

## Chat With Colleagues for Fun and Networking

Contributed by Susan Mankita, MSW, LCSW

Editor's Note: I first met my friend and colleague Susan Mankita in the AOL Social Work Forum in the mid-1990s. The New Social Worker is pleased to collaborate with Susan and NASW on the new online community at SocialWorkChat.org.

Mila, Jerry, Larry, Kryss, Roger, Judith, and I are the closest of colleagues and friends. We're all part of an intimate circle that includes some of the best and brightest social workers I've ever known. We do our best to get together whenever we can, and over time, each has given me countless hours of support. I'd like to invite them all to dinner, just to say "thanks," but that would be next to impossible on short notice. They are spread out around the country in DC/Virginia, Alabama, Indiana, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Ohio—and I live in South Florida. Our friendships have blossomed and are nurtured online in a chat room created by social workers for social workers.

Twice every week, this group of social workers and others from around the country (and occasionally the world) "get together" to chat about things that matter to us. Sometimes the discussions are casual, although they are often focused and professional. We invite "experts" to join us and share their know-how or take turns educating each other. Occasionally, it gets personal, and we morph into a support group for a struggling colleague.

I'd like to demystify chatting for you, within this discussion, with a description of how it works and a look at the benefits this type of social work connection offers. I've asked my online social work friends for some input, which I'll share, but ultimately, I'd like to invite you to join and broaden our intimate circle.

### Opportunities for New and Experienced Social Workers

Chatting offers opportunities for new and experienced social workers. I have had many student and new social workers over the years who wondered whether they would be welcomed in the chat, and the answer is a resounding YES. Professional participants are also wonderful mentors. Kryss Shane, an MSW student from Ohio State, says, "For me, the chat room is a really great way to connect to all types of social workers, to learn from those in different areas, and to begin to hear about career choices I didn't know were open to me with this degree. It lets me listen to those who have been there and to ask questions without fearing looking stupid or silly, the way I might in my classroom. At the same time, I'm able to help students who are working on BSWs to shed light on how things look from my perspective." The chat room is always a delightful mix, and professionals learn from students, as well as the other way around.

Kryss adds, "It's nice to be able to be a part of such a large group of social workers, to contribute what I'm able, and to learn from people who might otherwise never have teaching interactions with students. I always leave chats feeling like I've learned and heard another perspective I may not have otherwise experienced. Sometimes I'm able to contribute; other times, it's more a topic for me to listen and observe."

### Demystifying Chatting

Chatting is a great way to connect with professional colleagues with similar interests, although it is dramatically different from face-to-face communication. As you enter the "room," you will be greeted by colleagues, but there are no handshakes, broad dimpled smiles, or cautious grins. We communicate through the strength of our words. Without facial expressions, tone of voice, and the other in-person conversational nuances that we have all learned to "read," we learn together, to create other ways of knowing and supporting each other. New communication rituals that are simple but effective have emerged, so any new participants who are willing to sit back and allow their brains to adjust to this literal "meeting of the minds" can benefit.

Unlike e-mails sent back and forth, or bulletin boards where a poster leaves some thoughts that are later picked up and addressed by another poster, chats have the advantage of immediacy. That means that we are all together, at the same time and (virtual) place, and can connect in a direct and spontaneous way. Feedback is immediate, and it may come straight from the minds of several participants at once. Members build upon each other's ideas, and often the discussion is exponentially better because of it.

Joining in only requires a simple sign up, creation of your online username (mine is SusanLCSW), and clicking on a few links at the designated time. Participating only requires typing into a small box that you then "send" to the rest of the room at the click of a button. Although some have found this "scary" at first, many are surprised at how easy it is to do and how quickly they feel that sense of connectedness. The room is filled with all kinds of folks, many who participate, but some who just "listen" until they feel comfortable. Chat hosts are trained to make you feel welcome, help you get oriented, and keep the conversation flowing.

### The Benefits of Chatting

Ask a participant about the benefits, and you'll get an earful (or in a chat room, this would be an eyeful) about the ways that social work chats have benefited them personally and professionally. From networking and getting inside the worlds of other social workers to mentoring—from social support to access—participants are often surprised and delighted at the ways in which the involvement in cyberspace has IRL (in real life) payoffs. According to Judith

Spangenberg, a social work administrator from Center Valley, Pennsylvania, "The most important thing about the social work chat (for me) is talking with other social workers without having to explain our needs. The chat offers open conversation, complete acceptance, and lots of ideas for all of us!" She especially likes "being able to talk to social workers from all over the country about our similar needs in very different jobs."

