

Invitation by Client to Attend Out-of-Session Event: Responding Ethically to a Client's Invitation

Mary Harb Sheets, PhD and Robin S. Rosenberg, PhD, ABPP

Susan and Tom have lived together for several years. You have been the couple's therapist much of that time. During last week's session, they tell you that they have decided to marry and very much would like you to attend the event. They speak effusively about how much you have helped them come to this decision and can't imagine the day without your presence. Many, if not all, clinicians encounter this dilemma at least once during their careers as psychologists.

In the APA Ethics Code (2010), the multiple relationship that would be created if you agree to Susan and Tom's request is not necessarily unethical. In Standard 3.05(a), we are guided to consider what might constitute a problematic multiple relationship. Key words are potential impairment of the psychologist's ability to provide sound clinical and ethical treatment or risk of exploitation or harm to the client. A good way to distinguish between exploitation and harm is to remember that exploitation (a) can be identified ahead of time, (b) benefits the therapist, and (c) is ultimately always harmful. In contrast, harm need not necessarily be exploitive and cannot always be foreseen. The Code then tells us that "Multiple relationships that would not reasonably be expected to cause impairment or risk exploitation or harm are not unethical."

Suppose you seriously consider Tom and Susan's request to attend the marriage ceremony and believe your attendance wouldn't be an ethical issue or clinically contraindicated based on the above guidelines. What ideas would be important to consider to ensure that you uphold the ethical standards that guide our work?

Protecting our client(s)' privacy and confidentiality (Standard 4) is essential. You can expect that someone will ask how you know the person whose event you are attending. What will you say in response? Honesty is an important element of how you choose to answer, as guided by General Principle C of Integrity: psychologists do not engage in "subterfuge, or intentional misrepresentation of fact." Thus, even though this is a clients' personal event, if you attend, you are still in the role of their psychologist. Before you agree to attend, you and the clients need to have a conversation about how you will answer questions about how you know each other. As both a risk management strategy and an ethical one (Standard 6.01), once these parameters have been established, document that your attendance at the marriage is at your clients' request, the conversations you have had with the clients, and what is to be said



Mary Harb Sheets, PhD

(maryharb@me.com) is Chair of the CPA Ethics Committee, works in independent practice, and teaches Advanced Law and Ethics. She is a Fellow and Past President of the San Diego Psychological Association (SDPA), and chaired the SDPA Ethics Committee.



Robin S. Rosenberg, PhD, ABPP

(Robin@DrRobinRosenberg.com) is a clinical psychologist and executive coach. She is Vice Chair of the CPA Ethics Committee and is Board Certified in clinical psychology by the American Board of Professional Psychology.

at the event regarding how you know each other.

Another example: Your patient Vivek's wife had cancer and, despite treatment, she just died. Vivek tells you it would be meaningful to him if you attend the funeral, since you've been "with him" throughout her illness. As with Susan and Tom your primary ethical obligations are not to exploit the situation for personal gain and to minimize the risk of harm, including protecting his privacy and confidentiality. You might talk together about the potential upsides and downsides of your attending, the ways it might affect your work together and, if any mourners ask, what to say about how you know the deceased.

Over our professional lives, our clients may ask us to attend joyous (weddings, graduations) and sad (funerals) events – to share or bear witness. Ethically, we can attend (though that doesn't mean we must attend), as long as it won't exploit the relationship or increase the foreseeable risk of harm in the near term or downstream. A thoughtful consideration of these invitations in collaboration with the client can ensure you meet your ethical responsibilities. ■

REFERENCE

American Psychological Association. (2010). *Ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct (2002, Amended June 1, 2010)*. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/ethics/code/index.aspx>