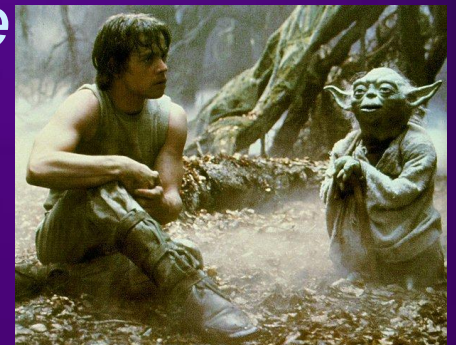# Defense Against the Dark Side:
Confronting Deception and Disruption in Online Groups

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Challenges for Moderators

- The Dark Side of online groups
  - Trolls (Posters who incite conflict)
  - Fakers (Fraudulent personae)
  - Influence of Psych Disorders (Addiction, Depression, Personality Disorder)
  - Threat of harm to self or others

Major Questions

- Which problems are most common and most distressing?
- What is optimal management?
  - Response to problems
  - Guidelines

Research Strategies

- Surveys
  - Peer support moderators/members (physical/mental illness, parenting, grief)
  - Physician forum (Sermo)
- Communication with group moderators
- Literature review
  - Unpublished 2004 review, Pector
  - Public media

Definition: Trolls

- Trolls may: irritate and disrupt groups, build false hopes, abuse kids/others, steal money.

  - Traits: Attention-seeking, antisocial.

  - Not much research (Suler 2007)

  - Sources:http://neurotalk.psychcentral.com/archive/index.php/t-11242.html, teamtechnology.co.uk/troll.htm, http://curezone.com/forums/troll.asp, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/03/magazine/03trolls-t.html http://www.kuro5hin.org/story/2004/5/15/19332/5961
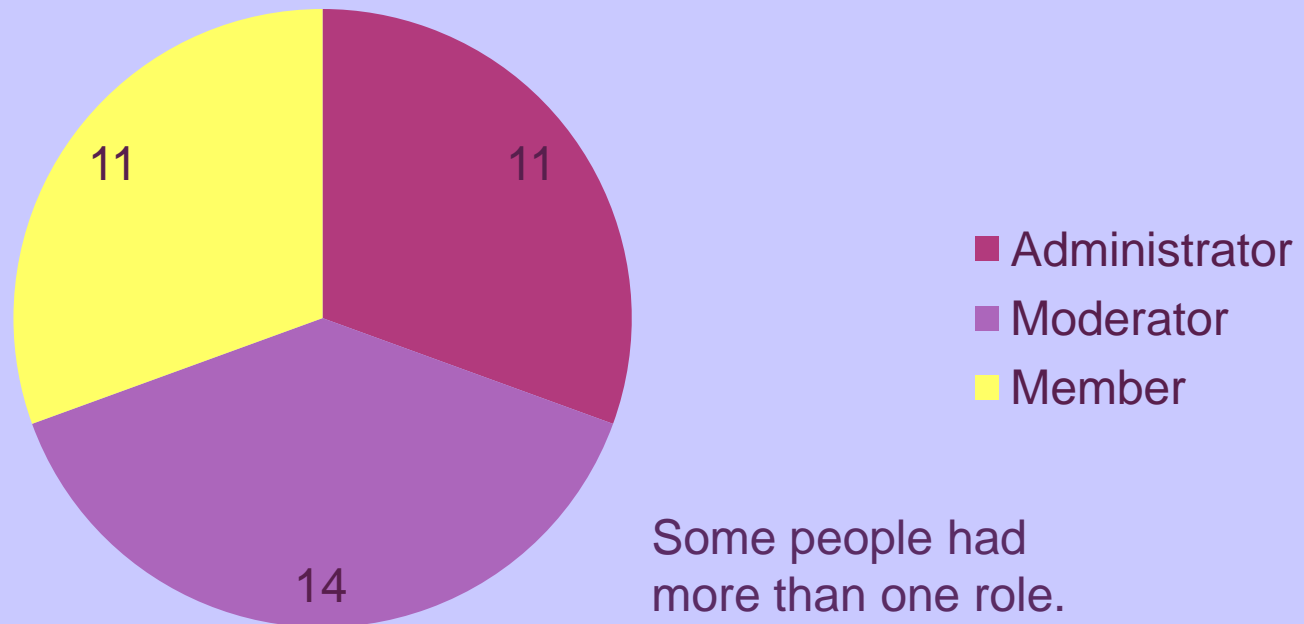
Definition:Fakers (Internet Munchhausen)

