

<p>IN THE MATTER OF</p> <p>DEBRA LYNNE AMBROSE, LCSW-C</p> <p>RESPONDENT</p> <p>License Number: 07310</p>	<p>*</p> <p>*</p> <p>*</p> <p>*</p>	<p>BEFORE THE</p> <p>MARYLAND BOARD OF</p> <p>SOCIAL WORK EXAMINERS</p> <p>Case Number: 19-2611</p>
<p>* * * * *</p>		

CONSENT ORDER

On August 14, 2020, the Maryland Board of Social Work Examiners (the “Board”) charged **DEBRA LYNNE AMBROSE, LCSW-C** (the “Respondent”), License Number **07310**, with violating the Maryland Social Workers Act (the “Act”) codified at Md. Code Ann., Health Occ. §§ 19-101 *et seq.* (2014 Repl. Vol. & 2019 Supp.).

The Board based its actions on the following pertinent provisions of the Act:

§ 19-311 – Denials, reprimands, suspensions, and revocations – Grounds.

Subject to the hearing provisions of § 19-312 of this subtitle, the Board may deny a license to any applicant, fine a licensee, reprimand any licensee, place any licensee on probation, or suspend or revoke a license if the applicant or licensee:

- (5) Engages in a course of conduct that is inconsistent with generally accepted professional standards in the practice of social work;
- (6) Violates any provision of this title or regulations governing the practice of social work adopted and published by the Board[.]

The pertinent provisions of COMAR, the code of ethics, provide the following:

COMAR 10.42.03.05 – Relationships

- A. The licensee may not enter into a dual relationship with a client or an individual with whom the client has a close personal relationship[.]

COMAR 10.42.03.06 – Standards of Practice

- B. Professional Competence. The licensee may not:
- (1) Undertake or continue a professional relationship with a client when the competence or objectivity of the licensee is or could reasonably be expected to be impaired due to:
 - (a) Mental, emotional, physiological, substance abuse, or personal problems
 - (2) Engage in other relationships that could limit the licensee's objectivity or create a conflict of interest or the appearance of a conflict of interest[.]

On September 23, 2020, the parties appeared at a Case Resolution Conference ("CRC") before a committee of the Board. The Respondent, represented by counsel, and the Administrative Prosecutor assigned to the case participated in the CRC. As a result of the negotiations at the CRC, the parties agreed to the following Consent Order consisting of Findings of Fact, Conclusions of Law, and Order.

FINDINGS OF FACT

The Board finds the following:

1. At all times relevant hereto, the Respondent was licensed to practice clinical social work in the State of Maryland. The Respondent was initially licensed to practice bachelors-level social work ("LBSW") in Maryland on or about July 19, 1986, under license number A02471. On April 16, 1988, the Respondent was licensed to practice masters-level social work ("LMSW") in Maryland under license number

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G-03251. On June 20, 1992, the Respondent was license to practice clinical social work (“LCSW-C”) under license number 07310. The Respondent’s LCSW-C license is currently active until October 31, 2020.

2. At the time of the incident, the Respondent was providing clinical social work services at a licensed outpatient mental health clinic (the “Clinic”) located in Hagerstown, Maryland
3. The Respondent currently provides social work services for two separate licensed outpatient mental health clinics – Employer1 is located in Boonsboro, Maryland. Employer2 is located in Hagerstown, Maryland.

Complaint

4. On or about February 26, 2019, the Board received a complaint (the “Complaint”) from a former client (the “Complainant”). The Complaint alleged several professional issues including ethical misconduct, professional misconduct, boundary concerns, and enmeshment concerns. Specifically, the Complainant alleged that the quality of her therapeutic services was based upon the quality of the gifts that the Complainant gave to the Respondent
5. Based on the Complaint, the Board began an investigation of the Respondent.

