

Navigating Boundaries in Small Communities

Understanding and Managing Dual Relationships in Behavioral Health

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Objectives

1. Define professional boundaries, boundary crossings, boundary violations, and dual/multiple relationships.
2. Explain why maintaining boundaries can be especially challenging in small and rural communities.
3. Identify actual, potential, and perceived conflicts of interest.
4. Apply an ethical decision-making process to unavoidable dual relationships.
5. Develop strategies for managing community encounters, social media, gifts, transportation, business relationships, and overlapping personal/professional roles.
6. Recognize when consultation, supervision, documentation, referral, or termination may be appropriate.

Dual Relationships, Ethical Decision-Making & Practical Strategies

You may not be able to avoid every dual relationship.

You can manage them ethically.

What makes maintaining boundaries difficult in a small community?

In Small Communities:

- Everybody knows somebody
- Professional and personal networks overlap
- There may be few providers
- Transportation may be limited
- Families often know one another
- Community events are shared spaces
- Reputation travels quickly
- Confidentiality can be more difficult
- Social media increases overlap

What is a Professional Boundary?

A Professional Boundary defines:

What belongs in the professional relationship

versus

What belongs outside the professional relationship

Boundaries protect:

- Client welfare
- Professional objectivity
- Confidentiality
- Role clarity
- Trust
- Autonomy
- Professional integrity

Boundary Crossing v. Boundary Violation

Boundary Crossing

- Departure from usual practice
- May sometimes be clinically appropriate
- Requires consideration
- May be temporary
- Consultation may be appropriate

Boundary Violation

- Harmful/exploitative departure
- Creates significant ethical risk
- Requires intervention
- May compromise the relationship
- Consultation is often essential

What is a Dual Relationship?

When a professional has more than one type of a relationship with the same person.

What is a Dual Relationship?

- Counselor + neighbor
- Peer specialist + former coworker
- Counselor + client's landlord
- Professional + client's employer
- Supervisor + friend
- Provider + client's family member
- Counselor + business partner
- Professional + community organization member

The Small-Town Reality

You discover:

“Your client is your neighbor.”

“Your client’s mother is your cousin.”

“Your client works at the only grocery store.”

“Your client coaches your child’s team.”

“Your client attends the same community organization.”

Three Questions to Ask

Before acting, ask:

1. Does this impair my judgment?
2. Could the client be exploited?
3. Could this harm the client or relationship?

If YES or MAYBE:



The Boundary Risk Continuum

Lower Risk

- Incidental Contact
- Minor boundary crossing
- Repeated boundary crossing
- Multiple overlapping roles
- Conflicting roles

Higher Risk

- Exploitation/harm

The Four R's

Recognize	Recognize – What is happening?
Reflect	Reflect – What risks exist
Respond	Respond – What is the least harmful ethical response?
Record	Record – What did I do and why?

Confidentiality in a Small Community

Avoid statements such as:

1. "How's treatment going?"
2. "Are you still going to counseling?"
3. "I'm glad you're doing better."
4. "I'll see you Tuesday."

Case Scenario: The Grocery Store

You're a counselor in a rural county. You see your client in the only grocery store in town. The client is standing with someone else. The client smiles and says: "Hey! Good to see you!"

What do you do?

1. Ask how treatment is going
2. Say hello and continue shopping
3. Tell them you'll see them next Tuesday
4. Introduce yourself to everyone

Social Media: The Community Never Sleeps

Boundary Risks Include:

- Friend requests
- Following clients
- Private messages
- Public comments
- Likes
- Community Groups
- Mutual friends
- Professional pages
- Personal pages
- Suggested friends

Gifts, Favors and Small-town Reciprocity

- Homemade food
- Garden produce
- Tickets
- Holiday gifts
- Discounts
- Free services
- Transportation
- Borrowing equipment
- Doing favors

Transportation: A Common Boundary Trap

Transportation can create:

- Dependency
- Liability
- Privacy concerns
- Personal relationship
- Financial conflicts
- Safety concerns
- “You owe me” dynamics

Business Relationships

High-Risk Examples

Client → Employee

Client → Employer

Client → Contractor

Client → Customer

Client → Landlord

Client → Business Partner

Why?