#### Meeting Colleagues

One of my favorite aspects of chatting is the opportunity it offers to meet diverse colleagues. Participants range in age and experience from BSW and MSW students, eager to learn, to professional experts who come to learn and teach. We have retired social workers (several in their 70s and 80s) who come to keep connected to the profession. "I've had the chance to meet several of my social work "heroes," who've bent over backwards to support me in my own professional goals.

My own "virtual" connections have frequently migrated into real life relationships. Over the years, I have had chances to meet many of my chat room colleagues at conferences and on road trips. "I've found that friendships begun in the chat room are just as strong in real life. Jerry Satterwhite, a retired VA Hospital Social Work Chief from Birmingham, Alabama, confirms that. Here's a blurb from a recent private chat between us&hellip;

#### Maintaining Social Interaction, and Getting (and Giving) Professional Support

Whether you are surrounded by other social workers at work or are a lone social worker on an interdisciplinary team, chat time is a time to renew yourself. In a safe, supportive environment, no one "gets it" like a colleague. According to Larry Willoughby, a social worker from near South Bend, Indiana, "I like being able to gain knowledge and affirmation of my own ethics, but I especially like to see my friends online who are social workers like me." There have been many times over the years when social workers have reached out for that support and received it within the context of the chat room. Roger Barnes, from Silver Spring, Maryland, also focuses on what he gives back. "I like to hear about what social workers in other specialties are doing and share what I am doing in my specialty. I really enjoy the opportunity to provide some mentoring to those new to the field," he says.

#### Exploring New Ideas Without Leaving Your Desk

As much as we'd like and need time away from our daily responsibilities to nurture our professional selves and learn new things, in this era of cost-containment and hard financial times, most social workers are limited in travel time and budget. For those who are hungry for knowledge and spirited discussion, chatting is an alternative avenue.

In addition to providing a forum with quick answers for immediate challenges, participants have frequent access to guest experts. These volunteers bring the discussions into focus with unique knowledge. Often, we have read their articles or books. Inside the chat room, they are accessible and can help us delve more deeply into our understanding of and connection to their areas of expertise. Recent guest Emily Brown has written two books and multiple articles on marital infidelity. During the chat, participants were able to ask for her thoughts on specific situations. Another recent expert was a psychiatrist, Dr. Michael Diamond, who educated the group about the pros and cons of psychotropic medication. Other chats have had guest experts like former ASWB president Bruce Buchanan on ethics, social worker Sheila Peck on marketing your social work practice, and attorney Robert Hall on legal issues for social workers.

Regular participants step forward as guests, as well, to share their expertise. Larry Willoughby has presented on practice with Native American Populations; social worker (and filmmaker) Jeffrey Natalie on Family Work, Depression, and Divorce; Mila Tecala on Complicated Bereavement; and many more.

#### Facts About the Site

The chat room is part of the online community for social workers at <http://www.Socialworkchat.org>, a collaborative project between the National Association of Social Workers and The New Social Worker. It's the latest emergence of an online forum that originated on America Online in 1995.

I began chatting with other social workers as soon as technology allowed. For me, it was born out of professional isolation. I had grown up as the child of a social worker who had many, many colleagues with whom she had lunch and socialized—but as the lone practitioner in a tiny facility filled with nurses, physicians, pharmacists, and physical therapists, I found it hard to be the lone voice of social work reason in the linear world of health care. So the first thing I did, when I found out there was a thing called the Internet, was to search for other social workers.

While exploring AOL, I discovered some pre-existing infrastructure meant to attract social workers, from Allyn and Bacon, a large social work textbook publisher. It had a few bulletin boards and a chat room. I sat in that chat room night after night, but no colleagues came. After a little wrangling with Allyn and Bacon, I convinced them to let me "run" it, and I set about to build an online community of social workers. I grabbed a few colleagues, sent out notices, and the AOL Social Work Forum was born. It grew into a vibrant community that, over the years, hosted thousands of social workers at seven chats a week and boasted a volunteer staff of 18 social workers.

When after ten years, AOL changed its rules about online communities, we went searching for a new home. We have been fortunate to enjoy the benefits of the collaborative efforts of two organizations. We're delighted with this partnership and take enormous pleasure in watching it grow. We invite you to join this growing online community at <http://www.socialworkchat.org>.

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