



# Use of Social Media

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## Public Protection

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Social media refers to all "web-based and mobile applications that allow individuals or organizations to create, share and communicate content quickly through user-generated digital environments using multi-way communication."<sup>1</sup> Some social media platforms enable users to share links and written messages, while others allow for sharing of photos and videos. This document outlines the principles for occupational therapists' safe and ethical use of social media. If occupational therapists misuse social media, it can adversely impact the public, undermine trust, and reflect poorly on the profession. Occupational therapists using social media in their practice must uphold the College standards, comply with privacy legislation, and always act responsibly online.

## Benefits of Social Media

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There are many benefits to using social media as an occupational therapist. Social media can: foster collegial relationships and enable occupational therapists to disseminate information quickly and widely, help to identify and coordinate resources, locate services and link with other practitioners, and promote general occupational therapy education and professional development.

## Maintaining Professionalism

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Occupational therapists must use social media platforms professionally, securely, and responsibly. At times, the lines between public and private, professional and personal, can easily blur. There may be instances where an occupational therapist's social media posts in their personal life can cause reputational harm to the profession, the public, and themselves.

Whenever occupational therapists use their professional designation online, they are seen as acting professionally, even when referring to their professional status on personal accounts. Occupational therapists need to be mindful of their posts on personal accounts as the public may not separate the professional from the individual. When using their professional title online, occupational therapists should be professional, honest, respectful, and trustworthy.

Occupational therapists must comply with the [Standards for Professional Boundaries](#). This expectation extends to online activities, as it does in-person interactions. For example, 'friending', 'liking', commenting on, tagging a client, or engaging in non-professional interactions, including private messaging with clients can confuse and cross professional boundaries. **Consent is never a defense for a boundary violation or boundary crossing, even on social media.**

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<sup>1</sup> College of Physiotherapy Alberta. Retrieved from [https://www.physiotherapyalberta.ca/files/practice\\_guideline\\_social\\_media.pdf](https://www.physiotherapyalberta.ca/files/practice_guideline_social_media.pdf)

## Use of Social Media

In the very rare circumstance that the only platform for communication with a client is social media, the occupational therapist should ensure the client understands what information or content is permitted to be shared. For example, an occupational therapist can use social media to share general education resources or information about group sessions being careful to safeguard client identification and privacy. Occupational therapists must have a clear rationale for the use of social media that involves any client interaction and document the appropriate informed consent in the clinical record as outlined in the [Standards for Consent](#). Specific clinical guidance to clients should be avoided. The onus is on occupational therapists to ensure they comply with privacy legislation and maintain client privacy and confidentiality.

## Privacy and Confidentiality

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Occupational therapists must apply the relevant privacy legislation in the social media environment. To protect client privacy and confidentiality, occupational therapists must not post a client's personal health information on any social media site or post testimonials received from a service recipient that reference care provided by a specific occupational therapist.

When using social media, occupational therapists should remain updated on each platform's privacy settings. Remember, even on a personal social media account, your employer, colleagues, or service users may be able to see your posts or personal information. It is best to assume that everyone views anything you post online. Even with maximum privacy settings, something you share online can easily be copied and forwarded without your consent. A post can remain in the public domain even if deleted from the account.

## Pause Before You Post

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When using social media, occupational therapists should apply the same professional practices as when communicating in other ways. Occupational therapists must demonstrate respect and avoid using language that others might consider inappropriate or offensive. Occupational therapists must use professional judgement in deciding whether to post or share something. If posting content from another source, occupational therapists need to consider copyright infringements including proper referencing.

When using social media, only post comments and items appropriate for public view. Before saving, sending or posting, an occupational therapist should **confirm that the information is safe to make public or to broadcast. If it is not, the message should be changed, deleted, or ignored.** Occupational therapists are in positions of influence and must understand they are accountable for any comments, opinions, and viewpoints communicated through social media forums, including language and tone.

## Advertising and Conflict of Interest

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When using social media to advertise occupational therapy services, the information must be factual and verifiable. Occupational therapists must avoid conflicts of interest when using social media as noted in [Professional Misconduct O.95/07](#). Social media should not be used to pressure clients to accept occupational therapy services nor promote or reference a specific brand of device or equipment as outlined in the [General Regulation O.226/96 Advertising Part V](#).

## Social Media Policy

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Occupational therapists who are employees should be familiar with their employer's policies and procedures about social media. Some health care facilities monitor all social media communications involving the organization's name, logo, and identity linked through their staff's use. Occupational therapists should consult with their employer to obtain the necessary permission before using organizational information.

Occupational therapists in private practice should develop a social media policy and make this available to clients upon request. The length and details can vary, but consider including statements about conduct, disclaimers, security protocols, privacy compliance with legislation, and contact information. Occupational therapists can seek legal support in developing their social media policies appropriate for their practice.

## Monitoring Online Activity

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Occupational therapists need to regularly monitor the social media sites that they engage with, to critically appraise information posted and remove unprofessional or offensive content that may impact their professional online presence.

## Summary

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This document provides information for occupational therapists who use social media personally and professionally. In addition to following the College's standards and legislation, this offers practical considerations and recommended practice when using social media. Occupational therapists need to understand and evaluate the ongoing risks and benefits of using social media and are expected to uphold the profession's values in their online activities.

## References

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*Ontario Regulation 226/96: General* <https://www.ontario.ca/laws/regulation/960226>

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