

How to handle negative online reviews

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Online reviews have become a popular method for patients to rate their psychiatrists. Patients' online reviews can help other patients make more informed decisions about pursuing treatment, offer us valuable feedback on our performance, and help improve standards of care.¹ However, during the course of our careers, we may receive negative online reviews. These reviews may range from mild dissatisfaction to abusive comments, and they could have adverse personal and professional consequences.² For example, online discussions might make current patients question your practices or consider ending their treatment with you.² Also, potential patients might decide to not inquire about your services.² Here I offer suggestions for approaching negative online reviews, and point out some potential pitfalls of responding to them.

Remain professional. You might become upset or frazzled after reading online criticisms about your performance, particularly if the information is erroneous or deceptive. As much as you would like to immediately respond, a public tit-for-tat could prolong or fuel a conflict, or make you come across as angry.²

There may be occasions, however, when it would be appropriate to respond. If you choose to respond to a negative online review, you need to have a methodical plan. Avoid reacting in a knee-jerk manner because this is usually unproductive. In addition, ensure that your response is professional and polite, because an intemperate response could undermine the public's confidence in our profession.²

Maintain patient confidentiality. Although patients are free to post anything they desire, psychiatrists must maintain confidentiality. The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) applies to online reviews, which prevents us from disclosing information about patients without their permission, including even acknowledging that someone is our patient.³ Your patients' disclosures are not permission to disclose their health information. Potential patients might avoid us or existing patients may end their treatment with us if they believe their personal information could be disclosed online without their consent. To avoid such concerns, reply to online reviews with generic comments about your practice's general policies without violating confidentiality. Also, to avoid violating HIPAA rules, you may want to contact your malpractice carrier or your facility's legal department before replying.¹

Invite patients to discuss their grievances. If your patients identify themselves in a review, or if you are able to identify them, consider inviting them to discuss their concerns with you (over the phone, face-to-face, or via video conferencing). During such con-

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Then, share with your peers a 'Pearl' of wisdom from your practice.

versations, thank the patient for their review, and do not ask them to delete it.² Focus on addressing their concerns and resolving any problems they experienced during treatment; doing so can help improve your practice. This approach also might lead a patient to remove their negative review or to write a review that lets other patients know that you are listening to them.

Even if you choose not to invite your patients to air their concerns, do not entirely dismiss negative reviews. Instead, try to step back from your emotions and take an objective look at such reviews so you can determine what steps to take to improve your practices. Improving your communication with patients could decrease the likelihood that they will write negative reviews in the first place.

Take action on fake reviews. If a negative review is fake (not written by one of your patients) or blatantly untrue, contact the web site administrator and provide evidence to support having the review deleted, especially if it violates the site's terms of service.¹ However, this approach may not be fruitful. Web sites can be manipulated, and many do not require users to authenticate that they are actual patients.¹ Although most web sites would not want their reputation damaged by users posting fake reviews, more dramatic reviews could help lead to increased traffic, which lowers an administrator's incentive to remove negative reviews.¹

Consider legal repercussions. Stay up-to-date with online reviews about you by conducting internet searches once every 3 months.¹ Consider notifying your malpractice carrier or facility's legal department if a review suggests a patient or family might initiate legal action against you or the facility.¹ You might consider pursuing legal action if an online review is defamatory, but

such claims often are difficult to prove in court.¹ Even if you win, such a case could later be repeatedly mentioned in articles and journals, thus creating a permanent record of the negative review in the literature.¹

Enlist help with your online image. If financially feasible, hire a professional service to help improve your online image or assist in responding to negative reviews.¹ Build your profile on review web sites to help frame your online image, and include information that mentions the pertinent steps you are taking to address any legitimate concerns your patients raise in their reviews. Encourage your patients to post reviews because that could produce a more equitable sample and paint a more accurate picture of your practice.

Lobby professional medical organizations to take action to protect psychiatrists from negative online reviews by creating legislation that holds web sites accountable for their content.¹

Stay positive. Unfounded or not, negative online reviews are an inevitable part of a psychiatrist's professional life.² One negative review (or even several) is not going to destroy your reputation or career. Do not feel alone if you receive a negative review. Seek advice from colleagues who have received negative reviews; in addition to offering advice, they can also provide a listening ear.²

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