

Dual Relationships

Hazards of Unboundaried Attachment

Dual relationships represent perhaps the most tangled and nuanced element of any professional board's code of ethics. Despite the potential for perilous circumstances in the great majority of situations, they are not altogether prohibited. Key aspects of dual relationships are clear and easily called to memory, while others are more complex with subtle components of transference and misguided generosity.

Dual Relationships Defined

A therapist and a current or former client have a relationship outside the professional or therapeutic relationship.

- ❖ More than one role exists between the therapist and client.
- ❖ The outside relationship may be business, social, financial, personal, or other.
- ❖ It may occur simultaneously or consecutively.

Simultaneous relationship examples: The individual is a client as well as a student, colleague, employee, friend, or family member of the therapist.

Consecutive relationship examples: The client was a childhood friend of the therapist who hasn't had contact with the therapist for many years; the client sold a car to the therapist last summer.

Sexual Vs. Non-Sexual Relationships

Sexual relationships with clients are clearly prohibited. This type of boundary issue is often considered to be more easily identifiable.

Nonsexual relationships are nonetheless problematic. They blur the boundary between therapist and client, create conflicts of interest, increase the likelihood of harm and exploitation, and create confusion about the therapy and the expectations of the therapeutic work.

Types of Dual Relationships

Like many clinical areas, the topics discussed below are not black and white. Problems develop when behaviors cross ethical boundaries by interfering with client treatment or goals, placing the therapist's needs ahead of the client's needs, or causing harm to the client in any way.

Physically Intimate Relationships

Physical/sexual intimacy with clients is never appropriate.

Example: A therapist feels strongly attracted to a client which has not diminished over time. Consultation should be sought to assist in diffusing transference and for support in referring the client if the issue remains unresolved.

Relationships for Personal Benefit

Therapists receive compensation for providing therapy to clients. Other exchanges of money are not acceptable. They should not borrow money from nor lend money to clients, or engage in other types of professional arrangements.

Example: A therapist wants to sell their home and would like their client, who is a knowledgeable Realtor, to represent them.

Relationships Based on Dependency Needs

Therapists can gain fulfillment through their connection and work with clients, and it's true this is a form of emotional intimacy. The issue arises when the therapist becomes dependent on the emotional connection with a client to meet their own emotional needs. This interferes with the client's needs and causes harm.

Example: A therapist going through a divorce repeatedly seeks praise and validation from a client to fill the void created by the loss of their marriage.

Unintentional/Unplanned Relationships

Some dual relationships become known only after chance encounters. These do not involve unethical behavior as they are accidental in nature. To minimize risk to the client, consultation should be sought to identify the most appropriate ethical path forward.

Example: A therapist attends a family reunion and discovers their uncle's girlfriend is their client.

Altruistic Relationships

The most common reason dual relationships develop is because therapists are motivated to help, are afraid of hurting feelings or believe they are doing the right thing.

Examples: A therapist gives a client items they no longer need because the client has a financial hardship; a client asks a therapist to buy something from their child's school fund-raiser; or a therapist gives a client a ride home.

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The Need for Boundaries

Therapeutic Process

Therapists have a fiduciary duty to clients; they must act in their clients' best interest and client needs come before their own. Boundaries are critical for preserving the professional nature of the relationship, which allows the therapeutic work to take shape in a safe and open way.

Therapists do not have friendships with clients. Blurring this boundary compromises the security of the therapeutic frame and the relationship becomes characterized by mixed messages, perceived transgressions, people pleasing, and further boundary crossings.

Risk of Exploitation

Due to a client's vulnerability and the trust inherent in the therapist's role, clients are at risk of exploitation. This may be overt, such as engaging in a sexual relationship or paying a client for a task such as babysitting. Or exploitation may be subtle, such as a therapist seeking to meet their own emotional needs by fishing for compliments about their skill or their caring nature from a client.

Liability

In addition to the potential for harm, dual relationships carry an increased risk for grievances and malpractice suits.

Exceptions With Extraordinary Caution

Dual relationships may infrequently manifest in a way that is permissible, which is highly dependent on numerous factors and undoubtedly must involve a clinician advanced in their experience, skill, and self-awareness and be accompanied by ongoing consultation with an equally or greater skilled and self-aware clinician.

Summary

The intricacies of dual relationships should be explored and discussed for the sake of gaining a conceptual foothold on a topic that will inevitably present itself to each clinician. Interactions that begin with largely benign boundary crossings can end in significant ethical violations.