

# What do counsellors and psychotherapists mean by boundaries?

Client information sheet

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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

- 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.