- Material posted from elsewhere on Web (e.g. health sites)
- Illness traits portrayed as caricature
- Drama in poster's life:
  - ☻ Near-fatal illness or miraculous recovery
  - ☻ Drama increases when other members get attention
  - ☻ Poster is blasé (indifferent) about crises
  - ☻ Caution: Truth sometimes IS stranger than fiction!
- Claims contradicted by later posts, or disproved
- Family/friends writing on poster's behalf have same style.
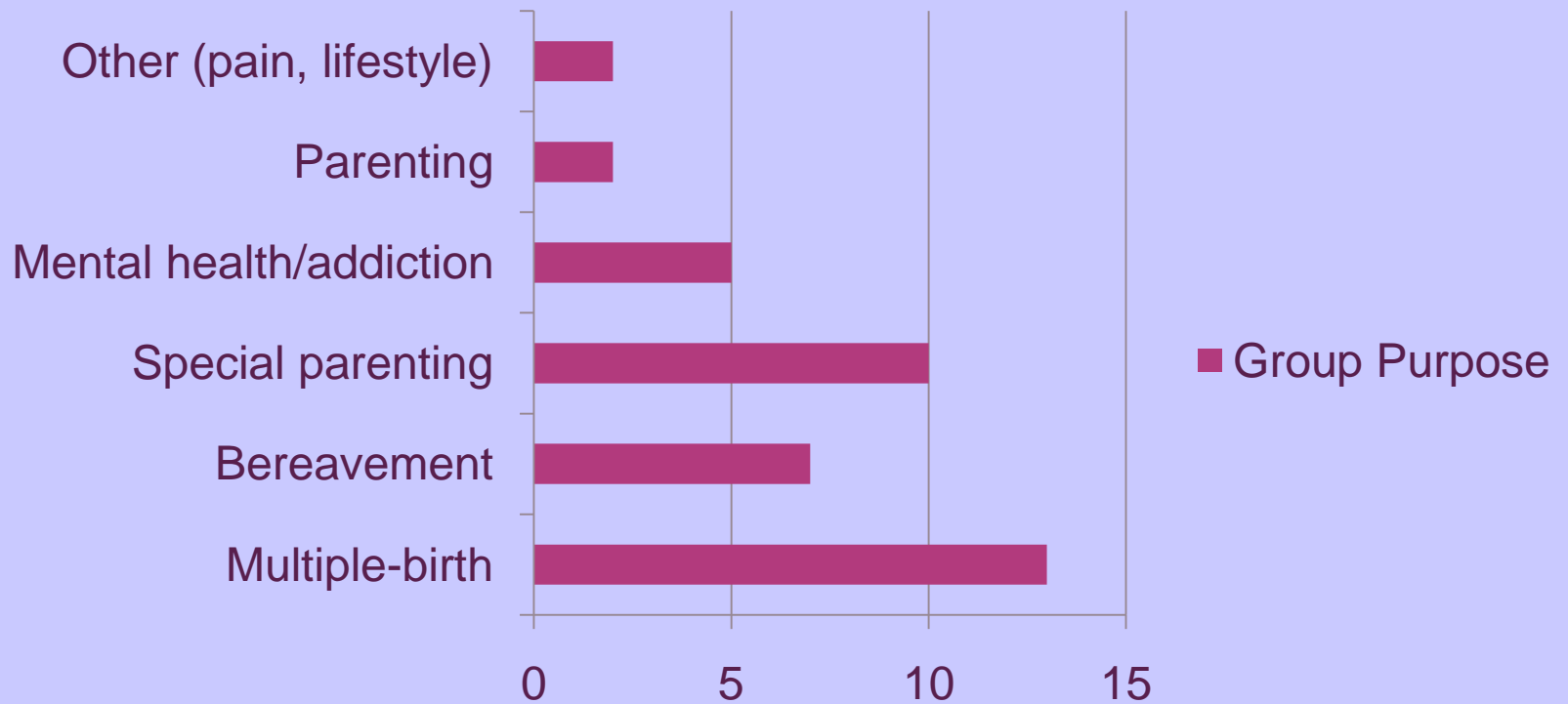- Balance empathy with circumspection.
  - ☻ Source: Marc D. Feldman;
    http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,526037,00.html

