

## Myspace, Other Internet Chat Spots Can be Socially Positive

by Alyce Duckworth, LCSW

Supervisor, Prince St. Academy, Arapahoe/Douglas Mental Health Network

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O.K., so I admit, I was extremely skeptical about the Myspace delirium at first. After all, I had heard such negative things about it for so long. You've probably heard the Myspace discussions about online stalkers and individuals getting turned down for jobs because of their Myspace pages. So, when I discovered recently that half of my family and several of my friends from "back home" in Michigan had Myspace pages, and more that half of my clientele are using Myspace regularly, I was curious. I was curious, but the skepticism remained. As it so often does with me, however, the curiosity eventually won out in the end. Indeed, I am now one of the billions of regular "myspacers." I was embarrassed to admit it at first. I figured I would surely end up deleting my page when I finally started thinking more rationally (although I don't know when that might happen). But, a month, 55 friends, 100 pictures, 10 songs, 20+ blogs, and two different profile layouts later, I'm still at it. In my mind, the positives still outweigh the negatives. I'd like to share some of those positives with you now:

- A person's Myspace page is, or has the potential of being, a microcosm of the way they relate to the world. It took me awhile to realize that I could either put the "real me" out there for all to see, or I could put a doctored-up, "dying-to-be-popular-at-the-cost-of-all-else" version of myself on my page. It feels much better when it's the real me, and I know everyone that's a friend is accepting me just as I am. Yeah. I like gangsta rap. I carry around a few extra pounds, and I am definitely not photogenic. I am a total sap in my movie preferences, and my way of thinking is sometimes so radical or else Pollyanna-ish that it drives people crazy. I love to write, but sometimes my blogs are so silly or idealistic that they reach the point of being nauseating. All of that is me, and when I put it "out there," folks can either take it or leave it. The ones that accept it are my true friends (most of the time). What a life lesson!
- Myspace gives us the opportunity to be a part of a *network*. It can help us remain connected with others. I am able to get a daily report about my sick cousin's condition all the way in Michigan, simply by logging on and reading her blog. I receive validation and support daily from people who read my own blogs....and accept what I have to say no

matter how sappy or radical. I have regular contact with old friends from high school and people who have known me since I was a kid. We share pictures, stories, music, and life events with each other. Of course, I'm not advocating that online communication should ever replace actual face-to-face socialization. Sometimes, however, it's the next best thing to being there, and it truly can be a way of remaining interconnected. When interacting on the computer is regularly chosen *instead of* actual face-to-face contact, there could be a problem.

- Myspace can provide the opportunity to set boundaries and choose appropriate friends. I've found that I can set my profile to "private" (so that it can only be viewed by people I select as "friends") or not accept friend requests from people unless they happen to know my last name. I can also "block" people from contacting me in any way if they become inappropriate, according to my standards. There is even an option to approve everything that gets posted on my site. Myspacers can include as much or as little information about themselves on their space. These concrete, immediate possibilities for setting boundaries can serve as great lessons in real life.
- Creating a page on Myspace, or even "surfing" the network a bit helps me keep up with the times. In my high school days, much of the "drama" was communicated in intricately folded notes passed surreptitiously in between classes or when the teachers weren't looking. Today, a majority of this drama is played out via text messages and web networks. Since my career involves working with teens, it's important that I'm able to speak their language. I believe that it's just as important for parents of teens (or parents of kids that will someday be teens) to become fluent in that language. It's so important for today's parents to get involved in newer and more creative ways. In this particular case, that might involve asking to see a teen's Myspace page. Asking a young person to share their page communicates interest in their lives and can also help the young person to feel empowered as the "expert" for a change. If you, as an adult caregiver, are given this opportunity, ask the teen to show you what they are doing to keep themselves safe online. Let them play the role of teacher, and don't blow it by being critical. The entire little universe that exists at the touch of fingertips might amaze you. I figure that technology is going to continue advancing and providing new opportunities for creating interhuman networks, no matter what. Since there's no stopping the inevitable, why not take advantage of the positives while learning how to maintain safety from the negatives. Happy surfing, readers!

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