

# Walking the Tightrope: Maintaining Our Ethical Responsibilities to Our Clients, Our Profession, and Ourselves

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When it comes to addressing ethical and/or legal breaches, we have clear obligations not only to our clients, but also to our profession and to ourselves. We also have to ensure that we are not falling into the trap of providing an expert opinion or recommending the filing of a grievance based solely on limited information such as the client's self-report without collateral information such as case notes/records or discussion with the therapist in question. It is important to be as objective as possible, factoring for our theoretical biases and personal opinions regarding therapeutic boundaries. We often are providing a professional opinion based solely on the client's self-report, without accounting for professional bias. We cannot define a colleague's attitudes or practices unethical or illegal just because the colleague used a different therapeutic approach, methodology or intervention than we would have. There is a difference between choosing a different clinical approach to an issue presented by the client and deeming such intervention as substandard care. We want to make sure we have a professional basis for forming an opinion about a colleague's choice of methodology or intervention. As professionals, we recognize that we are not to put ourselves in the role of investigator or facts-find; as professionals, we must also recognize that we are not to put ourselves in the role of judge or jury.

Prior to recommending that a client file a grievance against another therapist, it is important that we ask ourselves several important questions. Are we basing our professional opinion solely on the client's self-report, knowing that there are two sides to every story? Is there any chance that the client's report is false, incomplete, inaccurate, or invalid? Is our assessment of the colleague based on our theoretical or other biases? Are our boundaries of professional behavior inflexible, narrow, or misinformed? Are we informed about the standards of practice and evidence-based modalities specific to the presenting issues the client took to the other therapist? Do we have a pre-existing negative opinion of the colleague? Is the situation unethical and/or illegal versus being a situation where we disagree with the other therapist and his or her assessment and technique? Is there any chance that we are taking on a savior-rescuer role with the client?

We have an unwavering duty to protect clients and the profession from incompetent, predatory, and harmful therapists. There are therapists who cross professional lines and exploit or harm their clients. We also have an ethical and professional obligation to not make assumptions or form premature or unsubstantiated conclusions without further discussion with the client and our clinical supervisor or consultant. Just because a therapist approaches the same clinical issue differently does not make them wrong. Each clinician has their own scope of competency, and the benchmark will always be "do no harm" and how that is defined. We recognize that there are standards of practice that we are measured against. Situations such as sexual misconduct have clear benchmarks – there are



no circumstances where this behavior is acceptable. Situations involving differences of opinion related to theoretical modalities and tools used are not so clear. It is important that we are reflective and thoughtful about concerns we might have about another therapist's practices. We must at least consider seeking clinical supervision and/or consultation prior to directing a client to file a grievance against a clinician. In cases of harm, we might recommend that the client seek legal counsel to determine the best course of action. The NAADAC Code of Ethics call us to be advocates for our clients and often times we begin that advocacy by seeking supervision and consultation. We are not only called to reflect on the behaviors of others, but also on our own behavior. In the process of holding other professionals accountable, we hold ourselves accountable as well.



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