Peer Survey Participant Roles

Participant role

- Administrator
- Moderator
- Member

Some people had more than one role. Fairly even spread

Peer Survey-Group purpose

Group Purpose

Bar chart showing:
- Other (pain, lifestyle): 2
- Parenting: 2
- Mental health/addiction: 5
- Special parenting: 10
- Bereavement: 7
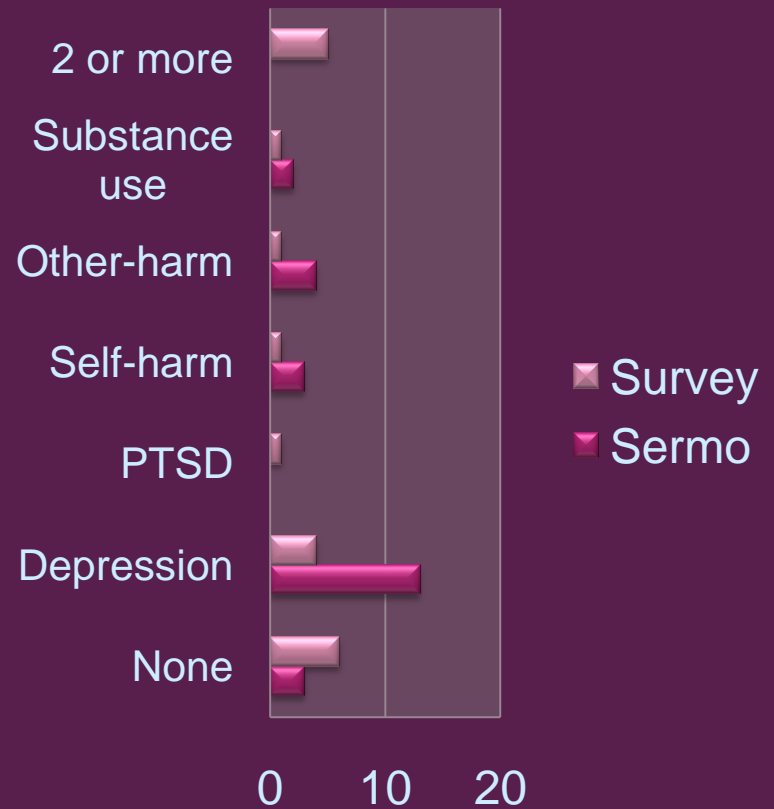- Multiple-birth: 13

