

Critical Look at 12 Myths & Faulty Beliefs in Psychotherapy

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Handout for the 5/18/2021 Presentation

1. Physical Touch in psychotherapy is unethical and . . . leads to sex.

**"Among all the senses,"
Montagu states, "touch
stands paramount."**

We have been told by ethics experts, attorneys, continuing education instructors and supervisors never to touch our clients beyond a handshake. Touch has been increasingly perceived as a risk management issue to be avoided rather than as one of the most powerful ways to connect with and heal our clients. The paranoid notion that non-sexual touch is likely to lead to a sexual relationship, is countered by greater understanding of the importance of touch for human connection and bonding and in reducing stress, anxiety and depression. In spite of a half century of extensive knowledge on the emotional, relational, physiological and behavioral benefits of touch, many therapists still shy away from appropriate non-sexual touch due to fear of boards, attorneys and lack of training. Even though most therapists touch their clients by patting them on the back, holding a hand or giving an appropriate hug at the end of sessions, they do not write or talk much about it.

The good news is that more clinicians are open to looking at the benefits of touch. Even though US culture tends to sexualize all forms of touch, clinicians are increasingly aware of the importance of touch with those who are depressed, anxious and stressed, as well as clinically appropriate touch with children and women who were sexually abused.

Resources:

Zur, O. & Nordmarken, N. (2021). [To Touch Or Not To Touch: Rethinking The Prohibition On Touch In Psychotherapy And Counseling, Clinical, Ethical & Legal Considerations](#). Online publication by O. Zur, Ph.D.

Zur, O. (2020). [Risk Management: Touching is not Always a Violation](#). The National Psychologist, Spring, p.6.

2. A ‘power differential’ is ALWAYS inherent in a therapist-client or psychologist-patient relationships - Therapists and psychologists are omnipotent and are always more powerful than their clients or



From the first day in graduate school in psychology, we psychotherapists-in-training have been instructed to pay great attention to the “inherent power differential” in psychotherapy. We were taught to be aware of the imbalance of power between therapists and clients, and repeatedly warned against inadvertently abusing or exploiting our vulnerable and dependent clients. The idea of power, as an attribute possessed exclusively by the therapist in the client- therapist relationship, has been largely left unchallenged. Our professional newsletters and advice columns on ethics and risk management present a similar unified message about therapists’ unilateral power and clients’ inherent vulnerability. Many psychotherapy clients and, definitely, those who are mandated to undergo different types of forensic evaluations, are very vulnerable because the power differential, indeed, exist in these professional relationships. They may be distressed, young, impaired, traumatized, psychotic, anxious, and/or depressed. However, there are also clients who function highly, emotionally and psychologically, and are powerful and effective in these and many other ways. They may be wealthy investors, powerful CEOs, established artists, forensic

psychologists 😊, or simply very centered, solid human beings who seek therapy to find meaning, seek their highest potential in a certain arena, or perhaps find a closer relationship to God. They are neither depressed, nor traumatized, nor vulnerable. As therapists we must know the difference: we must remember that not all clients are created equal.

Resources:

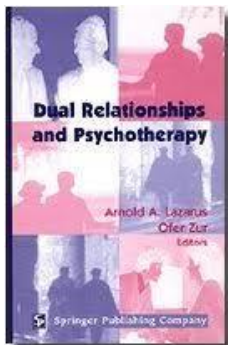
Zur, O. (2008). [Re-Thinking the "Power Differential" in Psychotherapy: Exploring the myth of therapists' omnipotence and patients' fragility](#). *Voices: The Art and Science of Psychotherapy*, 44 (3), 32-40.

3. “Once a client, always a client” - Therapists have overwhelming power & influence over their clients in perpetuity

Resource:

Zur, O. (2009). [Power in Psychotherapy and Counseling: Exploring the "inherent power differential" and related myths about therapists' omnipotence and clients' vulnerability](#). *Independent Practitioner* 29, (3), 160-164.

4. Dual relationships in counseling are always unethical, constitute ill-advised boundary violations and . . . are likely to lead to sex.



Dual relationships, or multiple relationships, in psychotherapy refer to any situation where multiple roles exist between a therapist and a client. Examples are when the client is also a student, friend, family member, employee or business associate of the therapist. A dual role of therapist and expert witness is likely to constitute an ethical violation, due to the therapist acting outside his/her scope of practice, unavoidable conflict of interest, or due to engaging in unethical multiple relationships.

