WHEN CLIENTS ARE HARMING OTHERS

Selections from Chapter Six of
The Ethical Lives of Clients - Transcending Self-Interest in Psychotherapy
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In general, when an adult client is discussing a scenario (outside mandated reporting situations) in which they are considering actions that can harm others, our traditional skills of empathy and offering personal insight may not be on target enough to influence the client to avoid doing harm. Sometimes therapists resort to blurting out warnings to not do something destructive. But a therapist can respect the client's autonomy while calling on the client's moral sensibilities about harming others.

Putting Children at Risk

A common example is harming one's children by putting them in the middle after a divorce, or trashing one's ex to the children. Or in stepfamilies, a parent might disagree with a new spouse on matters that might compromise the children's needs. Competing interests and obligations with ex-spouses, one's own kids, any step kids, and current spouses are ripe for ethical dramas.

When Clients Harm Adults in Their Lives

When it comes to children's welfare, most therapists are attuned to ethical dilemmas. But when an adult is the one at risk for harm, therapists can be ambivalent or even reluctant to speak up, except in situations such as flagrant abuse or threats.

A good thought experiment is how you feel about a client's behavior towards a reviled ex-spouse such as finding manipulative ways to get more than one's agreed-upon share of parenting time, foisting additional child expenses on the other parent, or spreading negative information to friends and family members about the ex's new lover. Do we as therapists feel any responsibility to question unfair treatment of a hated ex-spouse—even when the children are grown up and no longer as vulnerable? That's a litmus test for ethical consultation.

References:

Doherty, W. J. (2022). *The ethical lives of clients: Transcending self-interest in psychotherapy.* American Psychological Association.

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