Legend: Group Purpose

Incidence of Disruption, Mental Health Concerns
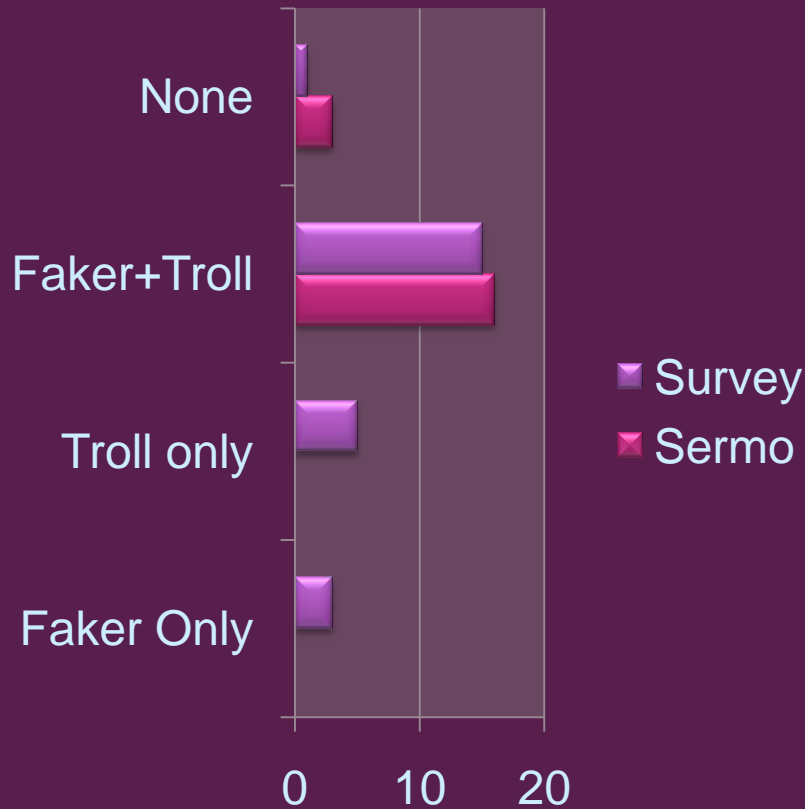
Type of Disruption

Type of Mental Health Concern

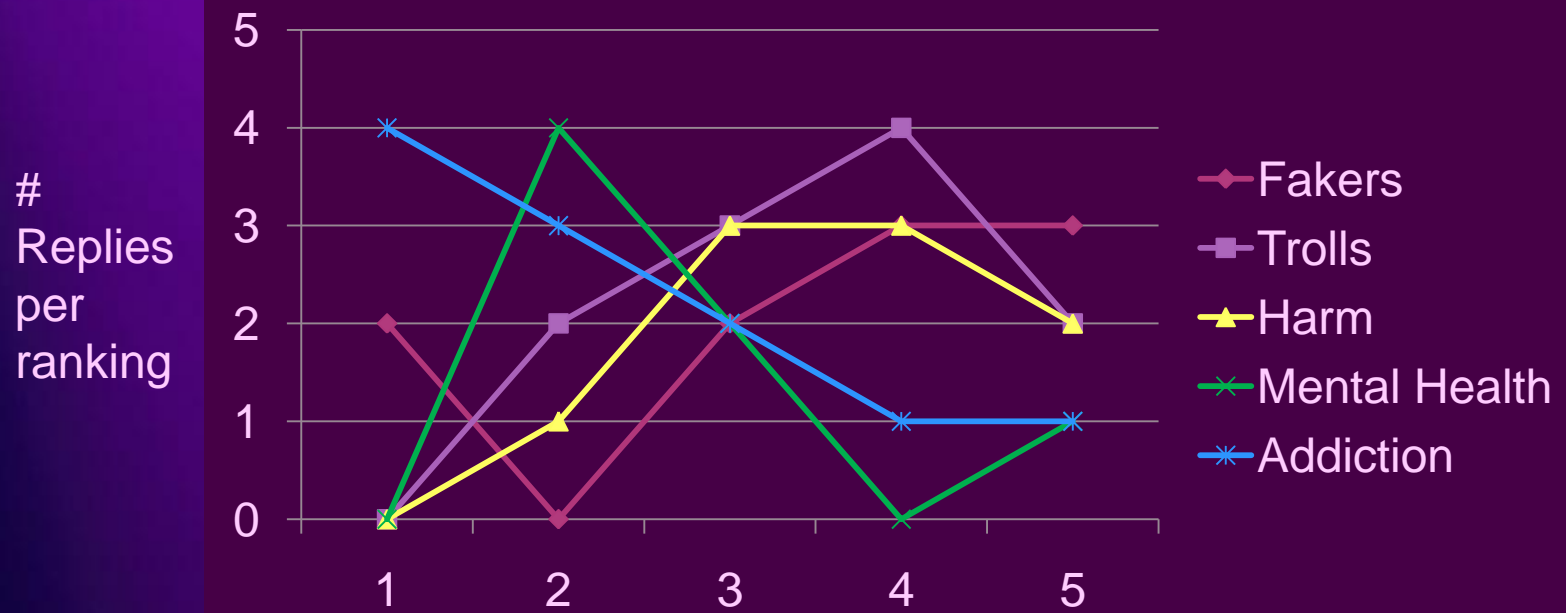# Importance of Disruption: Professional Group

