



Together Take a Pause and Ponder



Should I Search Online?



We live in a networked world, and sensitive information about the people you serve may be just a tap on a keyboard or cell phone away. Though it can be tempting – and even helpful – to search Google, Facebook, Twitter and other online and social media sources to find out more, online searches on your work or personal computers and electronic devices have the potential to:

- Compromise the integrity of the therapeutic relationship.
- Cross professional boundaries.
- Jeopardize trust between patients and their care team
- Introduce false or inaccurate information.

The general guidelines is NOT to search online for patient information, before you do the following:

- FIRST, talk with your manager, another team member, and/or your patient's provider
- THEN, Together Take a Pause and Ponder (TTaPP) the following questions.

Questions to Ponder Together

1) How is my decision to search for online information guided by our Mission, Core Values, and Standards of Conduct?

- Would this search demonstrate or compromise my reverence for this person?
- Does this search demonstrate hospitality, collaboration and respect for the dignity of this person?
- Does this search demonstrate or compromise my integrity or the integrity of others caring for this person in terms of honesty, humility and stewardship?
- How might this search strengthen or compromise my compassion for this person?
- Does this search illustrate our commitment to person-centered care, creating healing environments and advocating for others?
- Does an online search cross professional boundaries with this person or compromise the requirements of my professional licensure?

2) Why do I want to search online for information about this person?

- Am I concerned about this person's immediate safety and well-being, or am I just curious to find out what might be online?
- Do I believe this online information is critical to providing effective treatment for this person?
- Is my desire to search for online information based on my assumptions about this person, or influenced by any sources of stigma?
- Does this online search cross professional boundaries within my relationship with this person?
- How does this online search compare to other types of information-gathering activities? For example:
 - searching in a phone book
 - looking through a purse or wallet
 - reading a diary or journal
 - listening in on a personal conversation
- How will I know if any information I might find online is true and accurate?
- Is there no other way to find out this information (including directly talking with the person)?



3) Could my online search either advance or compromise treatment?

- How will I use the information I find online within the treatment setting?
- How will I keep this information private (or should I keep it private)?
- How would any online information I might find impact this person's treatment plan?

This information was adapted by the CHI Health Behavioral Healthcare Ethics Committee from information found in the following resources:

- Clinton, B. K., Silverman, B. C., & Brendel, D. H. (2010).
- Ethics Committee of the American Psychiatric Association. (2017). *Opinions of the Ethics Committee on the Principles of Medical Ethics With Annotations Especially Applicable to Psychiatry*. Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association.
- Patient-targeted googling: The ethics of searching online for patient information. *Harvard Review of Psychiatry*, 18(2), 103-112.



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For more information and assistance contact
the Ethics Services department at
EthicsServices@alegent.org or 402-343-4476.

- How might this online search be of benefit or cause harm to this person? To our therapeutic relationship?
- Is there a different way I could find the information I am searching for online that would pose less risk to this person's confidentiality and privacy?
- Is there something about this situation that would justify searching for information online? For example:
 - Looking for an otherwise-unknown emergency contact.
 - Concern for the immediate safety and wellbeing of this person.
 - Concern for the immediate safety and well-being of others as a result of my interactions with this person?

4) Should I ask for permission from this person before searching online for information?

- Would asking this person about the situation or for permission before searching open up discussions about my concerns?
- Are there compelling reasons **not** to ask permission before searching for information online?
- Will this person feel hurt, angry or violated if I search online without permission?
 - *If there is a low likelihood of benefit and a high likelihood that this person will feel angry or violated, then you should probably not search for information online.*
- How can I preserve privacy and maintain trust with this person if I search for online information without permission?

5) Should I share online search results with this person?

- If I decide to search online for information, should I share what I found with this person and/or with others?
- What if I didn't ask for permission to search online before-hand? What should I think about before I decide to tell this person about my online search after I've found something?
 - *Consider talking with a legal, risk management or privacy specialist, or requesting an ethics consultation, to help you with this decision.*
- If I decide not to tell this person that I searched online for information, or not to share the information I found, how will it change my interactions with this person?
- If I decide to tell this person about my online search, how can I do so in a way that preserves trust within our relationship?

6) If I do search online, should I document any information I find in this person's medical record?

- Is the information I found online relevant to the treatment plan?
- Have I considered that this person has a right to read information in the medical record?
- How might this person's relationship with other members of the current or future treatment team be impacted by this information?
- How might unverified information found online and placed in a medical record impact this person's current and future treatment and well-being?
 - For example, might documentation about a photo of this person holding a cigarette lead to a false assumption that this person smokes; and how might that impact future insurance coverage or employment opportunities?

7) How do I monitor my motivations along with the risks and benefits of searching online for information?

- Have I checked in with my manager or supervisor, another colleague or the primary provider before searching online for more information about this person?
- Have I identified and acknowledged my motivations for wanting to search online for more information about this person?
- Can I justify my desire to search online from a clinical and/or therapeutic perspective, or am I just being curious or "nosy"?
- Have I carefully considered how this person will be impacted by any information I find by searching online?
- Have I carefully considered how my perceptions will be impacted by information I find by searching online?

Whenever you are pondering whether or not to proceed with an online search for information, be sure to **Together Take a Pause and Ponder (TTaPP)** and ask yourself these questions. Stop and talk to a peer or supervisor, and **if you are not the direct provider for the patient, be sure to talk with the provider before proceeding with any search.** Consider consulting with a legal, risk management, privacy or ethics resource before proceeding with any online search for information about your patient.

Your answers to the questions above will help you decide whether or not you should search for information online.