When Life Gets in the Way of Practice

Psychologists are often very good at compartmentalizing. We show up for clients even when we are dealing with grief, illness, relationship problems, caregiving, stress, or major life transitions.

Sometimes that flexibility is appropriate. Sometimes it becomes risky.

The ethical question is not whether psychologists are allowed to have personal problems. Of course we are. The question is whether those problems are interfering with our ability to practice competently.

APA Standard 2.06 says psychologists should refrain from initiating activities when personal problems create a substantial likelihood of preventing competent performance. When personal problems interfere with professional duties, psychologists should take appropriate measures such as obtaining consultation or assistance and determining whether to limit, suspend, or terminate professional duties.

SIGNS WORTH NOTICING

Personal stress can show up as:

- Difficulty concentrating
- Unusual irritability or impatience
- Emotional reactivity to certain clients
- Persistent fatigue
- Difficulty maintaining documentation
- Missed appointments or deadlines
- Unusual boundary crossings
- Increased avoidance
- Withdrawing from colleagues
- Using substances or other behaviors to manage distress

None of these automatically means impairment. They are reasons to pause and assess.

THE VALUE OF CONSULTATION

One of the hardest parts of recognizing a problem in ourselves is that our perspective may be limited. We may minimize what is happening, normalize it, or assume we can simply push through.

A trusted colleague can provide an outside perspective.

Consultation can begin with: I am dealing with something personally, and I want to make sure it is not affecting my work. Can I talk it through with you?

That conversation may lead to practical changes: reducing the caseload, taking time away, increasing consultation, obtaining personal therapy, changing scheduling, or making referrals.

TAKING A STEP BACK CAN BE ETHICAL PRACTICE

Psychologists sometimes worry that limiting their work means they are letting clients down. In many circumstances, protecting a client's welfare may mean recognizing that another clinician is temporarily better positioned to provide care.

Build a plan before you need one. Know who you would call for consultation, where you would seek personal care, which colleague could help with an unexpected practice interruption, and what signs would tell you it is time to reduce your workload.

The goal is not to become invulnerable. It is to recognize when support is needed and respond responsibly.

Resources: APA Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct, Standard 2.06; North Carolina Psychology Practice Act.

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.