

# My space or yours

## Using technology in bereavement work with adolescents



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**Abstract:** Electronic communication and social networking sites form an increasingly central part of young people's lives today. In bereavement work, counsellors and bereavement support workers need to adjust their approaches to the needs of adolescents, if they are successfully to engage them in the work. Incorporating online social networking sites, such as MySpace.com, in bereavement support sessions with adolescents may be helpful: in establishing trust, in providing insight into the young person's feelings and thoughts, in enabling support to be tailored to the young person's needs and in assessment of progress. This article draws on a number of case studies to illustrate its argument for the benefits of working with these new technologies, while keeping mindful of important safety concerns.

**Keywords:** Social networking, electronic communication, bereavement, adolescent, counselling

Adolescents grieve in ways that are individual to them (Fergusson & Lynskey, 1996; Lin *et al*, 2004) and that are also distinct to their age and developmental group. Their reactions to loss differ markedly from the bereavement responses of adults and younger children (Corr, Nabe & Corr, 2006), and their support needs are also different.

Therapeutic work relies on a good therapeutic relationship. Adolescents differ from adults in how they express grief; they therefore require the counsellor or bereavement support worker to do something different to engage them.

In this article we argue, based on our own clinical experiences, that new technology – specifically, social networking websites such as MySpace.com – provides a useful and therapeutically appropriate means to engage young people in bereavement work.

### Online social networks

Nearly two-thirds of US teenagers aged 13–17 have access to a computer at home, and almost half surf the web on a regular basis. US adolescents have a significant presence on social networking web pages: 61% of 13 to 17-year-olds

have a personal profile on a site such as MySpace, and 71% of students aged nine to 17 use social networking sites on a weekly basis (National Center for Technology Innovation, 2007).

Ethnically, young people from minority ethnic groups are rapidly catching up with their white peers. A recent review of the ethnic profile of its users by the Facebook social networking site found that, while its users are predominantly white, the numbers of black, Asian and Latino users are growing. In the 2009 survey (see [http://www.mercurynews.com/ci\\_14012942](http://www.mercurynews.com/ci_14012942)) some 11% of the social network's approximately 100 million US members were African-American, about 9% were Latino and 6% were Asian, with increasing use among blacks and Latinos in particular from four years previously. New technology has, thus, a considerable and growing reach across the teenage population, cross-cutting race and cultures.

Numerous articles and commentators have highlighted concerns (among adults) that young people's use of online communication is bad for their mental health and well-being, encourages social isolation and reduces social interaction and connectedness (see, for example, Kraut *et al*, 1998). However others have questioned the assumption that computer use is the

cause of social isolation and counter-argue that it may be that lonely and socially challenged individuals turn more readily to online friendships. Thus online social networks may be a rich source of social connection for these individuals (Amichai-Hamburger, Ben-Artzi, 2003).

Subrahmanyam and Greenfield (2008) argue that new electronic communication media such as instant messaging, e-mail and text messaging, as well as internet blogs, social networking sites and sites for sharing photos and videos bring many advantages, as well as dangers, for young people today. They see these media as enhancing young people's social interactions with each other (although not with their parents), and argue that, rather than trying to control young people's use of electronic media, schools (for example) should be building on the benefits they offer.

Lampe and colleagues (2006), in their research into young people's use of social networking sites, find they are used primarily to develop offline relationships, rather than initiate new online contacts, and so enhance face-to-face social networking with peers. Lenhart and Madden (2007) similarly found that young people (aged 12–17 in their research) use social networking sites primarily (91%) to stay in touch with existing friends and, less frequently, (49%) to make new friends. Their findings suggest boys in particular find it an accessible way to increase their social networks: older boys (aged 15–17) were more likely than girls of the same age to say that they use social networking sites to make new friends (60% vs 46%).

Research by Ko and Kuo (2009) found that, far from increasing loneliness, blogging (and time spent online) was positively associated with mental health and well-being.

Importantly, in relation to this article, Williams and Merten (2009) studied adolescents' online social networking following the death of a peer and found that social networking facilitates bereaved young people's coping, bringing freedom of expression and the opportunity to reflect on their relationship with the deceased. This finding is highly relevant to bereavement counsellors and is consistent with our own experiences in work with bereaved adolescents.

### MySpace.com

MySpace.com is a popular social networking website offering an international, interactive network of friends, personal profiles, blogs, groups, photos, music and videos for teenagers and adults (Lenhart & Madden, 2007). MySpace accounts are free. Once an individual signs up, they can customise their profile by adding information about himself or herself, listing their interests, hobbies, and educational background, and uploading photos.

In our work providing bereavement counselling to adolescents in their own homes, we have found, like Subrahmanyam and Greenfield (2008), that it is better to work with the opportunities MySpace offers, than to fight with the site for their attention.

