

Where is reliable information on the Internet?

Arthur Becker-Weidman, LCSW, Ph.D.,
Center For Family Development
www.Center4FamilyDevelop.com
716-810-0790

Many families and professionals use the internet to try to find answers to important questions about mental health and psychological issues. Enter nearly any term into your search engine and thousands of “hits” come up. How can you sort out the reliable and valid information from what is useless, harmful, or merely the distorted views of minor fringe groups? This is a very hard question and a very important question. As social workers, if we are to provide useful information, resources, and referrals for our clients we need to sort the good from the bad.

Many people go to the popular Wikipedia without realizing that this is not a professional or “vetted” site. Anyone can and does edit articles. The result is that articles about potentially contentious issues, in which category many mental health issues fall, can and are taken over by fringe advocacy groups, zealots, and persons with an “axe” to grind. The information is often incorrect, biased, and not helpful. I’ve followed the evolution of a few articles there and to my dismay, a number have been taken over by such zealots. For example, a series of related articles has been filled with biased and inaccurate information by a lay person and by the leader of a fringe advocacy group who teaches at a small college, working in tandem. The advocacy group leader has no training or experience in psychotherapy or mental health issues, or in the topic of the articles, and is not a licensed mental health practitioner. Yet, by being dogged about editing and getting others from his advocacy group to chime in, they have taken over these articles and pushed out more scholarly views. One can see this phenomenon in a number of articles on Wikipedia on various other topics. The difficulty is that Wikipedia is not a vetted or monitored site. Anyone can and does contribute and can do so in an anonymous fashion. Without knowing the background of these hidden editors, it is difficult to evaluate the veracity of the information. Imagine if all of the articles in Social Work were written anonymously and could be put in by any writer, without vetting or peer-review! For this reason I generally advise parents and professionals to avoid that site in favor of the ones listed below.

These are just a few of the more reliable sites that clients and professionals might want to use. What they all have in common is that they are vetted and reviewed by a professional or group of professionals. Those sites that allow postings and blogs monitor the postings, some actually reviewing the posting before it is put up. The editors and administrators are identified and their credentials, background, and training are relevant to the subject matter. For these reasons, the information on these sites is reliable, trustworthy, accurate, and useful.

National Association of Social Workers

<http://www.socialworkers.org/>

The website for our national association is a good source of current and reliable information on a variety of topics of interest to social workers and our clients.

NASW, New York State Chapter

<http://www.naswnys.org/>

For material of more local interest, our state chapter's website is a valuable resource

The websites of various other professional organizations can also provide useful, current, and trustworthy information.

1. Association for the Treatment and Training in the Attachment of Children

www.ATTACH.org

This has information for both parents and professionals. In addition to White Papers and Practice Manuals, the site offers a listing of Registered Clinicians and Registered Agencies from which services can be secured.

2. The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry

http://www.aacap.org/cs/root/facts_for_families/reactive_attachment_disorder

This site has a few practice parameters about the diagnosis and treatment of several mental health conditions.

3. American Psychiatric Association

<http://www.psych.org/Resources/MentalHealthResources.aspx>

This page has a number of reliable and useful links

4. American Psychological Association

<http://www.apa.org/topics/>

This page has a listing of various topics and diagnoses and links to information about those subjects.

Other useful sites with professional oversight include the following:

1. The Psychology Wiki

<http://psychology.wikia.com/>

This "wiki" has contributions primarily by mental health professionals. Unlike other Wiki's, editors are asked to identify themselves and so the information here tends to be quite reliable and timely. The Administrator, Dr. Joseph Kiff is a licensed psychologist working in Dudley in the West Midlands, in England. The site has information posted by professionals and is generally current, reliable and trustworthy.

2. National Institute of Mental Health

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/>

Provides useful information for consumers. It also has some of the most current information available from clinical trials research.

3. WebMD

<http://www.webmd.com/mental-health/>

This site has reliable information written by professionals and monitored by professionals.

4. Mayo Clinic

<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/>

One of the oldest sites around for health information.

Other sources of reliable information include:

Encyclopedia Britannica

<http://www.britannica.com/>

Columbia Encyclopedia

<http://www.bartleby.com/65/>

With so much misinformation floating around, it is important that social workers and families have access to reliable and factual information. That can be hard to find when one merely pops a term into one's search engine and then looks at the top two to five sites. Popularity may not represent accuracy. It is best to stick with vetted sites that have information from identified individuals who are experts in the area you are searching. I have provided you with just a few of the most reliable and accurate sites.