Text Messaging Best Practices:

Text messaging or SMS messaging (Short Message Service) puts instantaneous communication at our fingertips. Text messages are brief messages generally sent from one cell phone to another over a wireless network.

Text Messaging and Vocational Rehabilitation
Text messaging has numerous possibilities for the delivery of VR services. It can be used to confirm appointments, communicate job vacancies, and deliver some types of counseling service. It also increases opportunities for counselor-consumer contact between formal meetings.

We were unable to find any studies about the use of text messaging for the delivery of VR services, but a few studies in the health promotion literature may be relevant. For example, Joyce and Weibelzahl (2011; see citation 1) demonstrated that text messaging successfully promoted help-seeking behavior among college-aged students in a university setting. Other studies have looked at how supportive text messages can be used for smoking cessation efforts and for patients recovering from bulimia (see citations 2 and 3).

Text Messaging and Confidentiality
Text messaging is not a secure way to communicate with consumers for several reasons:

- Text messages are rarely encrypted making it easy for outsiders to access sensitive information.
- It is difficult to verify a client’s identity via text messaging.
- Phones are often misplaced or left accessible for others to view text messages.
- Large cell phone networks like Verizon often save text messages and text messaging details (see citation 4).

Despite security issues, there are efforts to make text messaging more secure (see citation 5). For example, the iMessage application, developed by Apple and installed on most Apple iPhones is fairly secure especially when messages are sent from one iPhone to another (see
Even if a text message is encrypted, however, there are ways for government and law enforcement agencies to access personal text messages.

Given the popularity of text messaging, its utility for the delivery of some VR services cannot be overlooked. As always, ethical guidelines apply (see citation 7). Below are some tips for improving the confidentiality of text messages. These recommendations are meant to deter thieves and prying eyes rather than institutions with the technology and resources to access private text messages.

- Encourage your clients to password protect their phones -- this deters others from casually picking up their phone and reading text messages.
- Give each client a unique code -- this allows you to verify a client’s identity if you are concerned that an imposter is trying to get their information. You can assign this code during your first face to face meeting.
- Avoid sending sensitive data via text -- social security numbers or information about disability status should not be sent in a text message. Set up an appointment to exchange any information that needs to be kept confidential.
- Don’t send text messages to the wrong person -- this may sound obvious, but it happens! Get in the habit of double checking text message recipients.
- Download an encrypted text messaging application: If you know that you are going to be communicating with a client a lot via text messaging, consider downloading an encrypted text messaging application. Text Secure is an encrypted text messaging application available through Google Play. Silent Circle (see citation 9) is a reputable encrypted text messaging application available for a monthly fee.

The Language of Text Messaging:
Text messaging has its own language. Many words and common phrases have been abbreviated beyond recognition to the untrained eye. In many instances words are spelled phonetically, or represent an acronym for a common phrase. Numbers and letters are often used instead of the words they sound like (e.g. 4 = “for” and C = “see”). Additionally, the meanings of text-messaging abbreviations are not set stone. If you are unsure about the
meaning of an abbreviation, Google it! The text language is always evolving, meanings may change over time and new abbreviations are developing. About.com has a list of some of the most common abbreviations and when it is appropriate to use them.


The very informal language of text messaging may blur the line of counselor professionalism. Text messaging CU@1 hardly seems like a professional way to confirm an appointment. However, as a counselor, it is important not to overlook texting as a way to communicate with clients simply because of semantic concerns. This doesn’t mean that you should start texting like a teenager. However, a basic understanding of text messaging lingo will help you become a more effective text messaging communicator. A general rule of thumb for using abbreviations in text messages is to avoid them until your consumer has introduced them to the conversation.

**Text Messaging and Special Populations**

**Young Adults:**
Text messaging is probably one of the easiest and best ways to reach young people. Young people text more than any other age demographic -- 97% of young adult cellphone users text and many prefer text messaging to voice calls (see citation 8). Furthermore, research done in the area of health promotion has demonstrated success with this demographic (see citations 3 and 10).

**The Deaf Community**
Text messaging has been important for the deaf community. Prior to text messaging over wireless networks, people who were deaf or hard of hearing relied on TTY telephones or relay services. Text messaging has changed the frequency of interaction among deaf people and between deaf and hearing people. Evidence also suggests that texting has increased independence among deaf youth because their parents feel more comfortable with texting as a way to get a hold of them (See citation 11).

**Other Populations:**
Age is an important predictor of text messaging use. For example, only about 1/3 of cellphone users over the age of 65 text compared with nearly 3/4 of cell phone users age 50-64. Text
messaging use is likely to increase among the older population as current users’ age and there are more adaptive text message applications (e.g. large buttons, text to speak etc.). It is also likely that age is a more important predictor of text messaging than disability type. To date, texting has been used by teachers to help students with dyslexia and ADHD remember important tasks and deadlines (see citation 12). Additional cellphone applications may have even greater relevance for young people with disabilities.

Citations


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