



Resource Sheet for Therapists

This sheet is for therapists, psychologists, and other caring professionals whose clients are experiencing online harassment. In it you will find background information on the problem of online harassment, along with common myths and misconceptions. We hope it will be helpful for you as you work with clients dealing with this issue.

Overview

Online harassment is an increasingly common problem. According to the Anti-Defamation League, 53% of U.S. adults have experienced online harassment. Furthermore, 63% of LGBTQ+ adults, 35% of Muslim adults, and 30% of Hispanic adults have been harassed due to their identity. Because of its intersection with identity, online harassment may compound past trauma, imposter syndrome, or internalized oppression.

Definitions

Online harassment can be experienced as psychological trauma. Some forms of online harassment may be familiar to you as they pre-date the internet: bullying, hateful comments, threats of violence, stalking, or sexual harassment. Other forms may be new to you.

Doxxing	Releasing private information to the public, typically with the intent of setting the client up to be stalked, physically intimidated, or targeted with violence
SWATing	Sending police to the client's home, which can lead to physical harm (in at least one case, death) or the destruction of property
Trolling	A term that is often minimized to mean poking fun at someone online or "just joking around" but often produces real, harmful mental health impacts
Impersonation	Hacking the client's account or creating an account to look like the client's in order to post content that will harm their reputation
Nonconsensual distribution of intimate images	<p>This is colloquially referred to as "revenge porn" which can unfortunately perpetuate the ideas that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The client did something worthy of exacting vengeance• The attack is carried out by someone known to the client• The content was recorded consensually (which may or may not be the case)

Common Mistakes

It's common for anyone, including mental health professionals, to react to online harassment based on myths or preconceptions. Here are some common mistakes.

Suggesting the targeted person discontinue use of the internet	This is often not a viable option for folks either because of their work or because cutting out the internet would also mean cutting out major systems of support.
Referring to the internet as "not real life"	Any separation between technology and "the real world" has dissolved - particularly for younger people who have never known a world without ubiquitous social media. Interactions that happen on the internet have real impact; the internet is "real life" now.
Making assumptions about the efficacy of police involvement or reporting to HR	Law enforcement is only beginning to take issues of online harassment seriously, and even then only in the most clear-cut and well-documented cases. There are also inconsistent laws and application of those laws that make it hard to prosecute.
	Police and other authoritative institutions can be traumatic for people to engage with - especially if they are of an identity that has been historically disbelieved, killed or brutalized by those institutions.
Underestimating the mental health impact of online harassment	It's common for targeted persons to feel afraid to leave their house and exhibit other behavioral changes consistent with trauma. If they used the internet as a place of support, they may also be grieving the loss of that support system.
Interjecting with comments about own ineptitude with technology	It's okay if you are not technically proficient. Refrain from shifting the focus to your own technological anxieties. If a term comes up that you are unfamiliar with, it's okay to say "I'm not familiar with that" or to research it later.
Attempting to counter imposter syndrome with praise or compliments	Imposter syndrome can persist through any amount of success or achievement. The most effective antidote to imposter syndrome is hearing peers or role models disclose their own insecurities or feelings of being an imposter.
Labeling the targeted person's experience	Labeling online harassment as "bullying" might feel invalidating to one person and empowering to another. Let the targeted person define their own experience.