Money + Power + Professional Relationship =
Increased Risk

When the Client Is Someone You Know

Possible Relationships:

Former classmate

Neighbor

Relative of a friend

Former coworker

Community leader

Parent from child's school

Member of the same organization

Family & Friends of Clients

Your client's:

- Spouse
- Parent
- Child
- Sibling
- Romantic partner
- Best friend

Family & Friends of Clients

The question isn't:

"Do I know them?"

The question is:

"Can I remain objective and protect everyone's interests?"

Peer Support & Dual Relationships

Peer Support Is Relational

Peer specialists may:

- Share lived experience
- Live in the same community
- Attend the same recovery meetings
- Know clients personally
- Have overlapping social networks

Remember:

Peer ≠ Friend

**Lived Experience ≠ Unlimited
Self-Disclosure**

Supervisory Dual Relationships

Power Changes the Equation

Supervisor + friend

Supervisor + employee

Supervisor + family member

Supervisor + former partner

Supervisor + supervisee's business
partner

Ask:

Can I remain objective?

Can they disagree safely?

Can I evaluate fairly?

Can they leave the relationship
safely?

Case Scenario #2: The Community Event

You are a counselor at a recovery event.

Your client approaches you:

“Come sit with us!”

The client is with:

Their family, your neighbor or someone you know personally.

Things to consider:

1. Confidentiality
2. Role clarity
3. Client choice
4. Your own relationships
5. Potential misunderstanding

When Dual Relationships Are Unavoidable



Documentation: Tell the Ethical Story

Good Documentation Answers:

What happened?

What decision was made?

What risks were identified?

Why was that decision reasonable?

Who was consulted?

What will be monitored?

What options were considered?

Ethical Decision-Making Worksheet

STOP & THINK

1. What are the overlapping roles?
2. Who could be harmed?
3. What power differential exists?
4. Could confidentiality be compromised?
5. Could my judgment be impaired?
6. Is exploitation possible?
7. What does my code/policy require?
8. Who should I consult?
9. What is the least harmful option?
10. What should I document?

Case Scenario #3: The Neighbor

You move into a new neighborhood.

What should you do?

Three months later, your new neighbor becomes your client.

You share:

- A driveway
- Neighborhood events
- A community association
- Mutual friends

Case Scenario #3: The Neighbor

You move into a new neighborhood.

Three months later, your new neighbor becomes your client.

You share:

- A driveway
- Neighborhood events
- A community association
- Mutual friends

- A. Immediately terminate treatment
- B. Ignore the issue
- C. Discuss the overlap
- D. Become friends but keep treatment separate

What We Should NEVER Normalize

Small Community Does NOT Mean:

- ✗ "Everyone does it."
- ✗ "They know me, so it's okay."
- ✗ "We're basically friends."
- ✗ "There aren't any other providers."
- ✗ "The client won't mind."
- ✗ "Nobody will find out."
- ✗ "I've always done it this way."

Building a Boundary-Friendly Organization

Organizations can reduce risk through:

1. Written boundary policies
2. Social media policies
3. Transportation policies
4. Gift policies
5. Conflict-of-interest procedures
6. Consultation pathways
7. Documentation expectations
8. Supervision procedures
9. Supervision procedures
10. Referral agreements
11. Staff training

Your Personal Boundary Plan

"If I encounter a client in public, I will..."

"If a client sends me a social-media request, I will..."

"If a client offers me a gift, I will..."

"If I discover a pre-existing relationship, I will..."

"If I am unsure, I will consult..."

Boundaries Are Not Barriers

They are structures that protect relationships.

Remember:



Don't handle it alone.

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Thank You!

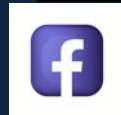
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