Physician group: not important

Physician ratings of group disruption

# of replies per rating

1-5 Ratings: 1 = not important, 5 = extremely important

Importance of Disruption: Peer Support

Peer support: fakers & trolls > psych/addiction:

Replies per ranking

Rank of factor, 5= most important, 1 is least important

Legend:
- Fakers
- Trolls
- Harm
- Mental Health
- Addiction

Peer Support Group Reactions: Troll/Faker

Reactions Observed by Respondents
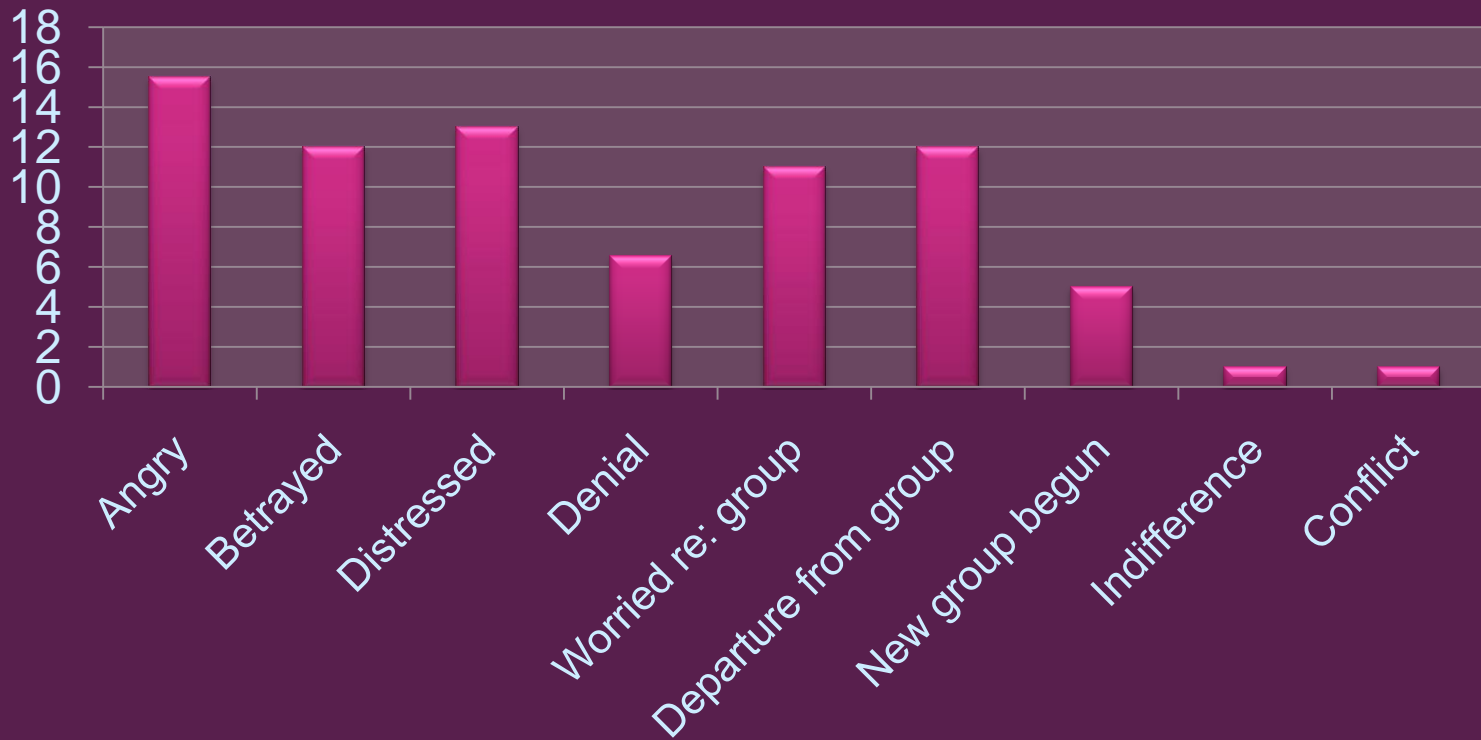
Peer Support Admin Reaction: Troll/Faker

