



Protecting Your Reputation Ethically: Unfavorable Online Reviews

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The Internet is an invaluable resource that helps the public locate a psychologist, without being confined to personal referrals or flipping through the Yellow Pages. Consumers embrace online evaluation reviews, especially sites that offer critiques of every service imaginable. Although the validity and reliability of these reviews may be suspect, people increasingly go online for guidance, especially when choosing a psychologist.

Along with this trend comes technology for business owners to track postings about their enterprise. Psychologists are encouraged to conduct routine searches of themselves (e.g., Google alert) to monitor their online presence. While appearing online may be exciting, negative reviews can be problematic for psychologists, raising important questions about how to react and whether it is possible to respond while adhering to our ethics code.

For any professional, receiving unfavorable feedback is upsetting. But reading an inaccurate or unfavorable online review can be infuriating, demoralizing and discouraging. Psychologists worry that negative reviews adversely impact employment opportunities, referrals and their overall reputation. While many local small businesses have strategies to counteract the effects of a negative review (e.g., posting respectful responses, correcting factual mistakes, offering free upgrades, using a reputation management company), psychologists have limited options because of laws and ethics that govern our behavior.

A psychologist's first reaction to a negative online review may be to clarify, correct, or simply post a response. However, for ethical as well as risk management reasons, it is generally unwise to engage in online public communication, largely because of concerns about compromising the wellbeing of many individuals (i.e., author of the negative review, family members or possibly other patients). In addition to the potential breach of confidentiality, an online confrontation may trigger a series of events, including angering the reviewer, increasing the likelihood of an escalated online exchange, negative effects on the reviewer or even the reviewer's filing a licensing board complaint. The public discourse could ultimately negatively impact other patients. Any of these stressful events could contribute to psychologist burnout, health problems or a sense of hopelessness.

Relevant Ethical Issues

Many psychologists feel powerless about negative online reviews, knowing that they must avoid doing harm (APA, 2010, Standard 3.04) and respect the privacy of those individuals with whom they have a professional relationship (APA, 2010, Standard 4), which limits the ability to correct misrepresentations of their work (APA, 2010, Stan-

dard 1.01). Furthermore, unlike other professionals who can solicit positive consumer testimonials to offset a negative review, this is prohibited by the psychology's ethical principles (APA, 2010, Standard 5.05).

Psychologists work hard to establish their reputations and may feel devastated when they are attacked with little recourse. In some instances, psychologists might experience various stress-related health concerns (e.g., high blood pressure, sleep disorders) and become consumed with feelings of powerlessness. The 2010 *APA Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct* reminds us that one's judgment is not at its best when one is distressed. An emotional response may ill serve one's patients and oneself. These are often times to reflect or consult with a colleague to maintain objectivity and identify biases and limits before acting. (APA, 2010, Standard 2.06b).

Psychologists must determine if there was a legitimate basis for the negative feedback, such as behaviors that led to the complaint (e.g., psychologist not returning phone calls; distracted during session) (APA, 2010, Standard 2.06b), rather than a criticism of accommodations (e.g., limited parking). Were ways to provide feedback discussed during the informed consent process? Patients should know their options for providing feedback to the psychologist (e.g., face-to-face or satisfaction surveys) and their recourse when they are dissatisfied or have serious concerns (e.g., referral to another provider). It may be appropriate to provide information about potential consequences of posting reviews online (e.g., risks of patient's loss of privacy, a negative response from other reviewers).

Moving Forward: Enhance Your Own Reputation

Be proactive and take advantage of the Internet. Create, improve and maintain your online presence through accurate business listings, professional profiles and websites. Consumers benefit from educational logs, newsletters and columns. In this era of social media and ubiquitous online information, it's important to be proactive in establishing your presence, both online and in your community. □

References

American Psychological Association. (2010). *Ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct (2002, Amended June 1, 2010)*. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/ethics/code/index.aspx>.

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