

No Sex No Excuse

“If I talk about this abuse, no one will believe me. Even if they believe me, they will never understand why I let this happen. Maybe they won’t think it’s any big deal...maybe they’ll just think I was asking for it. Who’s going to support the client instead of the therapist?”

THERE IS NO EXCUSE

but I had never felt this way about a client before - I just fell in love.

but as her therapist, I only touched her in context of the therapy so she could become orgasmic with her spouse.

but I was under the influence of alcohol and other drugs at the time we had sex.

but he wanted to have his first experience and I knew I could be his most loving teacher.

but she understood what she was doing and agreed to be discreet about our involvement in order to protect my reputation and my family.

but touching and massage are soothing and relaxing. The client is the one who sexualized the relationship.

but she had experienced such abusive relationships, I just wanted to show her what good and caring sex was like.

but my own life was in shambles then, I just didn't know what I was doing.

but she was so beautiful and so seductive, I just got carried away.

but I was no longer his therapist. We terminated as soon as we realized we had feelings for one another so we could become lovers.

There is no excuse.

“He used to say that I was very special and our relationship was unique. When I found out that there had been other clients that he had ‘loved’, I felt humiliated and used.”

INTRODUCTION

Most therapists who practice psychotherapy are ethical people who care about their clients. Only a small percentage of therapists behave unethically. Therapists who encourage, ask for, or permit sexual involvement with their clients are exploiting them. **Professional therapy never includes sexual behavior.** All therapists are educated and trained to know that this kind of behavior is unethical, self-serving and harmful to the client.

By the nature of their profession, therapists are trusted and respected. It is common for clients to admire and feel attracted to them. A therapist who accepts or encourages these normal feelings in a sexual way - or tells a client that sexual involvement is part of the therapy - is using the trusted therapeutic relationship to take advantage of the client. **Once sexual involvement begins, therapy for the client ends.** The original issues that brought the client to therapy are postponed, neglected, and sometimes lost.

The Louisiana State Board of Social Work Examiners and other licensure boards want this kind of behavior stopped. This literature was developed to help victims of sexual exploitation by therapists. It defines sexual exploitation, gives warning signs of unprofessional behavior, presents a Client Bill of Rights, and answers questions frequently asked by victims of professional abuse. It also outlines the client’s rights and options for reporting therapist misconduct.

“The years that I was in therapy with the person who exploited me are all a blank. I can’t remember any of our conversations or what we worked on. I do remember constantly wondering whether he was going to be sexual with me this time. I felt powerless to stop him and was very confused by my own feelings of attraction and guilt, fear and shame.”

“I foolishly put my trust in him. I assumed he was the professional. He told me that a body massage, touching me in intimate areas, was a legitimate part of therapy. When I felt uneasy about it, I told myself that it was my hang-up getting in the way of therapy.”

DEFINITIONS

The terms used to discuss the issue of sexual exploitation by the therapist are often ambiguous. In order to eliminate confusion, we offer these definitions:

Therapist - any social worker, psychologist, psychiatrist, nurse, marriage and family therapist, counselor, substance abuse counselor, member of the clergy or other person, whether licensed or not, who provide or claim to provide psychotherapy, counseling, assessment or mental health treatment.

Client or Patient - any person who uses the services of a therapist.

Sexual exploitation - inappropriate sexual conversation, or suggestions of sexual involvement with the therapist, and/or sexual or romantic contact between client and therapist which may include but is not limited to kissing, touching of breasts or genitals, nudity, masturbation and/or sexual intercourse.

Boundary - something that indicates or marks a limit. In a therapeutic relationship, a boundary is the limit that exists to maintain the professional relationship between the therapist and the client in order to ensure that the client’s needs are appropriately met. When boundaries are violated, the client feels intruded upon and perhaps even confused about sense of self.

“He started to tell me his troubles and the burden was heavy. Then he made me feel like I had to comfort him, to have sex with him. I was the one who

needed help. I have more problems now than when I started.”

“She told me I didn’t have to make appointments, that I would just do work on her house. Then it turned into sex. I feel powerless because she still helps me financially.”

WARNING SIGNS

In some sexual exploitation cases, other inappropriate behavior comes first. While it may be subtle or confusing, it usually feels uncomfortable to the client. Some warning signs or clues in the therapist’s behavior are

- giving seductive looks to the client.
- telling sexual jokes or stories.
- discussing the therapist’s sex life or relationships.
- sitting too close or lying next to the client.
- unnecessary touching.

