OMG, R U OK? Therapeutic Relationships between Caregivers and Youth at Risk on Social Media

# Details

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## Authors

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## Sample

The study included 17 in-depth interviews (10 women and 7 men) with youth caregivers who work in a
range of facilities and programs for youth

## Implications For Educators About

Other

# Abstract

The rising of social media has opened new opportunities for forming therapeutic relationships with youth at risk who have little faith in institutionalized interventions. The goal of this study is to examine whether and how youth care workers utilize social media communications for reaching out to detached adolescents and providing them emotional support. Qualitative in-depth interviews (N = 17) were conducted with counselors, social workers, and clinical psychologists who work with youth at risk. A thematic analysis of the interviews revealed three principal psychosocial usages of social media: (1) Reaching out and maintaining reciprocal and meaningful therapeutic relationships with youth at risk over time; (2) Identifying risks and emotional distress; and (3) “stepping in” and providing psychosocial assistance, when needed. These beneficial practices are made possible through the high accessibility and the sense of secured mediation that characterize social media communication and that complement the psychosocial needs of youth at risk. Alongside these advantages, the analysis yielded several significant challenges in social media therapeutic relationships, including privacy dilemmas and blurring of authority and boundaries. Given that social media communication is a relatively new phenomenon, the applied psychosocial practices are shaped through a process of trial and error, intuitive decisions, and peer learning. Although the main conclusion from this study supports the notion that the advantages of social media therapeutic relationships with youth at risk outweigh their problematic aspects, future research is recommended to establish clear guidelines for youth caregivers who wish to integrate the new media in their daily psychosocial work.

# Outcome

The interviews revealed that counsellors and social workers generally hold a positive view towards online therapeutic relationships (Rosenberg, Ophir Billig, 2020). They acknowledge the benefits of this new type of communication and recount its therapeutic successes. According to the interviewees, social media-based communication contributes to maintaining a reciprocal, meaningful, and long-term contact with the at-risk youth under their care. The qualitative analysis of the interviews reveals that online communication can facilitate and even improve the quality of the therapeutic relationship with at risk youth in three key areas: (1) forming a trustful and positive relationship with detached youth and maintaining it over time; (2) detecting early signs of dangers and distress; and (3) providing psychosocial counseling when needed. The interviewees expressed several concerns regarding the integration of new technologies into the traditional therapeutic practice and some even opposed to use of the word “therapy” in the context of online communication with at-risk youth.