

## Client–Therapist Contact: Proper and Improper Conduct

This information has been written to help you understand what is proper and improper conduct for a therapist, and what responses are available to you as a consumer. It may raise issues that you have not considered before. However, if you are well informed, you will be better able to make sure your needs get met in therapy.

Although almost all therapists are ethical people (that is, moral and law-abiding people) who care about their clients and follow professional rules and standards in their practice, there are a very few who do not consider what is best for their clients and who behave unethically. These issues apply to any mental health worker: psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, counselors, clergy, nurses, or marriage and family therapists.

### Therapist Behaviors That May Not Be OK

There will be times in your therapy when it might be important, even if it is very uncomfortable for you and your therapist, to discuss your feelings and concerns about sex. In fact, such discussions may be needed if you are to benefit from your therapy. **However, sexual contact is never a proper part of any sex education or sex therapy.**

Many caring therapists sometimes show their feelings through touch. These forms of physical contact in therapy, such as a handshake, a pat on the back, or a comforting hug, may not concern you. But you are the best judge of the effects that any touching may have on you. If your therapist engages in any type of physical contact that you do not want, tell him or her to stop, and explain how you feel about that contact. A responsible therapist will want to know about your feelings and will respect your feelings without challenging you.

If your therapist makes sexual comments or touches you in a way that seems sexual to you, you are likely to feel discomfort. Trust your feelings. Do not assume that your therapist must be right if it feels wrong to you.

There are warning signs that a therapist may be moving toward sexual contact with you. The therapist may start talking a lot about his or her own personal problems, giving you gifts, writing letters to you that are not about your therapy, or dwelling on the personal nature of your relationship. Or the therapist may create the idea that he or she is your only source of help by criticizing you for standing up for yourself, or by telling you how to behave with a sexual partner. A red flag should definitely go up if your therapist discusses his or her own sexual activities or sexual attraction to you. Other signs include making remarks intended to arouse sexual feelings, or forms of physical seduction, such as sexual touching.

### Attraction to Your Therapist

It is normal for people in therapy to develop positive feelings, such as love or affection, toward a therapist who gives them support and caring. These feelings can be strong and may sometimes take the form of sexual attraction. It can be helpful to discuss these feelings with your therapist in order to understand them. A caring, ethical therapist would never take advantage of your feelings by suggesting sexual contact in therapy or by ending therapy to have a romantic relationship with you.

Though sexual feelings sometimes occur, and discussion about them is often useful, sexual contact with your therapist cannot be helpful. Sexual contact in therapy has been found to be harmful to the client in many ways, including damaging the client's ability to trust. The harmful effects may be immediate, or

they may not be felt until later. For this reason, sexual contact with clients is clearly against the rules of all professional groups of mental health workers (psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, counselors, and so on).

### **Actions You Can Take If You Believe That Your Therapist's Actions Are Not OK**

Any time you feel uncomfortable about a part of your therapy, including therapist behavior that you think is improper, consider discussing this with your therapist. Your therapist should not try to make you feel guilty or stupid for asking questions, and your therapist should not try to frighten, pressure, or threaten you. If your therapist will not discuss your concerns openly or continues to behave in ways that are not OK with you, you probably have reason to be concerned.

When a discussion with your therapist about these behaviors does not help, you have the right to take some further action. You may wish to find another therapist and/or file any of several types of complaints. It is important for you to make the final decision about what course of action is best for your concerns and needs.

It may be very hard for you to think about making any kind of complaint against your therapist. You may worry that he or she will eventually find out about your complaint and be angry or hurt about it. You may also be concerned about possible harm to your therapist. There are several points to consider when you are trying to decide what is the best thing to do:

- Sexual contact between a therapist and a client is never a proper form of treatment for any problem. A therapist who suggests or engages in sexual contact in therapy is showing a lack of concern for you.
- Sexual contact in therapy is never your fault. Regardless of the particular things that have happened, you have placed your trust in the therapist, and it is his or her duty not to take advantage of that trust. If the therapist does this, you have been betrayed.
- A therapist who engages in sexual contact with a client is likely to do so more than once and with more than one client. If no one reports this behavior, other people may be harmed by the same therapist.

### **Specific Courses of Action**

Remember that you have the right to stop therapy whenever you choose. At the same time, you may also wish to make some type of complaint against the therapist who has acted improperly.

If you choose to make a complaint against your therapist, the process may become long and difficult. Other clients taking such action have felt overwhelmed, angry, and discouraged. It is very important that you have support from people you can depend upon. Good sources of support might be family members, friends, support groups, a new therapist, or some type of advocate. Identifying and using good sources of support will help you feel more secure about the plan of action you have chosen.

You may wish to see another therapist to help you continue with your therapy, including dealing with problems resulting from the experience with the unethical therapist. It would not be unusual for you to have confusing thoughts and feelings about your experience and your previous therapist. It would also be understandable if you felt frightened about seeking, or had difficulty trusting, a new therapist.

You may also want an advocate to actively help you in making and pursuing plans. Try to locate a mental health worker who has had experience with other clients who have been victims of therapist sexual misconduct. He or she will be able to understand your situation, provide you with important information, and support you in your choice of action.

Many therapists work in agencies or other offices with supervisors. Consider talking to your therapist's supervisor or agency director to see what can be done.

You may want to contact the state and/or national professional group to which your therapist belongs. For example, many practicing counselors are members of this state's Counseling Association and the American Counseling Association or American Clinical Mental Health Association. These organizations have specific rules against sexual contact with clients, and each has an ethics committee that hears complaints. State and national professional associations do not license their members to practice psychotherapy; however, they can punish an unethical therapist, sometimes by expelling that person from membership in the organization. Such an action may make it more difficult for the therapist to get or keep a license to practice.

If your therapist is a licensed professional, you may want to contact this state's licensing board of the profession to which your therapist belongs. It has the power to take away or suspend the license of a professional found guilty of sexual misconduct.

Another option is to file a civil suit for malpractice, which would be done through a lawyer. To get a referral to an advocate or therapist experienced in working with victims of sexual misconduct, or to obtain information on filing a complaint, call or write to this state's professional organization.

Here are the addresses of some of the organizations mentioned above:

American Counseling Association  
5999 Stevenson Avenue  
Alexandria, VA 22304  
800-347-6647  
www.counseling.org

American Psychiatric Association  
1000 Wilson Blvd., Suite 1825  
Arlington, VA 22209-3901  
703-907-7300  
www.psych.org

American Psychological Association  
750 First Street, N.E.  
Washington, DC 20002-4242  
800-374-2721  
www.apa.org

National Association of Social Workers  
750 First Street, N.E., Suite 700  
Washington, DC 20002-4241  
202-408-8600  
www.socialworker.org

There are groups in many communities to help victims of sexual abuse, and you can usually find them through the telephone book's "Human Services" section.

Please write your questions on the back of this handout so we can discuss them. Thank you.