Maryland Board Investigation

6. On October 22, 2019, the Board issued a Subpoena Duces Tecum (“Subpoena #1”) to the Respondent. Subpoena #1 stated in part:

Pursuant to Section §19-312(c) of the Health Occupations Article, Annotated Code of Maryland, YOU ARE HEREBY SUMMONED

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AND COMMANDED UPON SERVICE OF PROCESS by the BOARD OF SOCIAL WORK EXAMINERS to deliver the following:

A complete "**Legible Copy**" of any and all patient/client records for [Complainant] that involve any treatment that you provide[d] to this client. The records shall include any and all documents relating to treatment plans, session notes, evaluations, referrals, progress notes, written correspondences, counseling notes, progress recommendations, incident forms for client, client's ledger, memorandums, prognosis, sign in logs, discharge notes, inter alia[.]

7. The Respondent submitted Therapy Notes for the Complainant that included a summary, assessment and administrative/billing information. The Respondent also submitted Progress Notes which provided individualized narrative-type entries for each visit.
8. On October 21, 2019, the Board issued a second Subpoena Duces Tecum ("Subpoena #2") to the Clinic. Subpoena #2 requested the following:

A complete "**Legible Copy**" of any and all records pertaining to your internal investigative findings regarding former employee Debra Ambrose, LCSW-C. The records shall include all communications, electronic data, emails, text messages, social media post[s], voice recordings, letters, notes, correspondence of any kind, inter alia, involving former employee Debra Ambrose, LCSW-C.

9. The Clinic provided color copies of the photo album/journal that the Complainant shared with them which contained personal photographs of the Respondent, the Respondent's husband, and the Respondent's grown children which the Respondent sent to the Complainant; copies of email correspondence between the Complainant and the Respondent's personal email address; and the findings of the Clinic's Ethics Committee.
10. On December 9, 2019, the Complainant was interviewed by the Board's investigator under oath. The Complainant provided the following information:
 - a. The Complainant explained that "in the beginning everything was fine. I was getting my counseling. When I'd go in, I'd talk. She'd talk back. You know, let me know how to do things, how to go about my situations. And then as the months went on, it seemed like [the Respondent] wanted to become more friendlier [*sic*] as friend, and she's like, I've never met somebody, you know, as nice as you. You seem like you can help me out, too, with my situations, and I told her I have enough of my own situations."
 - b. The Complainant added that it seemed like the Respondent "didn't want to help me as much, and then she would start talking about her life. She would start talking about her family, the problems between – at the time, it was her fiancé . . . and all of the problems they were having. And I would always get upset leaving out because I never got to talk about my situations."
 - c. The Complainant noted that the Respondent would drop hints that she would like to have certain items or would tell the Complainant the exact types of wine she liked to drink. The Complainant explained that she felt she had to purchase and deliver the requested items or she would "lose my counseling." The Complainant stated that she would not bring the items into the building but the Respondent would come and collect the items from the Complainant's car.

- d. The Complainant stated: “When I couldn’t bring something in to her, it was – everything was all about her and her family. And I was getting the point that I’m not going to get help unless I have to bring something in to her to get my therapy.”
 - e. The Complainant added that the Respondent often threatened: “If you ever tell on me, you know, I would get fired Reminding me, don’t go say anything. If you do, you know, I’m going to make sure you go in [residential mental health facility]. I have friends. You’ll never get out. You’ll never see your kids again[.]”
 - f. The Complainant explained that “it just progress[ed] to the point I couldn’t deal with it anymore, and I finally went to her boss I took in a book of photos.”
11. On November 1, 2019, the Director of the Clinic (the “Director”) was interviewed by the Board’s investigator under oath. The Director provided the following information:
- a. The Director explained that on December 14, 2018, he met with the Complainant and reviewed a binder she brought full of pictures of the Respondent, the Respondent’s husband and the Respondent’s adult sons.
 - b. The Director forwarded the complaint to the Clinic’s Ethics Committee for review.
 - c. On December 20, 2018, the Ethics Committee met. According to the Ethics Committee’s written notes, during the meeting the Respondent admitted to crossing boundaries by sending emails and personal photos to her client, the Complainant. The Respondent also admitted to giving the Complainant her personal email, accepting trinkets from the Complainant, allowing the Complainant to take selfies with the Respondent, and giving the Complainant personal family photos.
 - d. The Ethics Committee found that there was no proof that the Respondent took the larger gifts of wine, a wine refrigerator, gift cards, etc. However, there was proof that the Respondent shared personal emails and photographs for a period of three years. The

Respondent tendered her resignation at the end of the meeting and the Ethics Committee accepted.

