

ETHICS IN PRACTICE

BY GREGORY W. BROCK AND JEANETTE D. COUFAL

A PROFESSION'S SYSTEM OF ETHICAL standards is a formalized code which, presumably, guides the conduct of all its practitioners. In any large profession, however, adherence to ethical standards is never 100 percent. Some may depart from that standard for lack of scruples, others through ignorance, others because they consider it inadequate to guide them in ethically ambiguous situations.

Recently, we surveyed 1,000 randomly selected clinical members of the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy (540 responded) to get a picture of how family therapists approach ethical issues in their everyday practice. We were interested in how closely family therapists adhere to AAMFT's ethical standards. Were there any situations or ethical questions that family therapists found especially perplexing? Below are some results of our study.

Legal Requirements

With surprising frequency, family therapists admit to disregarding legally mandated reporting requirements. Despite the Tarasoff decision (see p. 30), 40 percent of our respondents at least sometimes don't warn the potential victims of their clients' threats. A third of our survey sample at least sometimes don't report child abuse. In addition, most therapists seem bound by confidentiality not to report crimes clients reveal during therapy.

Inform intended victim of client's threat to harm.

Never	Rarely	Some-times	Often	Always
9.5	15.6	16.0	10.3	48.7

Break confidentiality to report child abuse.

Never	Rarely	Some-times	Often	Always
6.2	10.8	16.8	12.3	54.0

Report client's crime disclosed in therapy.

Never	Rarely	Some-times	Often	Always
46.7	36.2	13.0	1.5	2.5

Informed Consent

Despite the clear stipulation in the ethics code to ask clients' permission to tape sessions or permit observation,

nearly half of those surveyed only sometimes do so.

Get client consent to tape session or have observer.

Never	Rarely	Some-times	Often	Always
3.8	13.4	30.0	14.5	38.3

Therapist-Client Relationship

The role of family therapists is far less prescribed than that of the traditionally trained analyst or Rogerian therapist. Family therapists typically give themselves wide latitude in attempting to bring about change. How then do therapists handle some of the more mundane ambiguities that emerge in the therapy relationship? Most therapists hug their clients at least sometimes, but only 12 percent at least sometimes give clients a peck on the cheek. We are aware of sexual attraction toward clients, but few even rarely express such feelings. Reciprocal gift giving occurs, but we more often accept than give.

Kiss a client (peck on cheek).

Never	Rarely	Some-times	Often	Always
61.3	26.9	11.4	4	0

Hug a client.

Never	Rarely	Some-times	Often	Always
4.3	32.9	45.5	16.4	9

Tell client, "I'm sexually attracted to you."

Never	Rarely	Some-times	Often	Always
79.1	17.0	3.7	.2	0

Give a gift to a client.

Never	Rarely	Some-times	Often	Always
47.5	35.3	16.3	.9	0

Accept a gift worth less than \$5 from a client.

Never	Rarely	Some-times	Often	Always
13.3	26.9	41.7	11.8	6.4

Controversies

In the absence of clear legal and ethical guidelines, therapists who treat AIDS HIV+ patients can face troubling dilemmas. When an HIV+ patient refuses to disclose his/her condition to a partner, the therapist may need to decide what to do about the potentially lethal threat to the partner's health. Despite the principle of clinical confidentiality, over 40 percent of those surveyed say they would at least sometimes feel ethically obligated to

inform a client's partner under these circumstances—most would not.

Inform a client's partner that the client is HIV (AIDS) positive.

Never	Rarely	Some-times	Often	Always
44.3	14.2	14.4	9.1	17.9

Effective January 1, 1989, AAMFT changed its code prohibiting sexual involvement between therapist and client within one year of termination—



ILLUSTRATION BY WILLIAM BROWN

one year was raised to two. Over 90 percent of the respondents reported adhering to the old code, 7.5 percent did not. The new codes require nearly 16 percent of us to alter our behavior.

Become sexually involved with a former client within one year of termination.

Never	Rarely	Some-times	Often	Always
92.5	6.2	.7	.2	.4

Become sexually involved with a former client within two years of termination.

Never	Rarely	Some-times	Often	Always
84.2	12.0	3.2	.2	.4

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