

# SETTING BOUNDARIES WITH INAPPROPRIATE CLIENTS

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**H**ave you ever given a massage therapy session in which a client made an inappropriate sexual joke and you didn't know what to do? Did you freeze? Did you feel a mixture of rage and helplessness? Did you wish you had the skill to set a firm boundary at that moment or express your anger at such a comment? We should have learned how to deal with these kinds of comments in school, but most therapists never received that type of training.

Setting a verbal boundary is an important skill for everyone, especially for female massage therapists. Female therapists are frequently the targets of harassing comments by male clients who have inappropriate boundaries. This has happened to almost every female massage therapist I've met.

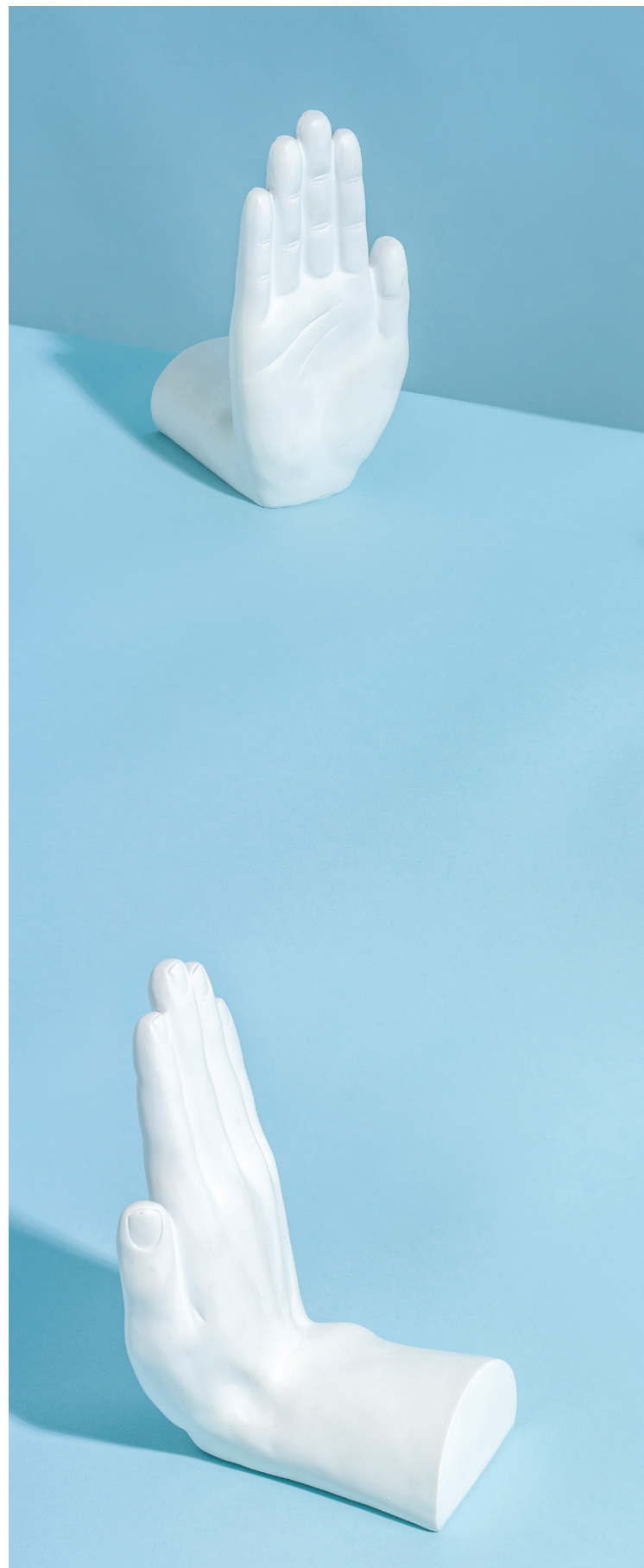
How do you set a firm boundary when someone crosses the line or says something offensive? This is not easy unless you have been trained in boundary setting or have honed that skill on your own. First, let's look at what boundaries are and then examine the ways you can set them in challenging situations.