12. On November 19, 2019, the Respondent was interviewed by the Board's investigator under oath. The Respondent provided the following information:

- a. The Respondent admitted that the Complainant had been a client of hers for approximately four years.
- b. The Respondent admitted to:
 - i. Giving the Complainant her personal email address as a result of the rejection by the Respondent's business email account at the Clinic because of an attachment from the Complainant early in the treatment relationship.
 - ii. Accepting trinkets and handmade crafts (key chains, lanyards, magnets, Christmas ornaments, etc.) from the Complainant.
 - iii. Taking multiple selfies with the Complainant.
 - iv. Sharing personal family information with the Complainant including things about her sick father, and other family members which may have influenced the Complainant's decision making regarding her own family.
 - v. Accepting a birthday cake¹ and flower arrangement from the Complainant.
 - vi. Sharing personal family photographs with the Complainant – noting that the photos had nothing to do with therapy and were of a personal nature.
 - vii. Sending the Complainant pictures of the Respondent and her family while they were on vacation.
 - viii. Misleading the Complainant into believing that the two of them were friends or that they were more than therapist and client.

¹ In her undated written response, the Respondent described receiving a birthday cake from the Complainant on two separate occasions.

- ix. Accepted between \$50.00 to \$60.00 worth of gifts from the Complainant.
 - x. Accepted beach chairs from the Complainant which she then took to Goodwill.
- c. The Respondent explained that “the resignation came after a really bad personal year.” The Respondent added that she “had a sick dad, daughter died, grandchildren with no mother, sold a house, downsizing, you name it. I mean, I know it’s just life but it’s hard to maintain life when you’re maintaining a 40 hour job doing what we do when bad things happen to you personally.”
- d. The Respondent admitted that her actions in this matter could be viewed as unethical and unprofessional but believes that she should be given a second chance and allowed to continue practicing in the field.
- e. In hindsight, the Respondent admits that she should have documented when the Complainant brought her gifts and specifically noted which she accepted and why, and which she rejected.

DISCUSSION

The Board finds that the Respondent, in her treatment of the Complainant, engaged in a course of conduct that was inconsistent with generally accepted professional standards. The Respondent admitted that she crossed professional boundaries by accepting nominal gifts, exchanging personal information and photographs, and misleading the Complainant into thinking that there was more than a professional relationship. The Board recognizes the Respondent’s ability to reflect on her practice, accept responsibility, and implement lasting changes to improve her practice.

CONCLUSIONS OF LAW

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Based on the foregoing Findings of Fact, the Board concludes as a matter of law that the Respondent violated Health Occ. § 19-311 (5) and (6) and COMAR 10.42.03.05(A); and COMAR 10.42.03.06(A)(B)(1)(a) and (2).

ORDER

Based on the foregoing Findings of Fact and Conclusions of Law, it is this **9th** day of **October**, 2020, by a majority of the quorum of the Board considering this case hereby:

ORDERED that the Respondent's license to practice social work in the State of Maryland shall be placed on **PROBATION** for a period of **ONE (1) YEAR**; and it is further

ORDERED that for a period of one (1) year, the Respondent shall meet for at least two sessions per month, for a minimum of one clinical hour per session with a Board-approved supervisor for random chart review and discussion at the Respondent's expense; and it is further

