

Non-Sexual Dual Relationships And Multiple Relationships In Psychotherapy

Key Points

- Non-sexual dual relationships are not necessarily unethical or illegal. Only sexual dual relationships with current clients are always unethical and sometimes illegal.
- Non-sexual dual relationships do not necessarily lead to exploitation, sex, or harm. The opposite is often true. Dual relationships are more likely to prevent exploitation and sex rather than lead to it.
- Almost all ethical guidelines do not mandate a blanket avoidance of dual relationships. All guidelines do prohibit exploitation and harm of clients

Types of Dual Relationships:

- A **social** dual relationship is where therapist and client are also friends or have some other type of social relationship. Social multiple relationships can be in person or online. Having a client as a Facebook 'friend' on a personal, rather than strictly professional basis, may also constitute social dual relationships. Other types of therapist-client online relationships on social networking sites may also constitute social dual or multiple relationships.
- A **professional** dual relationship or multiple relationship is where psychotherapist or counselor and client are also professional colleagues in colleges, training institutions, presenters in professional conferences, co-authoring a book, or other situations that create professional multiple relationships.
- A special **treatment-professional** dual relationship may take place if a professional is, in addition to psychotherapy and counseling, also providing additional medical services, such as progressive muscle relaxation, nutrition or dietary consultation, Reiki, etc.
- A **business** dual relationship is where therapist and client are also business partners or have an employer-employee relationship.
- **Communal** dual relationships are where therapist and client live in the same small community, belong to the same church or synagogue and where the therapist shops in a store that is owned by the client or where the client works. Communal multiple relationships are common in small communities when clients know each other within the community.
- **Institutional** dual relationships take place in the military, prisons, some police department settings and mental hospitals where dual relationships are an inherent part of the institutional settings. Some institutions, such as state hospitals or detention facilities, mandate that clinicians serve simultaneously or sequentially as therapists and evaluators.
- **Forensic** dual relationships involve clinicians who serve as treating therapists, evaluators and witnesses in trials or hearings. Serving as a treating psychotherapist or counselor as well as an expert witness, rather than fact witness, is considered a very complicated and often ill-advised dual relationship.
- **Supervisory** relationships inherently involve multiple roles, loyalties, responsibilities and functions. A supervisor has professional relationships and duty not only to the

supervisee, but also to the supervisee's clients, as well as to the profession and the public.

- A **sexual** dual relationship is where therapist and client are also involved in a sexual relationship. Sexual dual relationships with current clients are always unethical and often illegal.
- **Digital, online or internet** dual relationships that take place online on social networking sites, such as Facebook or Twitter, or on blogs, chats, or LinkedIn, constitute unique dual or multiple relationships. These can be professional (i.e., on LinkedIn or Facebook pages), social (i.e., Facebook or other social networking sites) or other types of multiple relationships that take place on chats, Twitter, blogs, etc.
- An **additional** and rather rare form of dual relationship includes adoption, when a therapist legally adopts a former child client who was put up for adoption. Multiple relationships also occur when a client refers a friend, family member or colleague to therapy with the same therapist that he/she works with.

Dual Relationships Can Be Avoidable, Unavoidable Or Mandated

- **Voluntary-avoidable:** Usually these dual relationships take place in large cities or metropolitan areas where there are many therapists, many places to shop, worship or recreate.
- **Unavoidable:** Multiple relationships are often unavoidable in rural areas, sports psychology, drug and alcohol recovery inpatient, outpatient or 12 step programs, such as AA, and on Native American reservations. Supervisory relationships inherently involve multiple role and multiple relationships, as supervisors have responsibility to the supervisee, the client, the community, and the profession at large. Dual relationships are sometimes unavoidable in institutions, such as mental hospitals.
- **Common - Normal:** Dual relationships are common and generally normal among disabled groups, spiritual/faith communities, LGBTQI communities and in any small community within or nearby big metropolitan areas. Multiple relationships are a common part of universities and colleges as well as training institutions, such as psychoanalytic, cognitive-behavioral, somatic and other teaching institutions. Dual relationships can also be a common part of adventure therapy or nature therapy. As time goes by, we witness more acceptance of digital or online multiple relationships, primarily among young therapists and young clients who often tend to blur the line between therapeutic and social boundaries, especially in social media.
- **Mandated:** These dual relationships take place primarily in the military, prisons, jails and in some police department settings. Inherent in these settings is that the mental health professional is mandated to have multiple accountabilities. At times, psychologists in forensic mental institutions are also involved in mandated multiple relationships (especially when ordered by a judge to serve in a dual role of evaluator and treater).
- **Unexpected:** Unexpected multiple relationships occur when a therapist is not initially aware that the client they have been working with is *also* a friend, colleague, co-worker or even an ex-spouse of another client. Similarly, unexpected dual relationships take place when, unbeknownst to the psychotherapist, the client joins the therapist's church, book club, or baseball recreation league. Digital or online multiple relationships, including social networking, can catch therapists by surprise. These digital or online dual

relationships often take place on social networking sites, such as Facebook or Twitter, or on blogs, chats, LinkedIn or even on dating sites.

Dual Relationships Can Be Concurrent Or Sequential

- A **concurrent** dual relationship takes place at the same time as therapy.
- A **sequential** dual relationship takes place after therapy has ended. For example, after therapy ends a therapist decides to embark on social or business relationships.

Level of Involvement

- **Low-minimal level:** When a therapist runs into a client in the local market or in the theatre parking lot.
- **Medium level:** When a client and therapist share occasional encounters, as in attending church services every Sunday or occasional PTA meeting.
- **Intense level:** When therapist and client socialize, work, attend functions or serve on committees together on a regular basis.

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