
ONLINE PREDATORS & SCAMS: What Every Practitioner Needs to Know

A Report by OWA Member: Michael McKinley, C. Ht.

Nearly every day we hear the horror stories. Some are about predators who engage and victimize young people online. Others, show trusted counselors, who have betrayed their adult clients through fraud or exploitation. Currently, the Internet has flooded cyberspace with online practitioners preying on the unsuspecting and vulnerable person in crisis who does not know how to verify the credentials of “professionals” who advertise their services online. Who do you trust?

This is a natural consequence of our modern technological society. Therapists, counselors, and other wellness providers are now able to reach right into our living rooms by offering services online, often in communities where services are not currently available. Just as it is easy for qualified practitioners to offer services, it is easy for the unqualified, uncredentialed, or even criminal individual to attract people in an unregulated environment such as the Internet.

How can the average person know for certain whether or not an online professional has the education, experience, or credentials to provide services?

Who am I?

My above byline claims that I am a Certified Hypnotherapist, but am I? Anyone can add letters to their name on the Internet. After all, doesn't M.D., Ph.D., or Psy.D. sound better? There is no government agency overseeing the content of individual websites. Read the information and access services from online professionals at your own risk.

The Internet has several characteristics that make it extraordinary. It is free, easily accessed, and provides anonymity for its users. The ability to exchange ideas and information has been an asset to the online community. Exercising freedom of speech, expressing concerns, and offering opinions anonymously have opened communication channels that otherwise would not exist. It is this enhanced communication that makes it possible for an unscrupulous person, a predator, to reach unsuspecting victims from thousands of miles away.

What better cover to reach these unsuspecting victims than under the guise of a ‘wellness practitioner.’

The Problem

So, how can you protect yourself and your clients? Misrepresentation is easy.

Meet Maria I. Nocent, 18 year old, high school graduate who is suffering from extreme bouts of depression —deep enough to have thoughts of suicide. She has confided these thoughts to a friend, a real cry for help. Her friend convinces her that her problem is serious enough to warrant professional counseling. Maria agrees. Unwilling to confide in her parents, she decides to look for help on the Internet. “Googling” using key words such as “counselor” or “depression” brings up a smorgasbord of providers who profess to have credentials. There are so many choices that naturally, she feels overwhelmed and selects one that she is attracted to.

Enter John P. Redator, a 43 year old Internet predator or as his website claims, “Dr. Jonathan Redator, Psy.D.” John has done this before and knows how to groom his victim. He is completely relaxed, warm, and empathetic as he begins his email exchange with Maria to gain her trust and then her phone number. Skillfully securing her confidence through lengthy phone calls and gentle persuasion, he convinces her that her situation is even more serious than he had first thought. Sessions will need to be in person to be most effective, he claims. Feeling comfortable, Maria readily gives Dr. Jonathan her home address and where she works. A qualified online therapist would have assessed the situation, realized Maria was suicidal, and directed her to emergency services in her area.

“It cannot be that easy,” you say. As a true skeptic, I decided to find out just how easy it is. I arbitrarily chose a website for my research, the sites that make money by taking a percentage of the fees that are paid by the client. Numerous disclaimers are present that say the site is not responsible for verifying the credentials of any provider advertised on the site. They are all banking that the person seeking services, possibly stressed and anxious, will simply grab their credit card.

So, I went on the site, created a legitimate account and profile with my real name, authentic credentials, actual experience and training. That site went “live” on the service without any request for proof of anything I entered-- my identity, my credentials, or my experience. That means, this site displayed me to the world as ‘legitimate.’ Once this company accepted me, I had the ability to change my information at any time.

Then, I created a fictitious identity on the same site. I used exactly the same format and layout of the original, but I changed my credentials to Psy.D. I used a bogus name for my practice, biography, and fabricated school of medicine—The Hartford School of BS. Again, this site went live without any indication that they checked my credentials. Now I can start charging clients and giving advice under false credentials using email, or click on a button to begin a chat session...and get their credit card number. That’s it. Michael McKinley, Psy.D. will see you now!

This is scary. I claimed to have credentials I had not earned, and the user perceives the site as endorsing me. This is a persuasive technique of credibility by association. The way business is done has changed, and we find ourselves conducting business over the Internet more and more. As providers, the Internet offers the benefit of reaching clients seeking professional services online. Potential clients have the advantage of comparing prices, products and services, and obtaining information about legitimacy and authenticity before making a

Legitimate practitioners' problems begin when John Predator victimizes someone and the headlines read 'Internet Doctor Preys on Local Teen' or 'Woman Scammed Out of Thousands By Online Counselor.' Often, these headlines can be taken out of context and guarantee that many people will develop a negative view of practitioners in general, and specifically online practitioners. It only takes one headline to imply deceit and it reflects negatively on all.

The Solution

A simple solution would be to prohibit individuals from misrepresenting themselves. However, it is just not possible with today's technology. A practical solution is to educate the public to be wary and to verify credentials and references before accepting services. It is very difficult to take the time and effort to independently verify credentials. In the best frame of mind, most people do not know where to start. The passive acceptance of what is presented, as long as it *appears* to be professional, is exactly what predators and scam artists depend on.

I found a new site that appears to be on track to address these concerns. Online Wellness Association is the way a potential client can verify a professional's credentials fast and easy, and best of all, *free*. OWA is a site where potential clients can *safely* search for a wellness provider. With the click of a mouse, they can see the OWA Seal of Approval on the professional's site—a genuine indicator of authenticity like the Good Housekeeping Seal. The client would know that professional's credentials have been verified by OWA and that they are a legitimate practitioner. Practitioners become members initially by agreeing to a background check, providing copies of credentials for verification, and offering the professional references of four of their peers.

For me, I have found OWA, One Wellness Association, gives my potential clients an added sense of security knowing that my credentials are genuine, that my personal background has been checked, and that I am qualified to provide the professional services I am offering. I'm *SAFE*. The client is *SAFE*.

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