ETHICS

Self-Disclosure: To Do or Not to Do?

By Mita Johnson, EdD, LAC, MAC, SAP, NAADAC Ethics Committee Chair

The topic of self-disclosure is a thought-provoking subject, especially in the addictions counseling profession. The questions typically revolve around: (a) how much I can or should tell a client about myself, and (b) whether my self-disclosure will help the client in his or her recovery, especially if I have a recovery history myself. These are both valid questions that need to be examined because the answer is not always a neatly-defined "always" or "never." Whenever you are considering a self-disclosure, you should be intentional rather than impulsive about that decision, and base your decision on the answers to the following four questions:

1. **Why** are you wanting to self-disclose personal information to your client(s)?
2. **What** will your information mean to the client? How will this information help the client?
3. **Is it okay** for your self-disclosure to be made public to everyone the client encounters?
4. **How** would you defend this self-disclosure to your clinical supervisor, a grievance board, or a regulatory-licensure board?

Self-disclosures have a purpose in the helping professions when they are used ethically, thoughtfully, and pragmatically. Self-disclosures have the potential to let the client know that they are not alone, and that you can empathize with their situation based on your own story. For some clients, knowing that others have made it through similar journeys can be motivating and hope-inspiring.

Why you are disclosing personal information is key to this conversation. What is your goal or intent in self-disclosing to your client? How is your self-disclosure addressing a specific need of the client versus meeting your needs? Is there any chance that the intent of the self-disclosure was to make an easy connection with the client where the client accepted you more because of the self-disclosure? All of these questions would have to be examined to make sure that the self-disclosures are for the client's benefit and not the clinician's benefit.

Most clients are curious about their clinician's story. There are also clients who need to know more about their therapist in order to connect with and trust them. Timing of self-disclosures is important to consider. We do not want our disclosures to in any way influence the screening, intake assessment, treatment planning, or treatment of the client. When a client begins asking questions that are not necessarily timed well, you have several options:

- Re-direct the conversation back to the client.
- Deflect the client away from their question to other questions.
- Answer another question.
- Speak in general or third person terms/voice rather than using "I" language.

A final thought for you to consider is the release of information to your client about your own substance use history. This can be tricky because there will be clients who compare their drugs of choice to your drugs of choice and it can become a competition of who used harder or more intense substances and/or expressed more addictive behaviors. Again, the timing of this self-disclosure is very important to the treatment process and must be judiciously determined. Most clients do not need to know your substance use history, age, marital status, or other personal information in order to work effectively with you. What they do need to know is that you have empathy, care about them, and can listen nonjudgmentally to their stories and life journey.

Mita M. Johnson, EdD, LAC, MAC, SAP, has a doctorate in Counselor Education and Supervision, a Master's Degree in Counseling, and a Bachelor's Degree in Biology. She is a licensed professional counselor, licensed marriage and family therapist, and licensed addiction counselor, along with earning the national Master Addiction Counselor (MAC) and Department of Transportation Substance Abuse Professional (SAP) certifications. Johnson has two supervisory credentials (ACS and AAMFT) and is a NCC. She is a core faculty member at Walden University, and she maintains a private practice where she works with supervisees who are working on credentialing. Johnson is the Past-President of the Colorado Association of Addiction Professionals (CAAP), and is currently NAADAC Treasurer and Ethics Chair. She previously served as NAADAC's Southwest Regional Vice-President. In Colorado, Johnson is involved in regulatory and credentialing activities as well as workforce recruitment and retention initiatives. She speaks and trains regionally and nationally on a variety of topics. Her passions beyond workforce retention include pharmacology of drugs of addiction, infectious diseases, ethics, motivational interviewing, and clinical supervision.