

What do counsellors and psychotherapists mean by boundaries?

Client information sheet

Sarah Millward from our **Get help with counselling concerns service** explains the purpose of professional boundaries in therapy and what happens if they're crossed.

We use the word 'therapy' to cover talking therapies, such as counselling, psychotherapy and coaching, and 'therapist' to include 'counsellor' and 'psychotherapist'.

It is a therapist's duty to keep their clients psychologically safe. Boundaries are agreed limits or rules which help provide this safety and protect both the client and the therapist. They set a formal structure, purpose and standards for the therapy and the therapeutic relationship.

Therapists are responsible for setting up, monitoring and maintaining boundaries as part of their ethical practice. The aim is to create a relationship where you feel safe, comfortable and able to talk about your experiences or feelings, even if they seem taboo, frightening or embarrassing.

What are boundaries?

Boundaries can cover practical details such as fees and appointment times, or what contact you might have between sessions. These may be negotiated at the outset as part of your therapy contract.

Other boundaries are not explicitly discussed but are taken for granted as part of a therapist's professional ethics - such as not having a sexual relationship with a client.

Some boundaries depend on the therapist's theoretical approach. For example, hugging a client may be acceptable in humanistic therapy but not in psychodynamic. Humanistic and person-centred therapists may share personal experiences, where appropriate, but psychodynamic therapists are unlikely to 'self-disclose'. It's advisable to ask potential therapists about the way they work to make sure you feel comfortable with their approach.

Boundaries that all therapists should maintain include:

- providing consistency, predictability and security of therapy sessions - for example offering you the same time and place on a regular basis, unless otherwise agreed
- ensuring sessions take place in a calm environment with no distractions and where confidentiality can be ensured
- limiting contact between you to pre-arranged appointments, as far as possible
- avoiding multiple relationships - for example you should not be student and teacher or supervisee and supervisor at the same time as client and therapist
- appropriately and ethically managing any physical attraction between you
- remaining impartial rather than judging you or imposing their values
- not giving, receiving or exchanging any gifts during the therapeutic relationship
- managing the end of therapy in an appropriate way and ensuring formal boundaries are maintained during any breaks in therapy and after therapy has ended

Signs that boundaries are being properly maintained

It should show that your therapist takes professional boundaries seriously if they:

- make clear, professional arrangements regarding fees and appointments
- readily provide information on their training and experience
- focus on you and your concerns
- show that they will maintain your confidentiality appropriately
- demonstrate how feelings can be safely discussed and understood rather than acted upon
- support and encourage your self-confidence and autonomy
- treat you with respect, care and dignity

Boundaries and confidentiality

Whether you're seeing an independent practitioner or you're receiving therapy through the NHS, education or your workplace, you're entitled to know the boundaries of confidentiality. These should be clearly explained at the start of therapy and discussed whenever you want clarification.

There are only a few occasions when a therapist may need to pass on information about you - and then only to another professional with a legitimate reason for needing the information. These include when:

- the law requires it
- you or another person are at risk of harm
- talking to their therapeutic supervisors about their work, which is usually a routine contracted practice

- referring you to another professional for help
- sharing basic health information with another health professional involved in your care

Normally a therapist would seek your consent to pass on any information.

Many organisations have specific policy guidelines about confidentiality for therapists working with children or vulnerable adults. It's the therapist's responsibility to know about and inform you of any organisational policies which affect their work with you.

Crossing boundaries

Boundaries should always serve the client's interests, but it's not always clear what these are.

For example, if you arrive 15 minutes late for a session in a distressed state, should your therapist extend the session or finish at the usual time? Extending the session undermines the consistent and predictable nature of the therapy, but a lack of flexibility seems uncaring. The therapist must also balance needs - for example they may have another client waiting to start a session. Too much flexibility can lead to confusion while too little can make them appear unhelpful and cold.

If a therapist deliberately crosses a boundary, this should be based on:

- your needs
- their professional judgement about whether it's appropriate in the context of your therapy
- confidence that they could justify their decision to professional colleagues, if challenged
- anticipating the likely effect that the boundary crossing, and their intention to do it, may have on you

Sometimes therapists may unintentionally ignore or cross a boundary. If you feel uncomfortable with anything that happens in a session, it's important that you talk to your therapist about it.

For example, if your therapist makes negative comments about where you're going on holiday, you should be able to tell them how you feel about it. If they acknowledge their error, this may be uncomfortable but not necessarily harmful.

Signs that boundaries are not being properly maintained

It can show that boundaries are at risk if your therapist:

- seeks praise, reassurance or constantly wants you to show gratitude for their work
- gradually changes from their usual practice or drifts away from the contract originally agreed with you

- focuses on their own needs rather than yours - for example talking about themselves excessively or unexpectedly ending sessions early
- tells you their problems and expects you to 'care' for them
- suggests they are the only practitioner or person who can meet your needs
- offers additional sessions, not agreed at the outset, without there being a clinical justification
- frequent compliments and flattering comments seem inappropriate or insincere
- seems to judge or blame you
- flirts with you - no therapist should ever make sexual advances towards you
- takes sides with you, no matter what the situation, or argues with you
- lends or borrows money from you
- continues to work with you despite any issues which seem beyond their competence or experience
- seems furtive or secretive
- suggests you have a special relationship, which may seem exciting or flattering but implies something secretive or unprofessional
- makes you feel uneasy, tense or unsafe
- often allows sessions to overrun the agreed time

Sometimes a therapist can cross a boundary without it causing a major problem, but it should not be ignored. If your therapist does not raise the issue, you should - if you can.

If you're concerned or confused about boundaries being broken, or if there are frequent or serious issues which make you feel uncomfortable, you might not feel able to discuss this with your therapist. If possible, talk about your concerns with a trusted friend or another therapist. They should be able to help you clarify whether your therapist is acting unprofessionally.

If your therapist is a member of a professional body, such as BACP, which has an ethical framework or code of conduct, you can contact the organisation to discuss the issue. You shouldn't have to give your name or tell them what you talked about in therapy if you don't want to.

Sometimes breaking boundaries can be a legal matter as well as grounds for complaint. For example, a therapist making sexual advances to a client may be a criminal offence.

BACP's Get help with counselling concerns service

Our **Get help with counselling concerns service** provides help, guidance and information on what to do if you have any concerns about your therapy or your therapist.

Anything you say is confidential and you can speak with us anonymously if you prefer.

We're available from Monday to Thursday, 10am to 4pm. Calls are limited to a maximum of 30 minutes. You are not limited to the number of times you can contact the service.

At other times or, if you have difficulty accessing the service by telephone, please leave us a voicemail or email us and we'll get back to you as soon as we can.

You can contact us by:

- telephone 01455 883300 option 2 or 07811 762256
- email gethelp@bacp.co.uk
- www.bacp.co.uk/gethelp

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