Psychotherapists making custody recommendations (i.e., engaging in a dual role

of therapists & experts) is one of the most common reasons for psychotherapists to be disciplined by licensing boards. Clearly, forensic psychologists who conduct forensic evaluations, such as sanity to stand trial or custody evaluations should avoid dual or multiple relationships of any form. Non-sexual dual relationships are not necessarily unethical or illegal. Sexual, exploitative and harmful dual relationships are unethical and can be illegal. Most of the major professional associations' codes of ethics state that multiple relationships should be avoided if they could reasonably be expected to impair the therapist's effectiveness or cause harm. There are several kinds of dual relationships: Dual relationships can be avoidable, unavoidable or mandated; consecutive or sequential; expected or unexpected-accidental; initiated by therapists, clients, both or a third party and they can be of low, medium or high intensity. Dual relationships are often unavoidable in rural and small communities, the military, forensic settings, church and LGBTIQ communities and among people with HIV/AIDS, Hispanics, African American, Asians and other minority communities. Almost all ethical guidelines do not mandate a blanket avoidance of dual relationships. All guidelines do prohibit sexual dual relationships with current or recently terminated clients and prohibit exploitation of clients.

Resources:

Zur, O. (2010) [Forensic Psychology Dual Relationships: Is it Kosher for a Psychotherapist to Serve as an Expert Witness?](#) Online publication.

Zur, O. (2006). [Therapeutic Boundaries and Dual Relationships in Rural Practice: Ethical, Clinical and Standard of Care Considerations.](#) Journal of Rural Community Psychology. V. E9/1 (Online Journal)

Zur, O. (2005). [On law-imposed dual relationships.](#) Online Publication.

Zur, O. (n.d.). [The Truth About the Codes of Ethics: Dispelling the Rumors that ALL Dual Relationships are Unethical.](#) Online Publication.

Zur, O. (Ed.) (2017). [Multiple Relationships in Psychotherapy and Counseling: Unavoidable, Common and Mandatory Dual Relations in Therapy.](#) New York: Routledge.

Lazarus, A. A. & Zur, O. (Eds.) (2002). [Dual Relationships and Psychotherapy.](#) New York: Springer.

5. Self-disclosure, socializing with or bumping into clients in the community always interfere with transference analysis and clinical efficacy.



Resources:

Zur, O. (2014). [Interview on Ethics and Self Disclosure](#) (Audio)

Zur, O. (2008). [The Google Factor: Therapists' Unwitting Self-Disclosure on The Net](#). *New Therapist* 57, September/October, p. 16-22.

6. “Don’t blame the victim” - Victims are always 100% innocent.

**"It is not my fault!",
"I have been wronged!"
and "I am owed!" are the
essential victim's stance.**

Psychotherapists and attorneys are in the forefront of those who fuel the “Victim Industry” in the U.S. “Don’t blame the victim,” has become a moratorium on exploring situations where victims bear responsibility. As a result, we have become a nation of victims. In reality, some victims are 100% innocent (i.e., abused children) and others are willing and relentless participants in their own (repetitious) victimization.

Resource:

Zur, O. (1994). [Rethinking "Don't Blame the Victim": Psychology of victimhood](#). *Journal of Couple Therapy*, 4 (3/4), 15-36.

7. Therapists-Clients bartering arrangements are inherently exploitative and should be avoided at all cost.



Resources:

Zur, O. (2004). [A chicken for a session: Bartering in therapy](#). *Voices*, 40 /1, 75-80.

[Bartering and the Codes of Ethics](#)

Zur, O. (2008). [Bartering in Psychotherapy & Counseling: Complexities, Case Studies and Guidelines](#). *New Therapist*, 58, 18-26.

8. Gift giving by therapists to clients is unacceptable.



Resources:

Zur, O. (2004). [To Cross or Not to Cross: Do boundaries in therapy protect or harm](#). *Psychotherapy Bulletin*, 39(3), 27-32.

Zur, O. (2012). [Gifts in Therapy: Some are Appropriate](#). *National Psychologist*, Sept./Oct. p. 6.

Zur, O. (2005). [Gifts in therapy](#). Online publication.

