A Touchy Subject: Ethics in Touching
Presenter: Frances Patterson

Would you record something like a handshake?
A: I would not record a handshake. This is a socially polite thing to do that really does not carry the same level of intimacy as other touch. What I would make sure to record is a hug, extended touch such as holding hands with a geriatric client, touch that could be misinterpreted by a client or another person that may have observed the touch. Again it is about protecting yourself and the client and remaining transparent in all of our dealings with clients. If you are not sure, then make a note of it. I always like to err on the side of caution.

If you are emotionally drawn to a client, is it best to avoid touch with that client?
A: That depends on the client, the situation, counselor self-awareness as to what the emotional draw is about, are you seeking supervision.
This is a situation where your own personal insight is critical. Are you experiencing countertransference and are you seeking consultation about it? If we don’t address our own issues then touch can be risky and could lead down a very slippery slope.

I have a client who wants to hug me when they come in to a session and as they are leaving. I am not comfortable with this familiarity. What should I do?
A: Consider this a therapeutic moment. Discuss with the client their behavior in regards to client needs. It is also acceptable to tell the client that you are not comfortable with it and why. Explore cultural aspects if appropriate.
You can also explore appropriate touch in the counseling relationship. This is a great opportunity to teach boundaries with a client. Client who have already been attending 12 Step meetings may not understand that what is normal in meetings my not be appropriate in counseling. Counselors who are also in recovery need to remember there are different boundaries also.

You talked about ending group with the serenity prayer while holding hands and a group hug. I work at a program that does this routinely and it is expected that we as counselors end group this way. How do I address this with my supervisor and management?
A: I recommend that you talk to your supervisor first and express concerns regarding violation of client boundaries, not having client permission, concerns of clients with past trauma, demanding clients touch each other, etc. If this practice is to continue, drawing up a draft of a policy and inclusion in informed consent for clients would be a good next step for you and your supervisor to take to management.

What about using soft objects [instead of touching], like a teddy bear, etc.?
A: This could be beneficial if you are seeing a client that you have concerns about any type of therapeutic touch or you are not comfortable with touch. At one time I had a basket full of stuffed animals in my office and I had some clients that would pick one up and just hold it during a session. I have also used “kooshes”, nerf balls and stress balls. Another approach that might be successful for you is, in lieu of touch, leaning in or removing any barrier (such as a coffee table) to give the feel of a more intimate space, without including touch.