

MAY I ACCEPT A GIFT FROM A CLIENT?

Sometimes clients are so appreciative that they want to give their favorite social worker a gift. Some agencies have policies on receiving gifts; others do not. Check with your agency supervisor if a client hints that he or she will be bringing you a present. The client's giving of a small gift may be a demonstration of simple gratitude for being helpful or for simply accepting something that the client said or did. But the gift may also be an attempt to ask the therapist to like the client more, or to manipulate the therapist (Gabel, Oster, & Pfeffer, 1988). This would be particularly true with expensive or extravagant gifts. In the absence of an agency policy, you may want to devise one of your own—such as not accepting gifts valued at more than \$10. Generally, small tokens of appreciation such as cookies or a cake that could be shared with others in the agency can be graciously accepted. Here's a situation that actually happened to one of our students:

Cynthia received a birthday card from a client who had heard a couple of staff talking about taking her out for lunch. When Cynthia opened the card, she found a \$50 bill in it. That night in her practicum group she revealed that she didn't know what to do. The client was on probation and she was afraid that if she told her field instructor, the client would get into trouble. She wanted to return the money quietly without informing her supervisor. Without exception, her classmates strongly urged her not to keep it secret but to advise the field instructor. Otherwise, they reasoned, the client might accuse Cynthia of taking a bribe or soliciting favors.

Once in a while, a client will want to give a special student a gift even after a case has been transferred or closed. Generally when this happens, there is some dependency on the client's part, and the client may be trying to keep the student involved in the case. If it is a small gift, it may be possible to accept it. However, you may want to have the client leave the gift at the agency or with another worker, so that you can pick it up without becoming entangled again.

IS IT EVER PERMISSIBLE TO DATE CLIENTS OR COWORKERS?

Students should not date clients or socialize with them outside of the agency. Although one date may not lead to romantic involvement, in any dating situation where there is physical attraction the potential for sexual involvement exists. And it is never permissible for helping professionals to engage in sexual activities with their clients. The NASW Code of Ethics (1999) states, "Social workers should under no circumstances engage in sexual activities or sexual contact with current clients." Further, social workers are prohibited from engaging in sexual activities with clients' relatives or other individuals with whom clients maintain close personal relationships when there is risk of harm to the client. In fact, because of its destructive consequences for clients, all of the major mental health professions have explicit prohibitions against therapist-client sexual involvement. In some states legislation has been passed making therapist-client sexual intimacy a criminal offense.

If you find that you are strongly attracted to a client, the advised course of action is to speak to your agency supervisor about arranging a transfer of this client to another staff member. Romantic involvement jeopardizes professional objectivity. The social worker's judgment about what is best for the client may be clouded as the social worker becomes overprotective and over involved.

Confine relationships with patients to the office, except when specific interventions are needed elsewhere. When would it be appropriate to see a client outside of the office? An example would be when it is impossible to talk or hear in your office (e.g., because of remodeling or construction), and it is convenient to walk to the corner restaurant and talk over coffee or a soft drink. In such instances, inform at least one other person in the agency (e.g., your agency supervisor) of your whereabouts. Although it is clear that, given a choice, some clients may prefer not to meet in the office, the use of an office within an established agency lends an air of propriety. Requests from clients to meet outside of the office may indicate an interest in manipulating or undercutting progress being made.



Social workers must behave in a trustworthy manner.

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