We have found that MySpace can be a very helpful tool in our counselling work, in a number of different ways.

### Gauging trust

One young person would initially close his MySpace page as soon as I entered his room. As my visits and our work progressed, he gradually chose to leave the page open, so I could see what he had posted about his dead parent, and we were able to discuss what he had written there.

### Measuring progress

With another young person, his postings on MySpace allowed me to assess his progress in coming to terms with his loss. This 16-year-old had initially posted photographs of his mother before her death, when she was very sick, on his MySpace page. As our counselling sessions continued, he changed them to pictures showing his mother when she was healthy. The change of photographs seemed to indicate that he was no longer focusing on the illness and was remembering good times when she was well. At the same time, he began to talk about fun moments shared with his mother. The pictures were thus a reflection of the young person's emotional and cognitive progress through his grief, from dwelling on her illness and death to having more positive memories.

### Outlet for emotion

MySpace and Facebook sites may serve as an outlet for adolescents dealing with bereavement. For example, one 16-year-old client whose mother died had started to act out by breaking the windows of the family car and skipping class. His destructive behaviour lessened once he was introduced to MySpace and starting posting his abstract artwork on the site. MySpace appeared to provide an outlet for him to express himself in a way that helped him deal with his grief.

A young person can find it easier to express themselves on their MySpace page, and may post statements they would hesitate to share with a counsellor, including their feelings about the loss of a loved one. Several adolescents with whom I have worked established memorials on their MySpace page to display photos of their loved one, along with written messages about the meaning of the loss.

### A window on the soul

Signs of healthy coping behaviours include the young person's ability to maintain a full workload in school, to interact with peers, and not to engage in damaging behaviours, such as drug and alcohol abuse. In grief work, it is also important to be aware that particular situations can trigger intense grief reactions in the young person. For instance, a parent conference day in school may remind the young person of his or her loss when s/he realises that the deceased parent will not be able to attend.

It is at such times of intense grief that an adolescent might post a new comment on their MySpace page about the meaning of their loss, and show it to the counsellor. The posting of a new comment may also indicate that the adolescent is engaging with the grief process and is able to show their grief.

In my experience, the intensity of these grief reactions depends on the support the adolescent has in his immediate circle of family and friends, and the work he or she has already done toward learning to live without the physical presence of the loved one (Worden, 1991). According to Worden (1991), there is a vast repertoire of grief behaviours that can be categorised under four headings: emotional response, physical sensations, altered cognitions, and behaviours. Identifying where the adolescent is with respect to these four categories will assist the counsellor to determine how the bereaved adolescent is coping.

MySpace can provide the counsellor with information about the adolescent's coping, and so inform the choice of interventions that can best help them deal with their loss. In this way, a MySpace page becomes a window on the emotions and thoughts of the bereaved young person, offering a means to achieve a better understanding of his or her coping and feelings that he or she may not be sharing verbally with the counsellor.

### Maintaining focus

While MySpace can be a useful tool in bereavement counselling to enhance the adolescent's coping, it is important that the grief counsellor ensures the conversation remains focused around grief related issues, such as emotions and how the young person is managing daily life. In addition, it is important not to allow the wealth of information these sites offer to distract both the counsellor and the bereaved young person. The goal is always to maintain focus and explore the young person's grief coping abilities.

### Safety concerns

It is important that the counsellor discusses online safety issues with the young person. Posting personal identifying information, such as a home address, a photo of their school or information that reveals where they hang out with friends, is dangerous (see [www.myspacesafetytips.com/index.php](http://www.myspacesafetytips.com/index.php)). The young person needs to understand that any information posted on MySpace is public, available to anyone, world-wide, and permanent. Even if an item posted on a MySpace page is deleted by the user, the information can still be retrieved. Young people should be warned about posting anything on their site that they may regret in later life.

### Conclusion

In bereavement work with young people, it is essential to adapt techniques to the needs of the client, to be part of their

world without losing sight of the counsellor's responsibility for safe practice.

Whatever our views, electronic means of communication occupy an increasingly central space in the social lives and social networks of young people today. We have found that, far from distracting attention, allowing adolescents to have their computers on during bereavement counselling visits has been enlightening and helpful.

MySpace has provided a means to gauge the trust of the adolescent, find a point of meaningful connection with him or her, gain insight into their sense of self (or at least the self that they choose to disclose to the world on their MySpace page), and measure their progress in the bereavement work. In the technological world where we live, it is crucial that those working with children and young people familiarise ourselves and are comfortable with tools like MySpace.com and similar sites. Ways of communicating are constantly evolving, and so too must the skills of those whose work relies on communication. ■

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