

Instant messaging: The right call for your practice?

'Instant e-mail' can speed office communication and facilitate online psychotherapy, but beware of security issues.

John Luo, MD

Assistant professor of psychiatry UCLA Neuropsychiatric Institute and Hospital Los Angeles, CA

If you cannot get to a phone and you need to make immediate contact, instant messaging (IM) may be the right call.

IM, the equivalent of 'instant e-mail,' allows almost real-time communication and exchange of information over the Internet. IM is most popular among teenagers and college students, but medical providers and other professionals have begun to recognize its potential for speeding communication.

HOW IM STARTED

Before the World Wide Web existed, electronic bulletin boards (BBS) were a popular mode of communication. Users would log in and browse various message topics, posting comments and questions for others to answer. Users also could check who was logged into the BBS and post messages to one or more of those contacts. This was done in a *Telnet* session, which is a method for connecting to another computer on the Internet. Telnet sessions hark back to mainframe computing, when computer terminals without processing power provided access to the central computer.

In 1996, Mirabilis released ICQ, which enabled Internet users to locate each other on the Internet without connecting to a BBS—by creating direct peer-to-peer communication channels. Companies such as America On Line, Microsoft, and Yahoo! also developed IM systems, but none could connect with one another because there is no common standard. AOL later purchased Mirabilis and incorporated its technology into the AOL Instant Messenger (AIM).

DOING IM: WHAT YOU NEED

To do instant messaging, you need an Internet connection and the appropriate client. Keep in mind that your client should be:

- compatible with several systems
- or the same client that your messaging partner uses. New users typically choose an IM system that a friend or colleague is using.

Choosing an IM client is a matter of preference because all systems offer similar features ([Table](#)). For public IM use, the service is free because these companies will send you advertisements or display them while you are using their IM software.

After installing the software, you must create a user account with a unique ID (example: jsluo). Most IM accounts will require an e-mail account for contact purposes. The next step is to add your contacts, entering either their IDs or e-mail addresses.

BENEFITS

One advantage of IM is that the software will indicate whether a contact is available for messaging once he or she has logged in. IM also lets you indicate your availability (away from desk, out to lunch, etc.), send files, do voice "chats," and arrange video conferencing.

Sending messages is as easy as clicking on the contact's name. This opens a dialogue window that lists messages sent during the user session. The record can be reviewed by scrolling back but will be lost once the session is terminated.

I have used IM to immediately contact my administrative staff from a different floor. Because the office manager's phone line is typically tied up, she can use IM to ask a question or tell me that my next appointment has arrived.

IM can also facilitate Internet-based psychotherapy. E-mail is commonly used for online therapy, but patients' e-mails can get mixed in with other messages. By contrast, IM promotes a one-on-one dialogue. Other parties can be included if desired, and multimedia features such as voice and video may provide additional cues about the interaction (See [E-therapy: Alerting patients to the benefits, risks, " November 2002](#)).

Because IM is a direct communication channel with visual references to previous dialogue, it creates the environment of an active conversation. One drawback is that a participant's typing speed typically limits the conversation's pace. Using the voice feature overcomes this limitation, but this feature will not work properly without a broadband Internet connection, such as over a cable modem or digital subscriber line.

RISKS OF IM-BASED THERAPY

The IM communication channel's lack of security poses a significant risk, particularly when used for psychotherapy. This active connection broadcasts its availability over the Internet, making it vulnerable to hackers. What's more, the IM client may change your security settings for your Web browser¹ or allow remote access to your computer by a hacker.²

MAKING YOUR IM SYSTEM SECURE

On the corporate level, vendors such as Yahoo!, Microsoft, AOL and others have created products to secure public IM systems, such as [Akonix](#) and [Endeavors Technology](#). These products are gateways that maintain corporate data within the company network, encrypt information, specify and limit certain features, and log conversations. This level of security does not exist over major public IM networks for individual users.

[Secure Shuttle Transport](#), [DBabble](#), and [PSST](#) provide encrypted communication to individual users.

Table
Instant messaging clients

Client	URL	Compatibility	Operating systems
Yahoo!	http://messenger.yahoo.com/	Yahoo only	Windows, Mac, Unix, SMS
AIM	http://www.aim.com/	AOL, ICQ	Windows, Mac, Linux, Palm, Windows Mobile, SMS
MSN	http://messenger.msn.com/	MSN only	Windows, Mac, Windows Mobile
ICQ	http://web.icq.com	ICQ, AOL	Windows, Mac, Windows Mobile, Palm, SMS
Trillian	http://www.ceruleanstudios.com/	Yahoo, AOL, MSN, ICQ	Windows
Gaim	http://gaim.sourceforge.net/	Yahoo, AOL, MSN, ICQ	Windows, Mac, Linux, BSD
Odigo	http://www.odigo.org/	Yahoo, AOL, MSN, ICQ	Windows, Java
Easy Message	http://www.easymessage.net/	Yahoo, AOL, MSN, ICQ	Windows
PalTalk	http://www.paltalk.com	PalTalk only	Windows

If you have questions about these products or comments about Psyber Psychiatry, [click here](#) to contact Dr. Luo or e-mail him at: Current.Psychiatry@dowdenhealth.com.

Disclosure

Dr. Luo reports no financial relationship with any company whose products are mentioned in this article. The opinions expressed by Dr. Luo in this column are his own and do not necessarily reflect those of CURRENT PSYCHIATRY.

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