Managing Boundaries and Multiple Relationships

Chapter 7
Psychology 475
Professional Ethics in Addictions Counseling
Listen to the audio lecture while viewing these slides

Dual and Multiple Relationships in Perspective

Dual Relationships tend to
• Impair the counselor's judgment
• Increase potential for conflicts of interest
• Lead to exploitation of the client
• Lead to blurred boundaries

Designing Safeguards to Protect Clients

Identifying Boundary Violations

Potential for Creating Dual Relationships
• Accepting a client's invitation to a special event
• Bartering goods or services for professional services
Potential for Creating Dual Relationships continued

- Accepting a small gift from a client
- Attending the same social, cultural, or religious activities
- Giving a supportive hug

The line

- Boundary crossing: a departure from commonly accepted practices that could potentially benefit clients.
- Boundary violation: a serious breach that results in harm to clients.

Establishing and Maintaining Appropriate Boundaries

Problematic Boundary Behavior

- Social
- Financial
- Workplace relationships

More Problematic Boundary Behavior

- Business relationships
- Multiple relationships
- Physical touch

Role Blending
Measures that can minimize the risk of dual relationships

- Maintain healthy boundaries
- Use informed consent to discuss issues surrounding dual relationships
- Talk with clients about any potential conflicts that may arise

More measures

- Consult with other professionals when dilemmas arise
- Document any dual relationship in case notes
- Refer when necessary

The Ban on Nonsexual Dual Relationships

Some Suggested NEVERS

- NEVER:
  - Touch a client
  - Indulge in boundary crossing
  - Go to lunch or have coffee with a client

More NEVERS

- Treat a spouse or friend of a client
- Meet clients in social situations
- Join the same church or synagogue as a client

Controversies on Boundary Issues
Psyc 475 – Professional Ethics in Addictions Counseling

Main issues to consider when deciding on a dual relationship

- Potential risk
- Conflict of interest
- Impairment of counselors judgment
- Client rights

Psyc 475 – Professional Ethics in Addictions Counseling

Bartering for Professional Services

Psyc 475 – Professional Ethics in Addictions Counseling

Before bartering is entered into

- Both parties should:
  - talk about the arrangement
  - have a clear understanding of the exchange
  - agree on it

Psyc 475 – Professional Ethics in Addictions Counseling

Making a Decision about Bartering

Psyc 475 – Professional Ethics in Addictions Counseling

Factors that should be reviewed before accepting a gift

- Monetary value of the gift
- Clinical implications of accepting the gift
- When in the counseling process is the offering of a gift occurring

Psyc 475 – Professional Ethics in Addictions Counseling

Giving or Receiving Gifts
More factors

- Motivations in accepting the gift
- Cultural implications

Social Relationship with Clients

Reasons for discouraging becoming socially involved with clients

- Counselors may not be as confrontive as they need to be.
- Counselors own needs to be liked may lead them to be less challenging.

More reasons

- Counselors own needs may be enmeshed with those of their clients to the point that objectivity is lost.
- Are at greater risk of exploiting clients because of the power differential in the therapeutic relationship.

Sexual Attractions in the Client – Therapist Relationship

Suggestions for Dealing with Sexual Attractions

- Acknowledge the feelings of sexual attraction to yourself.
- Explore the reasons you are attracted to this client.
- Never act out the feelings of attraction.
More suggestions

- Seek personal counseling if needed to understand your feelings about this client.
- Monitor boundaries by setting clear limits.
- If you are unable to resolve your feelings, terminate the professional relationship.

Sexual Relationships: Ethical and Legal Issues

- Sexual fantasies
- Behaving seductively with clients
- May influence clients to focus on romantic or sexual feelings towards them

Sexual Relationships: Ethical and Legal Issues continued

- May engage in physical contact that is primary intended to arouse or satisfy their sexual desires.

Ethical Standards on Sexual Contact with Clients

- Sexual contact with current clients is prohibited.
- Sexual misconduct is considered to be one of the more serious of all ethical violations and is one of the most common allegations in malpractice suits.

Ethical Standards on Sexual Contact with Clients continued

- It is the most disruptive and potentially damaging boundary violation.

At Risk Therapists
To minimize risks, counselors should

- Learn to recognize sexual attractions and how to deal with these feelings constructively.
- Seek professional support in times of personal loss or crisis.

To minimize risks continued

- Make a practice to examine and monitor feelings and behaviors towards clients.
- Know the difference between sexual attraction to clients and acting out.

To minimize risks continued

- Learning about the adverse consequences for clients and counselors who engage in sexual activity.
- Establish and maintain clear boundaries with clients by dealing with a client's sexual advances firmly and consistently.

To minimize risks continued

- Terminate the therapeutic relationship when sexual feelings obscure objectivity.

Harmful Effects of Sexual Contact with Clients

- Erotic contact is TOTALLY inappropriate and is an exploitation of the relationship by the counselor.

Sexual contact with clients is:

- Unprofessional
- Unethical
- Clinically harmful
Consequences to Counselors

- Lawsuit
- Being convicted of a felony
- Revoked license

More Consequences to Counselors

- Expulsion from professional organizations
- Losing insurance coverage
- Losing job

More Consequences to Counselors

- When sexual intercourse begins, therapy ends.
- Sexual relationships are NEVER the fault of the client.

Sexual Relationships with Former Clients

- To avoid a possible legal or ethical conflict, Gutheil emphasizes that practitioners should not establish a social or sexual relationship with a past or present client.

What do the ethics codes say?

- American Counseling Association
- American Psychological Association
- National Association of Social Workers
What do the ethics codes say? continued

- They all say that even after two years, the burden is on the counselor that there has been no exploitation.
- Safest view: “Once a client, always a client.”

Non-erotic Physical Contact with Clients

Fears of Counselors

- Misinterpreted as sexual
- Afraid of their impulses or feelings towards clients
- Afraid of intimacy
- May believe that to express closeness physically is inappropriate

Some counselors do not support touching because:

- It can promote dependency
- Can interfere with the transference relationship
- Can be misread by clients
- Can be sexualized

Others support it because:

- Can foster self-exploration
- Increase verbal interaction
- Increase the client’s perception of the expertness of the counselor
- Can produce more positive attitudes towards the counseling process

Note

- Touching should be spontaneous and honest expression of the counselor’s feelings.
- Sometimes it can be stronger than words.
Dealing with Suspected Unethical Behavior in Dual Relationships

- Not being aware, or misunderstanding an ethical standard is not an adequate defense to a charge of unethical conduct.

Professionals have an ethical obligation to deal with colleagues when they suspect unethical conduct:

- 1. Informally deal with the person.
- 2. If that doesn't work, then use more formal methods.