

Professional Boundaries in Therapy

“Boundaries define the helping pathway for patients and professionals and are integral to professional effectiveness.”

Everett & Gallop, 2001

Clients have the freedom to choose whether to enter in or remain in a counseling relationship. Informed consent is an ongoing part of the counseling process and counselors are required to discuss the limits of the counseling relationship. Because the therapeutic relationship is different from most other professional relationships, it is necessary to define the relationship and its boundaries.

Counseling is the provision of assistance and guidance in resolving personal, social, or psychological problems and difficulties, especially by a professional. Professional counseling is a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals.

Counselors work with clients on strategies to overcome obstacles and personal challenges that they are facing (American Counseling Association). Boundaries are guides that set forth the limits and parameters of the counseling relationship and are established for several reasons. In therapy, the foremost reason is the patient's well-being. Other reasons for boundaries in the counseling relationship include:

- Protection of the therapeutic process so that treatment remains effective
- Protecting client so that they benefit from therapy and are shielded from exploitation
- Protection from liability for both the client and the therapist
- Boundaries are essential to patient and therapist safety
- Boundaries delineate personal and professional roles helping the client and therapist to work within the parameters and understand its limits

When you begin a therapeutic relationship, the nature of the relationship may cause you to feel that your therapist is establish and encourage you to achieve treatment goals.

These are boundaries that are important to address and maintain. The following is a list of limitations between the therapist and client, that should be understood when beginning counseling:



- The therapist cannot engage with you in social settings or outside of the therapy office
- The therapist will not initiate a conversation with you in public if you see each other outside of the therapy setting. While you may choose to initiate a conversation with your therapist, be aware that doing so discloses your identity and the possible nature of your relationship, it exposes your privacy to others who may be within earshot.
- The therapist cannot see you outside of therapy for socialization (i.e., dinner, coffee, home visits, or “hanging out”). There are exceptions to these rules, which can be discussed with your therapist, however, exceptions must meet therapeutic needs and ethical standards.
- The therapist cannot call you to have a random or social conversation, that is not related to therapy or has been pre-established as part of therapy.
- Social media is a form of socializing and your therapist cannot engage or “friend you” on any social media site.
- Often clients will feel gratitude towards the therapist and want to show their gratitude with gifts, be aware that this exposes your therapist to liability and places her in the difficult position of having to decline your gift. If you want to show your gratitude a thank you is well received.

While some of these boundaries may seem odd or “unfair”, these have been established after years of research in the topic of patient rights and protection. Boundaries allow the therapist and client to maintain a healthy and safe therapeutic relationship and your care remains within the highest ethical standards. ***Please feel free to discuss additional questions and concerns when you meet with your therapist.***

