

What You Should Know about Confidentiality in Therapy

I will treat what you tell me with great care. My professional ethics (that is, my profession's rules about moral matters) and the laws of this state prevent me from telling anyone else what you tell me unless you give me written permission. These rules and laws are the ways our society recognizes and supports the privacy of what we talk about—in other words, the “confidentiality” of therapy. But I cannot promise that everything you tell me will *never* be revealed to someone else. There are some times when the law requires me to tell things to others. There are also some other limits on our confidentiality. We need to discuss these, because I want you to understand clearly what I can and cannot keep confidential. You need to know about these rules now, so that you don't tell me something as a “secret” that I cannot keep secret. These are very important issues, so please read these pages carefully and keep this copy. At our next meeting, we can discuss any questions you might have.

1. When you or other persons are in physical danger, the law requires me to tell others about it. Specifically:
 - a. If I come to believe that you are threatening serious harm to another person. I am required to try to protect that person. I may have to tell the person and the police, or perhaps try to have you put in a hospital.
 - b. If you seriously threaten or act in a way that is very likely to harm yourself. I may have to seek a hospital for you, or to call on your family members or others who can help protect you. If such a situation does come up, I will fully discuss the situation with you before I do anything, unless there is a very strong reason not to.
 - c. In an emergency where your life or health is in danger, and I cannot get your consent, I may give another professional some information to protect your life. I will try to get your permission first, and I will discuss this with you as soon as possible afterwards.
 - d. If I believe or suspect that you are abusing a child, an elderly person, or a disabled person I must file a report with a state agency. To “abuse” means to neglect, hurt, or sexually molest another person. I do not have any legal power to investigate the situation to find out all the facts. The state agency will investigate. If this might be your situation, we should discuss the legal aspects in detail before you tell me anything about these topics. You may also want to talk to your lawyer.

In any of these situations, I would reveal only the information that is needed to protect you or the other person. I would not tell everything you have told me.

2. In general, if you become involved in a court case or proceeding, you can prevent me from testifying in court about what you have told me. This is called “privilege,” and it is your choice to prevent me from testifying or to allow me to do so. However, there are some situations where a judge or court may require me to testify:
 - a. In child custody or adoption proceedings, where your fitness as a parent is questioned or in doubt.
 - b. In cases where your emotional or mental condition is important information for a court's decision.
 - c. During a malpractice case or an investigation of me or another therapist by a professional group.
 - d. In a cMI commitment hearing to decide if you will be admitted to a psychiatric hospital.
 - e. When you are seeing me for court-ordered evaluations or treatment. In this case we need to discuss confidentiality fully, because you don't have to tell me what you don't want the court to find out through my report.

3. There are a few other things you must know about confidentiality and your treatment:

- a. I may sometimes consult (talk) with another professional about your treatment. During supervision, I will only discuss items that will assist developing a treatment plan, or clarifying the theory base from which I will conduct our sessions. This other person is also required by professional ethics to keep your information confidential.
- b. Likewise, when I am out of town or unavailable, another therapist will be available to help my clients. I must make some information available to him or her about my clients.
- c. I am required to keep records of your treatment, such as the notes I take when we meet.

4. Here is what you need to know about confidentiality in regard to insurance and money matters:

- a. If you use your health insurance to pay a part of my fees, insurance companies require some information about our therapy. Insurers such as Blue Cross/Blue Shield or other companies usually want only your diagnosis, my fee, the dates we met, and sometimes a treatment plan. Managed care organizations, however, ask for much more information about you and your symptoms, as well as a detailed treatment plan.
- b. In the past, I have submitted claims on behalf of my clients. If you would prefer, I will give you my bill with any other forms needed, and you may send these to your insurance company to file a claim for your benefits. That way, you can see what the company will know about our therapy. It is against the law for insurers to release information about our office visits to anyone without your written permission. Although I believe the insurance company will act morally and legally, I cannot control who sees this information at the insurer's office. You cannot be required to release more information just to get payments.
- c. If you have been sent to me by your employer or your employer's Employee Assistance Program, either one may require some information. Again, I believe that employers and companies will act morally and legally, but I cannot control who sees this information at their offices. If this is your situation, let us fully discuss my agreement with your employer or the program before we talk further.
- d. If your account with me is unpaid and we have not arranged a payment plan, I can use legal means to get paid. The only information I will give to the court, a collection agency, or a lawyer will be your name and address, the dates we met for professional services, and the amount due to me.

5. Children and families create some special confidentiality questions.

- a. When I treat children under the age of about 12, I must tell their parents or guardians whatever they ask me. As children grow more able to understand and choose, they assume legal rights. For those between the ages of 12 and 18, most of the details in things they tell me will be treated as confidential. However, parents or guardians do have the right to *general* information, including how therapy is going. They need to be able to make well-informed decisions about therapy. I may also have to tell parents or guardians some information about other family members that I am told. This is especially true if these others' actions put them or others in any danger.
- b. In cases where I treat several members of a family (parents and children or other relatives), the confidentiality situation can become very complicated. I may have different duties toward different family members. At the start of our treatment, we must all have a clear understanding of our purposes and my role. Then we can be clear about any limits on confidentiality that may exist. In some cases, I may recommend another therapist for some members of the family.
- c. If you tell me something your spouse does not know, and not knowing this could harm him or her, I cannot promise to keep it confidential. I will work with you to decide on the best long-term way to handle situations like this.
- d. If you and your spouse have a custody dispute, or a court custody hearing is coming up, I will need to know about it. My professional ethics prevent me from doing both therapy and custody evaluations.
- e. If you are seeing me for marriage counseling, you must agree at the start of treatment that if you eventually decide to divorce, you will not request my testimony for either side. The court, however, may order me to testify.
- f. At the start of family treatment, we must also specify which members of the family must sign a release form for the common record I create in the therapy or therapies. (See point 7b, below.)

6. Confidentiality in group therapy is also a special situation. In group therapy, the other members of the group are not therapists. They do not have the same ethics and laws that I have to work under. You cannot be certain that they will always keep what you say in the group confidential.

7. Finally, here are a few other points:

- a. I will not record our therapy sessions on audiotape or videotape without your written permission.
- b. If you want me to send information about our therapy to someone else, you must sign a "release-of-records" form. I have copies which you can see so you will know what is involved.
- c. Any information that you also share outside of therapy, willingly and publicly, will not be considered protected or confidential by a court.

The laws and rules on confidentiality are complicated. Situations that are not mentioned here come up only rarely in my practice. Please bear in mind that I am not able to give you legal advice. If you have special or unusual concerns, and so need special advice, I strongly suggest that you talk to a lawyer to protect your interests legally.

The signatures here show that we each have read, discussed, understand, and agree to abide by the points presented above.

Signature of client (or person acting for client)

Date

Printed name

Signature of therapist

Date