[Codes of Ethics on Gifts in Therapy](#)

9. As the slippery-slope argument predicts, boundary crossings inevitably lead to boundary violations.



The baseless and paranoid idea of the “slippery slope” has been with us for too long and, when followed, results in substandard care. It is idiotic to assert that non-sexual touch is likely to lead to sexual touch, that simple gift-giving results in social relationships, or that bartering inevitably ends in exploitation.

Resources:

Boundaries in Therapy – Summary Brochure:

<https://drzur.com/media/boundariesbrochure.pdf>

Zur, O. (2004). [To Cross or Not to Cross: Do boundaries in therapy protect or harm](#). *Psychotherapy Bulletin*, 39(3), 27-32.

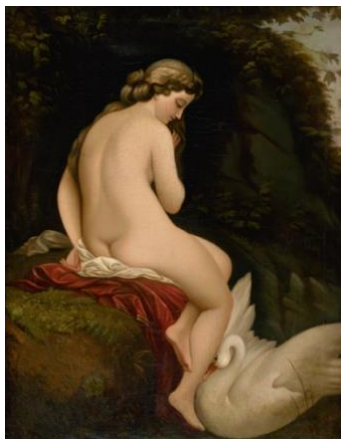
Zur, O. (2007). [Boundaries in Psychotherapy: Ethical and Clinical Explorations](#). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association - APA Books.

10. Malpractice Lawsuits against psychotherapists and counselors are common and therapists should be very concerned about it.



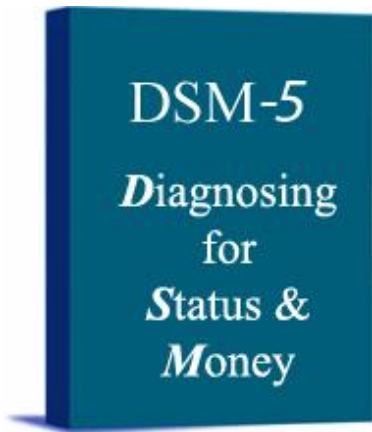
We have been indoctrinated to fear lawsuits and our licensing boards. The simple fact that social workers, MFT's and counselors pay about \$300-\$400 a year for malpractice insurance and psychologists pay about \$1,400 a year while many cardiologist, anesthesiologists and Obstetricians pay \$50,000 or much more a year clarify the level of risk between psychotherapists and these physicians. The percent of complaints to licensing boards is not as high as many attorneys and "ethicists" lead us to believe. Even when charges are brought, most complaints are dropped without any charges being filed.

11. It is all about Context: It is never ever ethical, legal or OK for a psychotherapist to be naked with a client.



Most, if not all, therapists, understandably, are likely to respond with a "Hell no!" as they probably connote this situation with a sexual encounter. Obviously, sex with clients is ALWAYS unethical, counter-clinical, and illegal in most states, but then imagine a situation in which a therapist is stepping out of the shower stall in the local gym when, to his or her or great surprise, a client (equally naked) steps out of the next stall. This is called an "incidental contact," "chance occurrence," or what I call an "out-of-office experience" that takes place in the community, outside of the treatment room. Such nude encounters have been reported to have taken place between men and women at nudist beaches or at the hot-tubs in Esalen. This vignette is an example of how therapists and ethicists must first understand and comprehend the specific context of each and every situation BEFORE they cast uninformed, 'instinctive' judgment.

12. The DSM is a scientifically valid, and reliable document.



Unlike what we were told in most graduate schools and assessment workshops, in my humbled opinion, the DSM is a politically and economically driven document more than a scientific one. My research and impressions has led me to believe that decisions regarding inclusion or exclusion of disorders are made by majority vote rather than by the review and acceptance of indisputable objective scientific data. One telling example: Homosexuality was listed as a mental disorder in the DSM until 1974, when gay activists demonstrated in front of the American Psychiatric Association Convention. The APA's 1974 vote showed 5,854 members supporting and 3,810 opposing the disorder's removal from the manual. Ever since, homosexuality has not been regarded as a mental illness. Voting on what constitutes mental illness is truly bizarre and, needless to say, unscientific. It is my impression that in recent years, the DSM has been primarily driven by the psychopharmacological industry, which reaps huge profits from each new diagnosis that can be treated with psychotropic medication

Resource:

DSM: DIAGNOSING FOR STATUS AND MONEY:

[HTTPS://DRZUR.COM/CLINICAL-UPDATES/DSM-DIAGNOSING-FOR-STATUS-MONEY/](https://drzur.com/clinical-updates/dsm-diagnosing-for-status-money/)