



Maintaining Professional Boundaries in Challenging Client Situations

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Michal Goldman, LCSW, is passionate about ethical boundaries and self-of-therapist work. She specializes in adult and couples therapy, with advanced training in EFT and discernment counseling, and writes a biweekly mental health column in a local newspaper.

Purpose Statement

1

Provide therapists with practical tools for maintaining clear, ethical professional boundaries

2

Deepen self-awareness regarding personal reactions to boundary challenges

3

Strengthen clinical decision making when facing difficult or emotionally charged client situations

4

Support ethical, compassionate care while protecting the integrity of the therapeutic relationship

Why Boundaries?

The framework for the session (engine of the car)

Decreases likelihood of burnout, ethical concerns, therapeutic ruptures

Why are Boundaries Important?



Ethical considerations



Prevent overdependence



Integrity

Self-Assessment Question

Which of the following is *not* a reason for maintaining professional boundaries in therapy?

- A.** To protect the therapeutic relationship and promote effective treatment
- B.** To avoid client overdependence on the therapist
- C.** To reduce the risk of ethical complaints or legal consequences
- D.** To limit emotional attunement with clients

Self-Assessment Question

Which of the following is *not* a reason for maintaining professional boundaries in therapy?

D. To limit emotional attunement with clients

Limiting emotional attunement is not a reason for or an outcome of maintaining boundaries in therapy.

“Boundaries are self-worth executed.”

— Juliane Taylor Shore

Types of Boundaries

- Porous vs. rigid: Flexible is key!
 - Physical—bubble, sexual
 - Psychological—separating others' feelings, letting people experience their feelings
 - Containing—accountability, how my behaviors impact the world
 - Executed—setting limits

Recognizing Boundary Challenges

- From the client angle:
 - Clients with relational trauma struggle more with boundaries
- From the therapist angle:
 - Therapy challenges outside of therapy will play out in the therapy room



Image created by the author using ChatGPT

How Secure Are You in Your Boundaries?


- Do You:
 - Feel responsible for others' emotions?
 - Feel uncertain about your beliefs?
 - Often feel taken for granted?
 - Have a hard time making time for yourself?
 - Have a hard time saying no?
 - Often overshare?
 - Have a hard time expressing yourself?
 - Often give in before trying to negotiate because it's easier?
 - Feel okay with discomfort if it aligns with your values?
 - Feel judgement more often than compassion?
 - Make choices based on your values?

Exercise:
**How can you improve your
boundaries?**

Boundary Vulnerability: Signs That Boundaries Are More Vulnerable

- Pressure to change length or frequency of session
- Blurring of personal and professional roles
- Emotional overidentification
 - Burnout
 - Frustration
 - Jumping to solutions

Think about a Client



What happens in your body that signals that you are at risk of shifting your boundaries?

“Social workers—not their clients, their clients’ relatives, or other individuals with whom the client maintains a personal relationship—assume the full burden for setting clear, appropriate, and culturally sensitive boundaries”

— NASW code of ethics



What are some ethics that help set boundaries?

Ethical Guidelines Related to Boundaries

- Do no harm
- Scope of practice
- Multiple relationships
- Conflicts of interest
- Informed consent—being proactive instead of reactive

Boundary Crossing vs. Boundary Violation

- Boundary crossing
 - May be done to improve clinical outcomes of client–therapist relationship
 - Should be clear reasoning as to the purpose and possible outcomes
 - Best to document these and your reasoning!
- Boundary violation
 - Unethical or unprofessional conduct
 - Sexual contact is by definition a boundary violation

Seeking Consultation



Self-of-therapist work



Important regardless of stage in career



Helpful legally

Practical Strategies

Setting Clear Expectations

- Clear is kind

Communicating with Clients

- Nonshaming
- Use what comes up as “grist for the mill”
- Have framework sessions as needed

Managing Emotional Reactions and Countertransference

- Focus on psychological boundaries
- Empathy, validation, reflection, acknowledgement
- Remind yourself how this is helping the client—stay with confident, compassionate energy!

Case Study

- Lena is a 34-year-old client seeing Jordan, a therapist in private practice, for ongoing relational trauma and boundary struggles. Lena has been making significant progress in understanding her patterns, particularly how she's been conditioned to override her own needs to maintain connection. One evening, Jordan receives a text from Lena at 12:13 a.m. The message reads:

Sorry it's late. I feel like I'm falling apart. I know you probably won't see this till tomorrow but I just needed to tell someone. I don't want to ruin things again. I'll see you Wednesday if that's still okay.

Case Study *(continued)*

- Jordan has a clear boundary outlined in their informed consent: He does not respond to messages outside of office hours unless it's an emergency, and even then, clients are directed to appropriate crisis resources.
- Jordan sees the message and feels empathy, concern, and guilt. He wants Lena to know he's there, but also senses the boundary line being tested.

Case Study Clinical Questions

As a therapist, how would you respond to this message, and how would you navigate it in the next session?

Case Study Clinical Question Discussion

As a therapist, how would you respond to this message, and how would you navigate it in the next session?

- Use informed consent to guide actions
- Balance compassion with clarity
- Be aware of feelings of urgency and challenge them
- Process underlying feelings and needs of client in next session

Case Study Clinical Questions

What parts of yourself got activated reading this case?

Case Study Clinical Question Discussion

What parts of yourself got activated reading this case?

- Self-of-Therapist Reflection
 - Countertransference is normal
 - Understanding emotional pulls that might impact clinical decisions
 - Making space for self-compassion
 - Helps make more intentional decisions

Case Study Clinical Questions

If this behavior escalated, what would your plan be? Would you adjust your boundaries?

Case Study Clinical Question Discussion

If this behavior escalated, what would your plan be? Would you adjust your boundaries?

- Plan for clarifying limits while staying compassionate
- Consistency builds trust

Case Study Clinical Questions

Would you bring this to supervision or consultation? Why or why not?

Case Study Clinical Question Discussion

Would you bring this to supervision or consultation? Why or why not?

- Supervision/Consultation
 - Reduces therapist isolation
 - Protects client and therapist
 - Explores shame and vulnerability in seeking support

Consistency > Specificity

- Communication outside of session (example: DBT phone coaching)
- Managing crises and boundaries: Plan what to do in cases of risk, and let clients know
- Session length: Be aware of therapeutic risks of going overtime

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Thoughts or Questions?



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Thank you!