

# GETTING

# HELP ONLINE

As the number of social networking websites devoted to those with mental illness has exploded, here are some guidelines on how to choose a site.

Many people like to talk with others who understand their struggles. They feel that having a mental illness, and all that comes with it, is very difficult to understand unless you have been through it. Sometimes it is difficult to connect in person because many people hide their symptoms. Becoming a member of a mental health support website is a good way to find comfort, encouragement and information from others who are going through or have gone through what you are experiencing.

Over the years, the nature of online support groups has changed. While once they were open chat rooms, today's groups are discussion and message boards, blogs, and occasionally IM chat. This means you can go to a website, browse the active discussions and recent blogs, and choose one that addresses your problem or a topic that interests you. There, you can read about the situations of others, make comments, and describe your own issues. Feedback can be quick and supportive. But be mindful- though people will have good intentions, few will have actual psychotherapy training. There are some websites that are moderated by therapists however, and will offer advice and support.

Online support can be a useful. For some individuals it is the only way they can feel completely understood. Online support is valuable as a supplement to therapy but are not meant to be a substitute for therapy. You might consider joining an online support group if you do not want to go out, are afraid to go out, are shy about speaking up in person, want to remain anonymous or simply do not have access to a group in your area. Online support groups are usually free of charge and are convenient in that you can choose how much time you will spend participating. **However, you do need to be careful about which group you join.**

## Some Online Sites

A network of [WebTribes](#) (including those below) allow individuals who suffer from mental health ailments to meet and communicate with one another-

- [AnxietyTribe.com](#)
- [AddictionTribe.com](#)
- [DepressionTribe.com](#)
- [OCDTribe.com](#)

These sites contain blogs from both members and therapists, mental health news, forums for discussion and a variety of different groups to join. It also contains a useful tool to help you find a therapist in your area. An advantage of WebTribes is that they hire professionals to keep discussions on track. They also include disclaimers that *they are not intended to substitute for professional therapy and that users who suffer from serious illnesses should see a health-care professional.*



Another useful site is <http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca>. This site has stories, publications and self-screening tools. It offers connection to others through message boards and a community referral section. It also has a discussion forum and a section to email for help. And importantly, it offers support in many languages including Arabic, Mandarin, Cantonese, French and Spanish.

## Finding the Right Online Support

Given that social networking mental health sites are so ubiquitous, users should be cautioned to-

**Look for resources from reputable sources.** Sources such as those affiliated with recognized national or provincial health organizations. These groups tend to be long-standing and are moderated. Examples include National Institute of Mental Health, the Canadian Mental Health Association, or the Mayo Clinic.

**Chose those moderated by a health professional.** The moderator should be active enough to patrol online group abusers (such as those who monopolize conversations, use profane language, or insult or dismiss other members) while still allowing healthy conversations. They should have their own blog section, or a biography that lists their qualifications.

**Ensure the resource has established group operational guidelines.** Guidelines should include information on starting discussion threads, language and tone to be used, and on how to express concern over another member's lack of adherence to the guidelines.

**Check who sponsors the group.** As someone is paying for the hosting, functionality and technology behind the online group, make sure you will not receive unwanted product advertising through postings or through email.

**Check if full anonymity is possible.** When posting or replying to a post, none of your personal information should be displayed, except for what you chose to show.

**Ensure the online support group does not try to replace the advice of your own medical practitioner.** Members should never recommend that you go off treatment or change the treatment prescribed by your doctor, even if they have had a positive experience with another method.

**Not believe everything you read online.** If you have a question about any of the posted information, print it out and take it to your mental health practitioner.

**Look for a group where members express genuine concern and compassion in a nonjudgmental manner.** These groups are rated higher for helping individuals feel better about themselves. Research before joining the site. See if you can find reviews or testimonials that are not on the specific website in question.

**Look for groups with high group cohesiveness.** Members of good online groups stick around long after they have received the support they seek.



Remember, online support should be used as a supplement  
and not as a replacement for therapy.  
To set an appointment with a counsellor, contact your EFAP.

**YOUR LOGO**

**For confidential assistance**  
**Brown Crowshaw 1.800.668.2055**  
[www.browncrowshaw.com](http://www.browncrowshaw.com)