## BOUNDARIES

A boundary is a limit or a line we set, beyond which no one should step. Certain boundaries are implicit norms in our culture. We learn these boundaries unconsciously, for the most part, as we grow up. In Western culture, we know not to ask questions that are too personal. We know not to touch a stranger's body without their

## ■ KEY POINTS

- Strong, clear boundaries help create functional professional relationships that last.
- When a person is starved for physical intimacy, they may make an emotional leap in a massage setting, confusing physical intimacy with sexual intimacy.
- Boundaries can be set by using three different verbal behaviors, depending on the context and goal.





permission, and we know not to ask people how much money they make or what their sex life is like. But there can be exceptions to these cultural norms in certain settings.

The profession of massage therapy sometimes breaks cultural norms. Where else would you enter a room with a stranger, take off all or most of your clothing, and have that stranger touch your body in a way that is often relaxing and pleasurable? Massage breaks the intimacy taboo and may partly explain (though not excuse) why some clients harmfully boundary-cross in this setting.

### INTIMACY

There are three types of intimacy: verbal, physical, and sexual. Massage is no doubt physically intimate. Often the only other person who touches you in a gentle, soothing, and pleasurable way is your spouse or partner. For some people, especially men, this physical intimacy can be confusing. A part of the brain in some people does not differentiate between physical, verbal, and sexual intimacy. An example of this loosening of the boundary is that most massage therapists have clients who tell their massage therapist very personal, intimate details about their life: their unhappy marriage, their financial woes, their emotional struggles—almost treating the massage therapist like a psychotherapist. This is incredibly common and demonstrates the intimacy leap from physical to verbal/emotional intimacy that sometimes occurs. Well-trained therapists recognize this phenomenon and gently set a boundary. And when it's appropriate, they direct those clients who need emotional help to a psychotherapist.

When a person is starved for physical intimacy, they may make an emotional leap in a massage setting, confusing the physical intimacy with sexual intimacy. This happens to female therapists with male clients every day, all over the world. The transition usually starts with subtle sexual comments

or jokes, and if not stopped can escalate to invitations to dinner, uninvited touching, or sexual requests. First and foremost, if a massage therapist feels unsafe during a session, they should end it immediately and get the necessary support/backup needed. If a client breaks a boundary with severely inappropriate behavior, no second chances should be granted. What we're exploring here is that if a minor misstep is made, there is typically a way to immediately stop the behavior, set a firm and clear boundary, and teach the client what is acceptable and what is not.

### TYPES OF BOUNDARIES

So how do we set those boundaries? There are verbal, emotional, sexual, and intellectual boundaries. We can set these boundaries verbally or physically. The most common way we set boundaries is through verbal communication. Those boundaries can be set by using three different verbal behaviors, depending on the context we are in and our goal. We can use attack, anger, or self-assertion behaviors. Let's examine them one at a time.

#### Attack

We all have the impulse to attack someone when we feel slighted, put down, insulted, hurt, or humiliated. We want to defend ourselves and retaliate to hurt the other person and make them feel bad for what they have done to us. We might say, "Don't be so stupid," "Get your hands off me," or "I hate you." Or we might use what's called "righteous questions," which are attacks in the form of a question: "How could you do something like that?" or "Why are you behaving like such an idiot?" These are not really questions you expect an answer to—they are just another form of attack behavior.

#### Anger

The function of natural anger is to protect ourselves, teach boundaries, and neutralize a threat from someone else. Mild anger is how a lion teaches its cubs how to

behave—a little more anger helps protect their territory. If a cub is behaving badly, the lion makes a growling sound or swats with their paw to indicate that the behavior is not OK. When another animal comes too close, the lion expresses herself by letting the animal know to get away from her cubs.