Administrative reactions observed by respondents
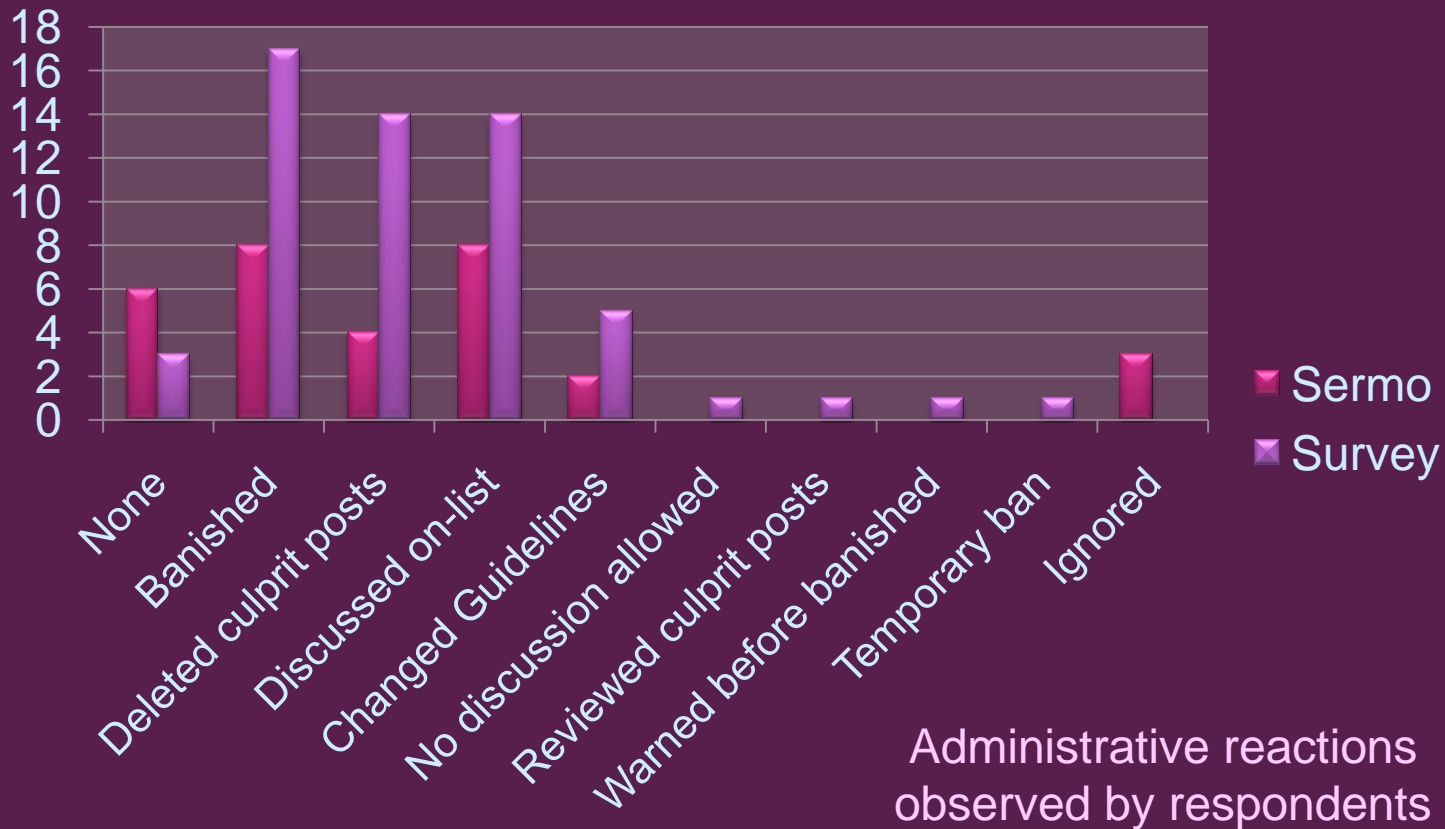
Defense against Dark Side