Other warning signs occur when therapists give clients “special” treatment, such as

- inviting a client to lunch, dinner, or other social activities
- changing any of the office’s normal business practices (for example, scheduling late appointments so no one is around, extending the therapy sessions to two or three hours, having sessions away from the office, etc.).
- confiding in a client (for example, about the therapist’s love life, work problems, etc.).
- relying on a client for personal and emotional support.
- giving or receiving significant gifts.
- providing or using alcohol or other drugs during sessions.

Signs of inappropriate behavior and misuse of power may include

- hiring a client to do work for the therapist, or bartering goods or services to enable the client to “pay” for therapy.
- intimidating or threatening behavior by a therapist (for example, suggesting that certain things that occur in the therapy hour should not be revealed to a spouse.).

If you are experiencing any of these warning signs - **TRUST YOUR OWN FEELINGS**. Confront your therapist about the behaviors that make you feel uncomfortable. If the issue is not resolved through confrontation, talk to your therapist’s supervisor or consult another professional to discuss your concerns.

“I trusted and believed in him. He told me we had to keep our relationship secret because of what it might do. I’ve lied to everyone. I hate living like this.”

“It’s really hard to explain how powerful the therapist seems to the client. He is supposed to be the expert, the trusted person who knows what is best for you. I wish I hadn’t ignored my uneasiness and confusion when he started touching me. I guess I wanted him to take my pain away and to take care of me. It turned out that I was taking care of his needs most of the time.”

WHAT IF IT'S ME?

If you have been or are a victim of sexual exploitation by your therapist, you may experience a wide range of emotions. Many victims feel

- **Guilty and responsible** even though it is the therapist's ethical duty to keep sexual behavior out of the therapy.
- **Mixed feelings about the therapist** including protectiveness, anger, love and betrayal.
- **Isolated, empty and distrustful** of others and of their own feelings.
- **Fear** that someone will find out or that no one will believe them or understand what happened.
- **Numbness or nothing** with accompanying nightmares, obsessive ideas, depression, and/or suicidal thoughts.
- **Confused** about issues of dependency, control, and power.

You may feel overwhelmed in trying to decide what to do or whom to tell. Facing what happened may be painful, but it is the first step in healing and recovering from the experience. You may have both positive and negative feelings at the same time. You may begin to feel personal control yet be afraid of what will happen in the future or you may romanticize the experience while feeling relieved the sexual relations are over.

The second step in the healing process is to decide what YOU want to do next. Try to be open-minded about your options.

PLEASE REMEMBER - It does not matter if you, the client, started or wanted the sexual involvement with the therapist. Therapists should never use the therapy relationship for their own personal gain. This is sexual exploitation and it is unethical.

"It was hard to question his behavior (hugging, kissing, petting) when he always preceded it by saying what a good person I was, so loving and caring. I wanted to hear these words, and refusing that touch and those compliments would not be 'loving and caring'."

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Is it normal to feel attracted to your therapist?

Yes. It is normal to feel attracted to someone who is attentive, kind and caring. This is a common reaction towards someone who is helping you. However, all therapists are trained to be aware of this and to maintain appropriate boundaries to insure a therapeutic relationship that is beneficial to the client.

What if I was the one who brought up having sex?

That doesn't matter. The therapist is the one who is responsible for keeping sexual exploitation out of the therapy.

Am I a victim if I had sex with my therapist?

Yes.

Does this happen a lot?

A recent study revealed that probably less than 10% of all therapists have had sexual contact with their clients. However, 80% of the sexually exploiting therapists have exploited more than one client. In other words, if a therapist is sexually exploiting a client, chances are he or she has done so before and will do so again.

Why do some therapists sexually exploit their clients?

Some therapists sexually exploit their clients because they are having trouble in their own personal lives. Some lack knowledge of professional standards and ethics, receive inadequate training and/or have poor supervision. Despite ample evidence to the contrary, some therapists claim that sexual contact is therapeutic for the client. Some are very seriously disturbed individuals who focus only on their own sense of power.

What if the sexual contact occurred after therapy terminated?

The therapeutic relationship of trust and dependency can be violated even after termination. If you feel you have been hurt or harmed by a sexual relationship with a previous therapist after termination of treatment, you probably have been and are entitled to any of the options listed on page 8.

Why do I feel scared and confused about reporting the therapist?

Feelings of confusion, protectiveness, shame or guilt are especially common in this type of situation. However, it is important for you to get as much information as possible about your options. Keep in mind that you are in control and can choose what to do.

How can I prevent this from happening again?

- Acknowledge your right to be free from sexual exploitation.
- When choosing a therapist, check with the licensure board to see if the therapist is licensed, and if the license is under suspension or probation.
- Question any action that may seem sexual in nature.
- Remember that while feelings of attraction are natural, therapy is supposed to be a place to explore and resolve feelings without having to act them out.
- Feel free to end a relationship that no longer seems safe.

