



Maintaining Boundaries While Using Yourself in the Work A Practical Skills Guide for Emerging Therapists

As you grow in confidence and self-awareness, you may notice that your presence, personality, and emotional attunement play an important role in the therapeutic relationship. This is often referred to as the use of self. While the use of self can deepen connection and support healing, it must be grounded in clear professional boundaries.

Boundaries do not reduce authenticity. They make it possible.

Why Boundaries Are Central to Ethical Use of Self

Boundaries create a predictable and safe therapeutic container. They clarify roles, protect client autonomy, and support ethical decision-making. Without boundaries, even well-intentioned use of self can become confusing or harmful. For emerging therapists, boundaries also protect against overextension, burnout, and role diffusion.

Ethical use of self exists within structure, not outside of it.

Common Boundary Challenges in Early Practice

New therapists often struggle with boundaries around time, emotional availability, and responsibility. You may feel compelled to be overly flexible, extend sessions, respond quickly outside of scheduled times, or emotionally carry clients between sessions. These patterns often stem from care and commitment rather than disregard for ethics.

Learning to recognize these moments is part of professional development.

Distinguishing Connection From Over-Involvement

Connection involves empathy, attunement, and presence. Over-involvement occurs when the therapist's emotional needs, values, or identity begin to shape the work. Signs of over-involvement may include thinking about clients excessively, feeling personally responsible for outcomes, or difficulty maintaining limits.

Boundaries help you stay connected without becoming enmeshed.

Using Self Without Crossing Lines

Ethical use of self means being emotionally available without making the relationship reciprocal. It involves intentional presence rather than personal disclosure or emotional reliance. Before

using self in session, consider whether the intervention serves the client's goals and maintains the professional frame.

When unsure, less is often more.

Responding to Boundary Crossings Thoughtfully

Boundary crossings can happen unintentionally, especially in early practice. What matters is how they are addressed. Reflecting on the situation, consulting supervision, and repairing transparently when appropriate supports ethical integrity. Avoiding or minimizing boundary concerns increases risk.

Boundaries are strengthened through reflection, not perfection.

Boundaries as a Tool for Sustainability

Consistent boundaries allow you to show up fully without depleting yourself. They support emotional regulation, reduce burnout risk, and help you maintain perspective over time. Boundaries are not barriers to care. They are part of ethical self-care and professional longevity.

Closing Thoughts

Boundaries are not a sign of distance or disinterest. They are a reflection of respect for the client, the work, and yourself. As you continue developing your use of self, boundaries will become less about restriction and more about alignment. They allow you to practice with clarity, confidence, and care over the long term.

Reflection Questions for Emerging Therapists

Where do I notice tension around setting or maintaining boundaries?

What fears arise when I hold firm limits?

How do my boundaries support ethical practice?

How can supervision help me refine boundary decisions?