

Inside→Outside: Unexpected Encounters

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You and your 5th-grade daughter arrive for her first soccer practice of the season. You see your client, Mikhail, there with (you presume) his daughter. A minute later you find out that he's the coach. People are introducing themselves to Mikhail; should you pretend you don't know him?

You're walking with your spouse down a main street near where you live, and your client, Sara, is walking toward you with someone; she stops to say hello and introduces herself and her friend to you and your spouse. The friend asks how you know each other. What do you say?

You go to a friend's wedding and see your client, Tim, there, holding hands with someone. He doesn't see you – yet. Should you make contact with him, and if so, what should you say? What should you do if he and his partner approach you?

Situations like these are not infrequent, particularly if you practice near where you live. Unlike *planned* out-of-therapy interactions (such as attending a client's wedding, discussed in the last issue), the above interactions are spontaneous. They may take our patients and us by surprise; we may not have had a chance to discuss with our clients in advance how to handle such interactions. In most cases, it can be helpful to discuss it with them after the fact, both to put in place a plan

should it happen again, and to address the clients' experience therapeutically.

The APA Ethics code (2002, with 2010 and 2017 amendments) can guide us in such cases. Let's consider our client's **privacy and confidentiality** (Standards 4.01 and 4.02); unless given permission to acknowledge the client as a client, of course we cannot do so (though the client may choose to reveal this information).

The situation with Mikhail also creates an ongoing **multiple relationship**, and so we must be alert for the potential for harm (Standard 3.04); in Standard 3.05(a), we are guided to consider what might constitute a problematic multiple relationship. The key words are potential *impairment* of the psychologist's ability to provide sound clinical and ethical treatment and risk of *exploitation* or *harm* to the client. Exploitation (a) can be identified ahead of time, (b) benefits the therapist, and (c) is always harmful. In contrast, harm isn't necessarily exploitive and can't always be foreseen. Multiple relationships that "would not reasonably be expected to cause impairment or risk exploitation or harm are not unethical."

When in a multiple relationship, you are *always in the role of the person's psychologist*. Thus, psychologists who live and practice in very close proximity and are therefore more likely to run into clients outside the office might consider having as part of their informed consent discussion how the two of you would like to handle running into each other outside of therapy. Once these parameters have been identified, thoroughly *document* the conversation.

Sometimes psychologists may know in advance about an upcoming multiple relationship; if Mikhail had mentioned in therapy that he'd be coaching 5th grade girls soccer, for instance, you might have explained that you live in the same town, and let him know your daughter will be on that team, and that, to protect his privacy, you will act toward him as if the only relationship you have with him is as the team's coach. You explain that to do otherwise would put him (or you) in the position of having to explain to others how you know each other (and thus violate confidentiality).

It is inevitable that we'll engage with a handful of clients in some capacity outside of our offices. Our ethical obligations are to protect their privacy and confidentiality, not exploit the relationship, and minimize the risk of harm. ■