Boundaries Are Not Just Rules: Protecting the Therapeutic Relationship

Professional boundaries are often discussed as a list of prohibited behaviors. But boundaries are more than rules.

They create the structure that allows clients to trust the therapeutic relationship.

Most psychologists know the obvious prohibitions. The harder situations are the gray areas: extra contact, special favors, personal disclosures, social media interactions, gifts, dual relationships, or gradually shifting expectations.

Boundary problems often develop gradually.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SMALL DECISIONS

A boundary crossing may seem harmless in isolation.

A psychologist responds to a personal text after hours. A client receives an exception to a cancellation policy. A therapist shares more personal information than usual. A client is invited to connect on social media.

The question is not always whether one individual action is clearly prohibited. It is whether a pattern is developing that changes the professional relationship or creates risk of exploitation, loss of objectivity, or harm.

MULTIPLE RELATIONSHIPS REQUIRE CAREFUL THOUGHT

Psychologists sometimes practice in communities where avoiding every potential overlap is impossible. Small towns, specialized practices, schools, hospitals, and other settings can create legitimate challenges.

APA Standard 3.05 addresses multiple relationships and cautions against relationships that could impair objectivity, competence, or effectiveness or could risk exploitation or harm.

Ask:

- Could this relationship impair my objectivity?
- Could the client reasonably feel pressured?
- Could this create an expectation that the client owes me something?
- Could confidential information be exposed?
- Would this be difficult to explain to a colleague or ethics committee?
- Am I meeting a client need, or one of my own needs?

SEXUAL AND ROMANTIC BOUNDARIES

Some boundaries are not gray areas.

The APA Ethics Code prohibits sexual relationships with current therapy clients and addresses sexual relationships involving former clients, clients' relatives or significant others, students, and supervisees in specific circumstances.

North Carolina law and the Psychology Board also address sexual and other inappropriate conduct involving clients, students, supervisees, and trainees. Recent North Carolina Board disciplinary actions demonstrate that boundary violations can result in serious professional consequences.

WATCH FOR VULNERABILITY

Boundary problems can be more likely when a psychologist is isolated, overwhelmed, emotionally invested in a case, or experiencing significant personal stress.

Consultation can provide an important outside perspective.

If you find yourself thinking:

I cannot tell anyone about this.
Nobody would understand.
It is probably fine.
The client needs me.
Just this once.

Those thoughts deserve attention.

HEALTHY BOUNDARIES PROTECT BOTH SIDES

A clear boundary is not rejection. It communicates that the relationship has a professional structure designed to protect the client.

When in doubt, consult a trusted colleague, review the APA Ethics Code, and consult applicable North Carolina law and Board guidance.

The goal is not to practice from fear. It is to practice with awareness.

Resources: APA Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct, Standards 3.05, 3.06, and Section 10; North Carolina Psychology Practice Act and North Carolina Psychology Board disciplinary materials.

Note: This article is educational and is not legal advice. Psychologists should consult current North Carolina law, Board guidance, and the APA Ethics Code for questions about their individual practice.