

Virtue Ethics & Personal Relationships

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As we are all keenly aware, ethics codes cannot possibly address all the situations that a clinician or service provider (hereinafter referred to as professional) will be exposed to and need to address during his or her tenure as a practitioner. While mandatory ethics give us the rules that are foundational to safe practice, aspirational ethics go above and beyond those rules to seek excellence in conduct that is more than what is minimally required. Virtue ethics define, inform and guide the actor rather than their actions. Virtue ethics require us to address these two questions: “who am I” and “how shall I be” in this situation? As professionals, it is easier to discern our mandatory ethics because they are concrete — and to ignore our virtue ethics. I would like to challenge us to think more holistically about our ethical thinking process and resulting conduct.

Romantic/personal relationships are a great example of where NAADAC’s Code of Ethics addresses and prohibits certain activities, knowing that there are grey areas surrounding these relationships. The principles and codes are designed to protect the client from exploitation and harm, and to protect the professional from conflicts of interest. The following case, which happens more frequently than we might realize, is an example of a grey area that in many ways is not so grey. Consider this case: is it okay for a professional (i.e., Sue) to engage in a romantic/personal relationship with a client (i.e., Bob) who is currently receiving services at her agency/place of employment, but is not a direct client? Bob is working with another professional in the agency but wants to enter into a personal non-professional relationship with Sue. The NAADAC/NCC AP Code of Ethics prohibits romantic/personal relationships with former or current clients — following under the maxim “once a client, always a client.” It is never going to be acceptable for Sue to have a romantic/personal relationship with Bob if Bob was her client, regardless of how long it has been since the relationship was terminated. A personal/romantic relationship is addressed in the NAADAC/NCC AP Code of Ethics. However, NAADAC does not directly address the issue of dating someone who is a client of the agency and works with another therapist. That’s not a problem, right?

Dating a client of the agency is problematic on several levels. As a clinician (Sue) dating someone who is a client of the agency (Bob), Sue is still in a position of access, power, and authority. Bob’s case is likely to be discussed in group supervision or other staffing sessions. Bob’s clinical behavioral health records, psychological assessment and drug testing results, referral information, legal information, health records, etc. may be accessible to Sue — violating Bob’s rights to confidentiality and privileged communication as a client. In addition, there is the potential for a conflict of interest or potential gain on Sue’s part. Before this relationship is pursued, there are questions that need to be answered and discussions regarding policy and procedure that need to be had around risk and liability management. The agency is charged legally and ethically with securing and protecting Bob’s rights and agency obligations per legal mandates, licensing rules, and Code of Ethics.

Agencies and group/private practices are not dating or social networking sites. If we add a personal layer, what is motivating Sue to consider pursuing a relationship with Bob? Is she willing to reveal to everyone that she is dating a client from the agency? Is there a transference/countertransference

reaction that she is falling prey to? Is she trying to rescue Bob? Is she enabling Bob? Does Bob have something she wants? What does her social network currently look like? What is Sue’s dating history and who is she typically attracted to? Why would it be okay to Sue to comeingle professional and personal relationships? Is there any pressure from Bob to date and how did that develop? What about Bob is attractive enough that she is willing to put her career, livelihood and credentials on the line? NAADAC’s Code of Ethics implicitly recommends that counselors and other service providers not engage in personal relationships with clients of the agency, even if they are not the professional’s direct client — due to the nature of the risk. It is incumbent upon the professional to engage in risk management thinking and behaviors that first and foremost protect the client from all actual and potential harm, while also protecting the professional.



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