interest Network
Network for Jewish Interests
Sports Counseling Interest Network
Traumatology Interest Network
Wellness Interest Network
Women’s Interest Network

You do not have to be a member of ACA to join one of the interest networks. To join, contact Clubb at hclubb@counseling.org or 800.347.6647 ext. 212.

Q: Thank you for the volumes of information you provide to ACA members. I’m preparing to start my private practice and would like to have a fully paperless office utilizing a web-based charting system and a scanner to capture all documents received in paper form. I am fully competent in the technological aspects of this plan, and all electronic files will be maintained with multilayered security, including password protection. It seems this would be HIPAA-compliant and ethical, but a licensed professional counselor in my area (Michigan) told me she thinks we are required to retain the originals of some documents no matter what. Could you share your insights on the paperless practice?

A: Congratulations on your decision. We think paperless is great. We know of no reason for paper backup unless an agency has a policy to that effect. If someone is worried that data may be lost because of computer failure, back up everything on a flash drive that is password protected.

Consider these systems that we have found or that readers have recommended. All have paperless capabilities.

EZClaim (ezclaim.com/products.php) seems to do all that you want — sends claims, receives reports and autoposts payments. It has a beginner’s guide (ezclaim.com/edi-beginners-guide.php) that is a great reference on the basics of electronic billing.

As for paperless charting, NextStep Solutions (nextstepsolutionsinc.com) has “paperless applications that are compatible with EZClaim Advanced. NextStep features custom assessments, case management, budgeting, seamless billing with EZClaim, treatment-planning wizard, charting and integrated scheduling with EZScheduler. NextStep was conceived by mental health practitioners, technology experts, business men and women.” Bob Walsh knows and uses this option.

The following systems have also been recommended. They have paperless applications and, as good programs should, all offer a free trial.

Therapist Helper (helper.com) is mentioned frequently as an all-in-one program.

Office Therapy and QuicDoc, made by DocuTrac Inc. (quicdoc.com/index.htm), is highly recommended by one of our readers, licensed professional counselor Philip Koestler. They offer electronic billing, charting and a function that allows you to process credit cards.

You can also find paperless applications in many other programs. As with any program, know all the fees beyond the purchase price for add-on components, tech support, licenses, renewal, multiple users, updates and so on.

Our schedule of upcoming private practice workshops:
March 26, Omaha, Neb.
April 11, Lincroft, N.J.
April 24, Indianapolis
April 26, Ann Arbor, Mich.
April 27, South Bend, Ind.
June 5, Chicago
Sept. 18-20, New Orleans

For details or to register, visit counseling-privatepractice.com and click on “Seminars.”

ACA members can e-mail their questions to Robert J. Walsh and Norman C. Dasenbrook at walshgasp@aol.com and access a series of “Private Practice Pointers” on the ACA website at counseling.org.

Letters to the editor:
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