“It feels good to have talked about this experience. I don’t feel so alone or ashamed anymore. I just have to keep telling myself that it wasn’t my fault, that I’ve done what I can to resolve the situation and it is time to get on with my life.”

“Once I told my therapist I didn’t want to see him anymore, I felt free. I’m beginning to feel better, stronger.”

WHAT YOU CAN DO

You have several ways of dealing with your situation and/or reporting what happened. The process of deciding what you would like to do may be confusing. Take the time to carefully explore all of your rights and options. You always have the option of waiting for a while or taking no action at all.

Something that may help is to think about your situation and decide what your goals might be. Perhaps you want to prevent your therapist from harming other clients. You may want to receive monetary compensation for the damage you have suffered to help pay for future sessions with a non-exploitative therapist. You may want to take a stand and make it known that sexual exploitation by a therapist is always damaging and wrong.

Remember - You have the right to decide what is best for you.

OPTIONS FOR ACTION

- Contact the appropriate licensure board

To request consultation or assignment of an advocate who will assist you in whatever action you decide to take.

or

To file a formal complaint against the offending therapist.

The purpose of the licensure boards is to protect the health, safety and welfare of consumers (clients/patients). Depending on the nature of the violation, the Board responsible for the licensee can suspend or revoke a license preventing the therapist from legally practicing in the State of Louisiana. The Board can also place the therapist on probation with requirements for weekly supervision and psychotherapy and/or limitations on scope of practice.

You should be aware that the law (LSA R.S. 37:21, Act 1289 of 1995) provides time limits for certain professional boards to initiate disciplinary proceedings. These time limits may vary depending on the **nature** of the complaint, the **amount** of time that has elapsed since the act or omission complained of occurred, or the **amount** of time that has elapsed between the act or omission and your **discovery** of sufficient information to bring the complaint.

Generally, the proceeding must be initiated within **two years of discovery**, but in no case can a proceeding be initiated more than **five years** from the date the act or omission occurred.

You may not initially recognize or acknowledge the sexual involvement with your therapist as abusive. **Discovery** of the emotional damage such abuse creates may take additional work with a new and ethical therapist and/or simply the passage of time and your own recognition of the residue of emotional suffering created by the exploitation of your trust.

As soon as you are aware that you have suffered some form of damage or injury as a result of something your therapist did or failed to do, you should contact your appropriate licensure board without delay.

- Notify your therapist's supervisor, agency director or church hierarchy if your therapist works in an agency, hospital, school or church.
- Report the therapist to professional membership associations who may remove the therapist from membership due to ethical violations. Consult your local library for the names and addresses of the appropriate professional associations.
- File a civil law suit for injuries suffered through sexual exploitation and for the cost of future therapy sessions. Most civil law suits must be filed within one year after the sexual exploitation occurs.
- Find a new therapist. For many who have been sexually exploited by a therapist, it is hard to seek another therapist for help and support. For most clients the issues that brought them to therapy were never resolved, and the sexual exploitation created even more psychological difficulties. Therapy may prove to be an important tool in your healing process. Some therapists even offer group therapy sessions where you can meet people who have had similar experiences. Call the professional associations or licensure boards and ask for the names of therapists who specialize in helping victims of sexual exploitation. Ask a trusted friend who has been in therapy and has changed in ways you consider positive. After getting several names, call the appropriate licensure board to determine if the therapists are licensed and if any disciplinary action has been taken against them.

- Do nothing. You should be mindful that doing nothing allows a questionable practice to continue. Doing nothing for an extended period may make the case more difficult to investigate or potentially impair the Board's ability to initiate proceedings due to the passage of time.

“I thought I would have to do all of this alone. I was so relieved when I found out there was someone willing to help me.”

Client Bill of Rights

You have the right to

- a safe environment, free from sexual, physical, and emotional abuse.
- know the limits of confidentiality and the circumstances when a therapist is legally required to disclose information to others.
- request and receive full information about the therapist's professional capabilities, including licensure, education, training, experience, professional association membership, specialization, and limitations.
- a clear description before beginning therapy about fees, method of payment, insurance reimbursement, number of sessions, substitutions (in cases of vacation and emergencies), and cancellation policies.
- know if there are supervisors, consultants, students or others with whom your therapist will discuss your case.
- receive treatment from a therapist who is not under the influence of alcohol or other mind/mood altering drugs.
- receive treatment from a therapist who will not exploit you for personal gain such as borrowing money, involving you in business transactions or in social relationships.
- receive a second opinion at any time about your therapy or your therapist's methods.
- refuse a particular type of treatment or end treatment without harassment.
- report unethical and illegal behavior by a therapist.

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