

Note on Therapist Boundaries: The Nexus of Ethical Practice and Self-Care

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Too often, discussions about self-care get reduced to a short list of things we should be doing to avoid the fate of compassion fatigue—as in, making time for exercise, eating mindfully, or getting regular massages. Rarely do we discuss the more nuanced aspects of self-care as it relates to our work with clients in the consulting room and, by extension, the ethical imperative that self-care takes on in this context.

On some level, we therapists are all called to this profession out of a strong desire to act as healers to others. The flip side of this coin may be an equally strong desire to avoid considering our own needs, emotional or otherwise. It therefore stands to reason that becoming comfortable with asserting our own needs is a developmental milestone in the career of a therapist; one which not only improves our ability to care for ourselves and decrease the chance of burnout, but which also increases the odds that we are providing competent and ethical care to our clients.

This is perhaps most clearly demonstrated by our ability to assert boundaries and maintain a reasonably firm frame in the therapeutic relationship. Given the fact that seeking direct fulfillment for our own emotional needs is necessarily off-the-table in our work with clients, it is especially critical that we be able to assert our need to protect our time, our financial stability, and, more

generally, our own sense of safety (to name a few aspects of the therapeutic frame). To do so helps us to endure and thrive in this work long-term while also providing several therapeutic benefits to our clients. These include:

- Modeling for clients who also find it hard to acknowledge/assert their needs in relationships,
- Demonstrating that you can tolerate your client's negative emotions (e.g., hurt, anger) when they are thwarted in their attempts to transcend the boundaries of the therapeutic relationship,
- Maintaining safety in the therapeutic relationship by showing that you can maintain separateness/operate outside of clients' omnipotent fantasies,
- Mitigating the possibility that the therapist will harbor resentment or unconsciously seek retaliation against a client.

The ways in which we fail to take care of ourselves in this context can be subtle and seemingly insignificant, but that does not make such lapses benign. Maintaining clear boundaries is an important way of taking care of ourselves *and* our clients. Just as in life outside of the consulting room, health in relationships relies on some degree of reciprocity and compromise of needs.

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