



Is it time to consider texting with clients?

Question: My client wants to text me in between sessions. Is that a good idea?

Answer: It may or may not be a good idea, and there are a number of considerations that can determine the answer. Research has shown that clients can benefit from text therapy (for example, see the 2003 article “Internet-based prevention of eating disorders,” published in the *European Eating Disorders Review*). Counselors can also gain a greater understanding of their clients and their patterns of behavior from text messages (see the 2010 article “The longitudinal course of bipolar disorder as revealed through weekly text messaging: A feasibility study,” published in *Bipolar Disorders*).

Additionally, texting is becoming more of a norm than phone calls. Paul Chaney provided a number of different statistics that illuminate this fact in his blog post, “We never talk any more: Why text messaging has replaced the phone for communication” (bizzuka.com/company-blog/we-never-talk-any-more-why-text-messaging-has-replaced-the-phone-for-communication).

Among the statistics he cited:

- ❖ 32 percent of respondents to a *Time* magazine poll in 2010 said they’d rather communicate via text than by phone, even with people they know very well
- ❖ Smartphone owners ages 18-24 send and receive 4,000 messages per month
- ❖ 43 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds say that texting is just as meaningful as an actual conversation with someone over the phone
- ❖ 42 percent of teenagers say the primary reason they have a cell phone is for texting
- ❖ 92 percent of smartphone owners in the United States will text and send an

average of 111 messages per week, and 49 percent of those who use social media daily would rather text than call a person

Therefore, from a therapeutic standpoint of meeting clients where they are, it may be beneficial to add texting to the counseling toolkit. However, there are ethical implications to be considered. Section H of the 2014 *ACA Code of Ethics* addresses distance counseling, technology and social media. There are special considerations to cover in the informed consent process regarding the use of texting (or any technology) in counseling, including anticipated response time, appropriate use of the technology and the benefits and risks of using the technology.

In the absence of visual confirmation, the counselor and client also need to establish a way to verify that they are texting with each other. Therefore, code words or phrases may need to be implemented for verification purposes (see Standard H.3.). Think of this as being similar to the way you would use a password to access a site. There are also security measures to put in place, such as using HIPAA-compliant text applications, locking the phone and even setting preferences for alerts.

In addition to ethical considerations regarding the use of technology, there are ethical considerations regarding overall appropriateness of the medium. A counselor should walk through an ethical decision-making model and evaluate what is in the best interests of the client. Some ethical standards to consider within the model are A.1.a., A.2.a., A.4.a., A.6. and B.1.d.

A counselor will want to respect the client and not do anything that might be harmful to the client. The counselor will also want to establish appropriate professional boundaries with the use of

texting. Finally, the counselor will want to explain the limitations to confidentiality when using texting. A counselor can (and should) do a number of things to protect the client’s confidentiality when using technology, but nothing is ever 100 percent safe and secure, and that needs to be made clear to the client.

If a counselor is not comfortable with the idea of texting with a client or thinks that he or she cannot establish strong boundaries as it relates to texting, then the counselor should not engage in this form of communication with clients. However, if the counselor takes the necessary precautions, covers all of the concerns *and* is comfortable with this type of interaction, perhaps it is time to consider texting as a viable alternative.



The questions addressed in this column are submitted by American Counseling Association members for educational purposes. Submit questions or comments to mwade@counseling.org with the subject line “Ethics Column.” As a reminder, a benefit of ACA membership is personal ethical consultations through the ACA Ethics Department at 800.347.6647 ext. 314 or ethics@counseling.org. ♦

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