ORDERED that the supervisor shall submit quarterly written reports to the Board, which shall include but not be limited to the number and type of cases reviewed, issues discussed and his/her assessment of the Respondent's practice, and the supervisor's recommendations, if any, for earlier termination of the supervision; and it is further

ORDERED that the Respondent is responsible for requesting that the supervisor submits the required quarterly reports to the Board in a timely manner; and it is further

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ORDERED that the Board has sole authority to implement any changes in the supervision and retains all authority to approve any changes in the supervision; and it is further

ORDERED that in the event that the supervisor discontinues supervising the Respondent for any reason, the Respondent shall immediately notify the Board and work with the Board to find a suitable replacement; and it is further

ORDERED that the Respondent shall not serve or continue to serve as a Board Authorized Sponsor, presenter and/or trainer of social work continuing education learning activities, an Ethics Tutor, an evaluator for the Board, or a Board Approved Supervisor for a period of 5 years from the effective date of this Consent Order; and it is further

ORDERED that if the Respondent violates any terms and conditions of the Consent Order, the Board, in its discretion, after notice and an opportunity for an evidentiary hearing if there is a genuine dispute as to the underlying facts, or an opportunity for a show cause hearing before the Board otherwise, may impose any sanction that the Board may have imposed in this case including probation, suspension, revocation, and/or a monetary penalty; and it is further

ORDERED that the Respondent shall be responsible for all costs incurred in the fulfilling the terms and conditions of this Consent Order; and it is further

ORDERED that for purposes of public disclosure, this Consent Order is considered a **PUBLIC DOCUMENT** pursuant to Md. Code Ann., Gen. Provisions, §§ 4-

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101 *et seq.* (2014) and is reportable to any entity to whom the Board is obligated to report.²

10/09/2020



Date

Gerard Farrell,
Board Chair
Maryland Board of Social Work Examiners

² This includes the Board's public website and NPDB.

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CONSENT

I, Debra Ambrose, LCSW-C, License No. 07310, by affixing my signature hereto, acknowledge that:

1. I am represented by counsel and I have consulted with counsel on this matter. I have knowingly and voluntarily agreed to enter into this Consent Order. By this Consent and for the purpose of resolving the issues raised by the Board, I agree and accept to be bound by the foregoing Consent Order and its conditions.
2. I am aware that I am entitled to a formal evidentiary hearing, pursuant to Md. Code Ann., Health Occ. § 19-312 (2014 Repl. Vol. and 2019 Supp.) and Md. Code Ann., State Gov't, §§ 10-201 *et seq.* (2014 Repl. Vol. and 2019 Supp.).
3. I acknowledge the validity and enforceability of this Consent Order as if entered into after the conclusions of a formal evidentiary hearing in which I would have the right to counsel, to confront witnesses, to give testimony, to call witnesses on my own behalf, and to all other substantive and procedural precautions as provided by law. I am waiving those procedural and substantive processes.
4. I voluntarily enter into and agree to abide by the terms and conditions set forth herein as a resolution of the Charges against me. I waive any right to contest the Findings of Fact and Conclusions of Law, and I waive my right to a full evidentiary hearing, as set forth above, and any right to appeal this Consent Order or any adverse ruling of the Board that might have followed any such hearing.
5. I acknowledge that any failure to abide by the conditions set forth in this Consent Order, I may be subject to further disciplinary actions, including up to revocation of my license to practice as a social worker.
6. I sign this Consent Order voluntarily, without reservation, and I fully understand and comprehend the language, meaning and terms of this Consent Order.

10/7/20
Date

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NOTARY

STATE OF MARYLAND

COUNTY OF FREDERICK

I **HEREBY CERTIFY** that on this 7th day of October, 2020, before me, a Notary Public of the State and County aforesaid, personally appeared **DEBRA AMBROSE, LCSW-C**, License Number: **07310**, and gave oath in due form of law that the foregoing Consent Order was her voluntary act and deed.

AS WITNESS, my hand and Notary Seal.



William G. Shawley, Jr.
Notary Public

My Commission Expires: 01/08/2023