When a parent slightly raises their voice and says, “Stop that!” to a young child who is hitting their sibling, with age-appropriate anger, that is an effective use of anger in proportion to the situation.

Most people think of anger as a negative emotion. Anger is often confused with the often-destructive emotions of rage, hostility, outrage, blame, attack, or acts of violence. Natural anger is none of those things. Elizabeth Kubler Ross, author of *Death and Dying*, says, “Real anger is constructive and over in 15 seconds.” It’s appropriate to the situation and usually not that loud.

Anger can be used to set a boundary. For example, when we say, “Don’t do that,” “I don’t like that,” or “Please stop” with the tone of voice appropriate to the context, it’s an appropriate boundary-setting emotional tool.

Voice tone is usually the key in differentiating the various forms of attack from natural anger or self-assertion. We can take the same words and say them in a way that connotes attack or anger. If you scream “*Don’t do that!*” at someone with intense rage in your voice, it will feel like an attack. If you say the same words—“Don’t do that!”—showing your anger by mildly raising your voice, it is an expression of anger.

If we hold our anger back and don’t express it for weeks, months, or years, when we finally do express that built-up feeling, it often comes out as an attack.

### Self-Assertion

Self-assertion is different; it is boundary-setting communicated in a non-defensive, non-aggressive, descriptive manner. The voice tone is neutral, clearly stating what is OK and what is not OK. For example, “I cannot back-date and falsify the dates of your sessions for your

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insurance claim,” or “If you keep asking me out to dinner at each session, I cannot continue to see you as a client.” When we assert ourselves, we are forceful and strong without being loud or angry.

Let’s now go back to the title of this article and explore how to set a boundary when a client begins to say something offensive or sexually inappropriate. Here’s an example: If a client says something like, “Have you heard the joke about the massage therapist who was asked for a happy ending?” you might interrupt them and say, “I’m going to have to stop you there.” Here you have a few choices depending on your goal.

If you wanted to attack them, you might say, “You can keep your filthy jokes to yourself” or “How can you be so insensitive?”

If you wanted to express your anger you might say, “It upsets and annoys me when you make those types of jokes.” If you wanted to use self-assertion to set a clear boundary, you might say with a firm but neutral tone of voice, “That type of joke is inappropriate. Please stop and don’t speak to me that way again. Can you do that?” Or you could combine them and express your anger or irritation and follow that with a self-assertion. For example, “When you make sexual jokes about my profession it’s really upsetting/annoying. Please don’t do that again.”

Often, clients ask therapists personal questions that feel invasive and inappropriate. How can we handle those situations without insulting our clients? Questions like “What do you do for fun when you’re not working?” or “How is your relationship going?” or “Do you want to have children?” can sometimes make therapists feel trapped and unsure how to respond, so they answer the question even though they are uncomfortable doing so.

You might instead respond by saying, “I like to keep my personal life separate from my work.” Or if you work in a spa setting that has strict rules about personal conversations with clients, you might say, “This spa has strict rules about not having personal conversations with clients, so I cannot have this type of conversation with you. This time is about you, not me.” If the client continues to cross that boundary despite your response, the boundary that’s left is to discontinue seeing that client.

People behave in ways that cross or violate boundaries in all walks of life. Having boundary-setting skills is necessary to be a massage therapist. Strong, clear boundaries help create functional professional relationships that last. **m&b**

**6** Dr. Ben E. Benjamin has done much pioneering work in the areas of ethics and communication, writing articles on professional, sexual, and business ethics, and is the co-author of *The Ethics of Touch*, a textbook used in schools throughout North America to teach ethics and boundaries to massage therapists as well as other hands-on health-care professionals. He has been an expert witness in cases of sexual assault in the massage and bodywork field since 2004. In 1974, Dr. Benjamin founded the Muscular Therapy Institute, a school he owned and directed for over 30 years. In the 1980s, he developed a 150-hour curriculum in ethics and communication skills for therapists in training. He has taught courses in ethics, boundaries, sexuality, and communication to somatic therapists for over 30 years.