- Trolls:
  - Do Not Feed! (Ignore them → Group Bliss)
  - Moderators should act offline
- Fakers: Be skeptical
  - Investigate fraud: photos, claims
  - Better to allow fakes than deny true need
- Psych disorder: Have plans for threats
- Develop strong group guidelines

Threats of Harm

- Suicidality-Educate, prevent, intervene. ISMHO input
    - ☯ Education of members (on website) about PTSD, depression
    - ☯ If threat, assess seriousness: plan, available means, support
    - ☯ Post resources: Local or online, private counseling, hotline number/website, emergency services. ? Call resource
    - ☯ Attempt to contact emergency services. Call local police with email address, ISP, IP address if these are known.

- Homicidality/threat to others
    - ☯ California Tarasoff law: Therapist duty to warn about serious threats. ? if it applies online or to peer groups. Prudent to assess threat, warn victim, notify police/protective services, refer poster. http://www.apa.org/monitor/julaug05/jn.html

Peer Survey - guidelines posted?

- The experiences of survey respondents:
  - 78%: All groups posted guidelines
  - 13%: Some did, some didn't post them
  - 9%: No groups posted guidelines

Group Guidelines

- Netiquette
  - Avoid flames, rants, spam, "me-too." Alert in subject re: sensitive topics (i.e. religion; new pregnancy in a loss group)
- Respect differences: situations, opinions, culture.
  - Avoid discrimination, personal attacks, obscenity.
  - Don't "prescribe" solutions. There are many ways to cope.
- Be honest but careful.
  - If you suspect dishonesty, tell moderator.
  - Provide validating information when requested.
- Research/surveys: ? Require moderator approval.
- Confidentiality: What is said in group stays there.
- No professional advice/treatment in peer groups.
- Consequences: warning, "censorship," banishment.

Words of Wisdom

- "Early in our "life" we had a moderately serious problem with trolls, fakers and trouble makers… Over time, a change in management strategy and finely tuned troll radar made this a minor issue. In the last 2 or 3 years, the most disruption we've had were a few members [whose] mental health issues caused them to be openly hostile …and [1-2] members with substance abuse issues, swiftly dealt with, negligible wake." SB, Preemie-l

- Fast, progressive discipline, focus on rule violation, not person.

- Members angry when moderators support faker/troll.

- Don't announce or "out" a troll/faker on-list. (More disruption).

- Legitimate people may create fake persona on same list!

- Intervening for suicidal ideation 'traumatic,' but led to treatment.

- "Toxic" people not good; group better after they leave.

Take-home Points

- Most distress: Fakers, trolls, threats of harm.
- Least distress: Psych disorder, addiction.
- Moderators need training & support
  - Group process, guidelines, consequences
  - Ignore trolls on-list, ban or moderate them.
  - Investigate fakers/fraud, confront off-list
- Group welfare outweighs individual
  - Dismissed individuals need referrals
  - Trolls/fakers: Treatments? Legal/tech?

Further Reading/Resources

- Online interactions, conflict resolution:

- http://www-usr.rider.edu/~suler/psycyber/therapygroup.html

- http://www.kalimunro.com/article_conflict_online.html

- Example ground rules:

  ☯Preemie-L http://www.preemie-l.org/forumrules.html

  ☯MOST (Mothers of Supertwins) http://www.mostonline.org/agreement.htm

  ☯ISMHO http://www.ismho.org/mailing_list.asp