



Boundaries and the little things that matter

I keep a small refrigerator in my clinic office to store my lunch and several bottles of iced tea. I enjoy the tea during the day as an alternative to water, just to have something different. One of my clients, noticing my stash of iced tea bottles that had not yet made their way into the refrigerator and also knowing that it was very hot outside, asked if she could have a bottle “for the road.”

I get this tea in bulk at Costco, so it costs me only about 75 cents per bottle. If I give this client a bottle of tea, am I violating some therapeutic boundary and leaving the impression that our relationship is something more than professional, or am I just being humane to someone who is thirsty and heading out into a hot day? Do I need to place a note in the case file indicating that I gave my client a bottle of cold tea to ensure that I properly document this boundary extension, or can I just consider it a simple act of kindness to a client? Is there a simple answer to this question?

Sometime back, one of our counselors-in-training came to me with a concerned look on his face. It seems a couple he had been working with gave him a \$50 gift card as a token of appreciation for helping them through some tough times. He was aware that money was tight for the couple and knew that \$50 was probably a stretch for them. Additionally, the counselor-in-training was aware of the 2014 *ACA Code of Ethics* standard that addresses receiving gifts (Standard A.10.f.) and wanted to check in with me as the clinic director to determine what to do.

Given the circumstances, we quickly worked through a generic ethical decision-making process and decided it was best for him to offer his heartfelt thanks but to tell the clients he could not accept their gift. Try as he might at the next session, however, the couple refused to take the gift card back. They insisted that the counselor-in-training keep it or donate it to the training clinic, saying they had recovered enough financially to be able to afford such a gift. Besides, the couple noted, they were paying next to nothing for the sessions (we operate on a sliding fee scale) and wanted to say thanks. The counselor-in-training thus accepted the card as a gift for the clinic, and we were able to use it for the benefit of other clients.

Minor concerns, major consequences?

A common theme in both of these cases revolves around how a counselor responds to a client request or action when that request or action can be perceived either as innocuous or as being on the edge of violating a relationship boundary. Although filling a client’s request for a bottle of tea or accepting a small gift from a client would seem to be minor concerns, our actions as counselors can have powerful consequences that either enhance or damage the therapeutic relationship.

This all became more complex with the publication of the 2005 *ACA Code of Ethics*, which revised the concept of *dual relationships* (having both a therapeutic and nontherapeutic relationship with a client). The 2005 ethics code recognized

something that had already been apparent for decades: Our relationships with our clients are multifaceted and complex. With this revised concept of dual relationships, we could no longer hide behind the idea that a therapeutic relationship was somehow not personal for both the client and the counselor. Instead, we had to learn how to manage those relationships for the benefit of the client.

The 2014 *ACA Code of Ethics* refined standards around managing and maintaining boundaries and professional relationships to add clarity (see Standard A.6.). The standard related to receiving gifts from clients first appeared in the 2005 code and remained relatively unchanged in the 2014 revision (Standard A.10.f.). Before that time, common wisdom prevailed that it was inappropriate to accept gifts of substantial value from our clients. This wisdom remains intact today.

Boundaries of the professional and personal relationship

So, how does one maintain the professional relationship while acknowledging that counseling is a personal endeavor? Let’s start at the beginning with the informed consent process. As the ethics code was developed and revised, we listed the many types of information that need to be explained and examined with clients prior to discussing the issues at hand (see Standard A.2.b.).

Nowhere on that list of things to discuss is there mention of gift giving or other related matters. In fact, it might

seem presumptuous on the part of a counselor to say, “No gifts are necessary at the termination of our time together.” After all, this might be perceived as implying, “I am so good that you will feel the need to offer me something more than my customary fee.”

What is being addressed in both broad and specific strokes is the boundaries of this *professional* and *personal* relationship. In other words, “This is what you can expect from me, and this is what I expect from you.” It is important to share with the client that counseling has a uniquely personal dimension, especially for the client, and that the counselor is present as the professional in this process. It is important to offer this information in a culturally sensitive way (Standard A.2.c.) and to assess the client’s expectation not just through the lens of the counselor’s culture or that of the majority of the people in the community, but from the client’s worldview and cultural norms.

The decision-making process

The vast majority of ethical dilemmas can be solved by working through a robust ethical decision-making process. Managing boundaries and navigating the challenges of clients offering their thanks in ways that make you uncomfortable are no exception.

It is important to first consider the motivation of the client. One place to begin examining that motivation is with the culture of the client. One of the values of the counseling profession, as delineated in the 2014 *ACA Code of Ethics* preamble, is “honoring diversity and embracing a multicultural approach in support of the worth, dignity, potential and uniqueness of people within their social and cultural contexts.” This is lived out in many different ways in the counseling relationship.

For example, some cultures perceive offering a small token or gift as an acknowledgment of respect. Processing with the client the meaning of the gift can be quite impactful for the counselor and consequential for the client. This doesn’t need to be a drawn-out affair but rather a simple discussion. What might appear to be a simple token from a client can, in fact, have a significance far beyond the value of the gift. This must be weighed in

any decision-making process when determining the counselor’s response.

But what is a counselor to do when, as in the second example above, the counselor and the client share the same culture and the gift simply represents an expression of thanks? Once again, the need arises to discuss the meaning and significance of the gift for the client and to examine the nature of the counseling relationship. Additionally, and more concretely, the value of the gift must be considered. Is it a small token of appreciation (e.g., a houseplant or a novelty coffee cup) or a gift of some value (e.g., a \$100 gift card to a local restaurant)? A general rule to follow is to return anything with an approximate value of more than \$25 with humble thanks and an explanation about the nature of a professional counseling relationship. Counselors should manage their actions on a case-by-case basis and document their actions, in a case note, regardless of the decision reached.

How about if the counselor gives something to a client, such as in the first case example? May I offer my client a cold tea, especially on a hot day? Would it be appropriate to offer clients a token of our work together that symbolizes their progress or reminds them of how far they have come in therapy?

The spirit of our ethics code reminds us that our primary responsibility is to promote the welfare of clients (Standard A.1.a.). So, two questions that must be asked are:

- 1) How will my actions be perceived by the client?
- 2) How will my actions impact the professional relationship with the client?

If the client perceives my actions as something other than professional or an act of simple human kindness that might be offered to anyone, it can create a mistaken impression about the relationship. This, in turn, affects how the client views the counselor and can create confusion on the part of the client about the counselor’s intent. This is especially true with clients whose issues may center around overly rigid or diffuse boundaries. On the other hand, a client with healthy boundaries might consider the counselor’s action a simple kindness that communicates respect, care and decency. It becomes your job as

the professional counselor to assess the context of the situation and to determine an appropriate course of action.

Conclusion

With certain exceptions, we no longer live in a world in which we maintain rigid boundaries as professional counselors for fear of contaminating the therapeutic relationship. We can extend boundaries when appropriate (e.g., attending a client’s wedding or commitment ceremony) with the proper precautions and after discussing it with the client. These extensions may, in fact, enhance the therapeutic relationship, build closer rapport and lead to greater healing.

Or, when necessary, we can choose to maintain a boundary with a client. When this happens, it requires a discussion that helps the client understand the necessity of the boundary and how it protects the therapeutic relationship.

Regardless of the action taken, documentation of the discussion and decision must be made in the case file. Although the process has become more complicated, in the end it benefits both the counselor and the client. ❖

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