

## **How do I maintain professional boundaries when working within my community?**

Providing psychotherapy services to people within the LGBTQIA+ communities - specifically the queer and trans communities - when I am personally involved as I am, raises questions about professional boundaries. They may need creative solutions that adhere to underlying ethical principles, while being structured in somewhat different ways that are unique to the situation.

Being involved in my community is my strongest credential as an LGBTQIA+ therapist. I qualify as queer knowledgeable, not just queer friendly or queer aware. I am actually more than knowledgeable, because those definitions do not require involvement in the lifestyle. More personally, embracing and expressing my queer side is too important to my identity and health at this point, to want to pull back significantly from my current level of involvement.

The easiest way to think about these boundary issues, is to compare it to practicing therapy in a small town, rather than in large cities, the latter providing much more anonymity, which makes strict separation between professional and personal/community life more possible. In a small town, a therapist is likely to know people both before and after they are clients. During the course of therapy, the client and therapist are likely to see each other, perhaps often, at church, in the grocery store, the post office, on the local arts board, or wherever.

The following are preliminary guidelines, meant to protect you, the client. These guidelines may get altered as experience dictates. If that happens, it will almost always mean that they become stricter, not more relaxed.

### **Confidentiality:**

- This is likely to be the major concern of potential clients. It is also a central element in professional codes of ethical behaviour, as well as statutory requirements. It is a value I personally feel strongly about.
- All of the usual safeguards for confidentiality and secure record keeping will be strictly adhered to.
- It almost goes without saying that I will not out anyone's interests or activities. That is generally expected and adhered to in the community as a whole, in any case.
- If we meet in public, I will take my cue from how you acknowledge me, and/or what we have talked about and agreed upon. Otherwise, I may make eye contact, smile or nod, but not go beyond that.
- There are all kinds of ways that we might have become casually acquainted, other than our actual professional relationship. However, if you identify me to others as your therapist, it will be hard for me to deny it. Of course, I still will not talk about what we are working on.

- Confidentiality is an integral part of counselling and psychotherapy and is seen as essential to building the therapeutic relationship and ensuring the client's sense of safety. The therapeutic process encourages the client to be as open and honest as possible and inevitably personal experiences and sensitive information is disclosed. It is vital therefore that the client can trust that everything discussed with me will remain completely confidential. All information will remain confidential, with some notable exceptions:
  - As part of my ongoing professional development and to ensure a standardised and ethical practice I am regularly supervised by a registered Supervisor therapist. This is part of the safeguarding that I am acting appropriately for your best outcomes. I do discuss your case with my supervisor but I do not mention any contact details. Your personal situation is presented in such a way in therapy that you are unidentifiable at any point.
  - In the case that both client and therapist agree to discuss something with a third party. After discussing this together I will request your signature on a confidentiality release form.
  - Even though I have a duty of care to my clients, I also have a duty of care to the wider community. I reserve the right to breach your confidence if you say anything that implies there was a serious risk to life or preventable injury to yourself, a vulnerable adult, child or person, or if you are planning or have committed an act of terrorism. If you have been forthcoming with any information where I and my colleagues could consider the behaviour illegal or unethical, I would in the first instance encourage you to report yourself to the appropriate authorities. This is to maintain your autonomy, however If you chose to continue that behaviour or act then I would have no choice but to after immediate discussions with more other therapists, disclose that information to the relevant authorities.

#### **Friends and Acquaintances:**

- There are prohibitions against dual relationships. Generally this refers to romantic relationships, sexual activity, being good friends or being in a business relationship outside of the therapy relationship. And it includes family members, or significant others of either friends or clients.
- If we already know each other well, and if either of us considers the other a good friend, I will not take you on as a paying client. In many cases, schedule permitting, I will be glad to talk about some of the same issues, as friends, over coffee.
- If we are acquaintances, including Social Media friends, but do not know each other well, it may be appropriate to work together as therapist and client. We will discuss the implications of any prior interaction and knowledge of each other, as well as how it may limit our friendship in the future.
- In between good friends and casual acquaintances, there is quite a bit of grey area. We would take even more time to discuss prior interaction, and how the transition to a defined professional relationship may or may not work.

#### **Sexuality Festivals or Workshops:**

- As a workshop facilitator on the subjects of gender and sexuality I will sometimes participate in sexuality festivals and workshops - both as participant and as facilitator. This is important for my personal and professional development. Therefore, it is

important for me to define boundaries in the case we've previously met in such an event.

- If we've had an ongoing interaction in a sexuality festival or workshop, I will treat that as a good friendship, and I won't see you formally as a client. If we interacted only once, very casually and briefly, and at least a year ago, we can talk about what it did and did not mean to each of us, and whether it will adversely affect developing a proper therapy relationship.
- If we have previously witnessed each other in sexual scenes at festivals or workshops, we will need to discuss whether and how that might affect working together.
- If you become a client, we will agree to share with each other any plans to attend specific events. After talking about it, if we still decide to go to the same one, we will set some rules for the event, such as agreeing not to watch each other's sexual scenes.

### **Social Networking:**

- On Facebook I have a professional account, which is public. I have another more anonymous one in which I share more explicit information, such as pics, my interests and political beliefs. It's important for me to keep some degree of separation between the private me and other parts of my life. However, you may have known me via that other account. I am open to discussing your feelings about that other account if relevant.
- If we are currently friends on Facebook and decide to enter a therapeutic relationship we will cease to be Facebook friends. If we are not currently friends on Facebook and you send me a friend request it will be declined. However, you could still see my professional posts by following the professional account.

### **If you are in need of therapy ...**

... and would consider doing that work with me, I hope you will raise any questions and concerns you may have, whether covered here or not. I want to be able to help you, and others in the community, in a safe and comfortable way. Once that kind of trust is established, we can work together, so that you can reach your full potential, according to your own definitions and goals. It will often be the case that clients come to me for issues and problems that are not all that LGBTQ related. But they don't want to have to hide that part of their lifestyle, and they don't want to spend a lot of time educating their therapists about it. You still get to explain what it all means to you, as a unique individual, which will take time and effort enough.

**I welcome any feedback, questions, and concerns** that prospective clients, and others in the community, may need or want to share with me.

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