

## Self-Disclosure Jaclyn Beckler

Self-disclosure is any communication of a therapist's personal information that goes beyond credentials, fees, scheduling, or other office-related factors. Empirical studies show that self-disclosure can prove beneficial in the helping relationship when used appropriately. Clients often find therapists that disclose as warmer and additionally increase their disclosure and sharing as a response. Since self-disclosure can be a helpful but complex skill to utilize in a helping relationship, clinicians must learn the different types of disclosure involved in the therapeutic setting and ground rules to follow when disclosing.

Some different types of self-disclosure can include unintentional, environmental, nonverbal, and intentional. Unintentional disclosure occurs when a clinician does not intend directly to share personal information, but the client may still learn individual factors. Such could happen during a canceled appointment due to sickness or surgery; the client seeing a therapist in a public setting, or the client accessing the therapist's social media. I find social media and internet access the most important to address in unintentional disclosure. As the text discusses, a professional should be mindful that clients can quickly find their social media and internet information in current times. A client may be offended or uncomfortable to learn more personal values or politics of their helper. This could intrude on the trusting relationship that the clinician is trying to build with the client. Thus, a professional clinician should recognize how much they share on personal websites that could affect their clientele, as well as their success within the profession.

Environmental disclosure refers to personal information the client may learn based on the surrounding atmosphere of the sessions. Typically, sessions will occur in an office setting. Research has shown that clients view the office setting as a direct projection of the clinician and the help they receive. While it may be challenging to avoid decorating an office without showing some personal taste, culture, or socioeconomic status, it is essential that the worker not decorate with anything that could devalue a client's culture. Microaggressions can occur by clients seeing something they feel minimizes any race or culture. Past studies have shown that clients feel more open and comfortable when an office displays multiple artifacts of various cultures. I find the biggest takeaway from this is to put effort into decorating an office space so that it is inviting, calming, and inclusive. I would like a future office to be a safe space that helps the client ground themselves just by entering. I have learned it to be helpful to avoid keeping overly personalized items, like family photos or political propaganda, in this space.

Nonverbal disclosure can have a significant impact on the client. If a worker's body language contradicts their words, the client will follow the body language. This reminds me of the traditional saying of action speaking louder than words. Nonverbal cues and body language can help relax and build rapport with the client or can cause tension and distrust. At the least, if these two forms of communication do not align, it will bring confusion or mixed messages into the relationship. Nonverbal disclosure can be even more critical concerning cultural and racial diversity.

Intentional self-disclosure occurs when the worker purposefully shares something about themselves with the client during a session. This type of disclosure can build rapport, help the client feel less alone in their situation, strengthen the helping relationship, instill hope, provide alternative views, or help direct the client to take action of their circumstances. Clients report intentional self-disclosure to have positive effects. They also usually like workers that disclose

more than those who seem rigid in not sharing any personal insight. Workers that do share an appropriate amount of unique experiences seem warmer and regularly motivate the client to share more during the sessions.

Due to the positive effects of self-disclosure, it will be beneficial for a therapist to utilize it in sessions. Ground rules should be considered, though. Self-disclosure should always benefit the client instead of comforting or validating the worker's feelings. One must regularly assess that they are not overidentifying with the client or projecting personal feelings onto the client. This will help to avoid counter-transference. Timing is also crucial in self-disclosure. Minimal disclosure may help to build the rapport in the initial stages, but should mainly be used in later stages when a connection has been established. A moderate amount of disclosure will help to avoid promiscuous self-disclosure. The client may be overwhelmed with too much information and discredit the clinician's position in the relationship if the worker seems to dominate the session. When sharing, it should always tie back into the client's current feelings. Disclosure should mirror the client's sharing and not enter an intimate level on the worker's part. It would be helpful to ask the client for feedback to understand if sharing helped the client. Finally, there will be clients in which self-disclosure should be avoided. Specific diagnoses, including impulsivity, conduct disorders, and personality disorders, as well as those with poor boundaries, would be such instances.

I am relieved to learn that some self-disclosure is helpful in the therapeutic relationship. After reading the material, I know that I should be continuously mindful of the guidelines and appropriate timing of disclosure since I do gravitate towards sharing personal information. This will help me avoid promiscuous self-disclosure, counter-transference, and consuming the time spent in session. I can easily see the benefits of sharing some personal references, as I have found professionals rigid and cold when they appear stuck in an overtly objective mode.

I have had both positive and negative experiences with self-disclosure in the past. One bitter experience involved a 16-year old girl with negative self-esteem because her foster family repeatedly told her she could pray the gay away and that being homosexual was a big sin with detrimental consequences for her afterlife. I tried to remain generalized by telling her that many Christians view homosexuality differently and are still devoted to their faith. She pressed for more of my personal feelings on the subject and also what I felt of women playing only submissive roles to men. Eventually, I shared that I was a feminist that believed women and men were equal in societal and familial roles and that I had numerous gay Christian friends. Soon after, she told her foster parents that my beliefs differed and I felt they were wrong. The foster couple ended up expressing concern over me being the worker since I did not follow conservative Christian values. This teen suffered from personality, conduct, and impulsivity disorders. She also seemed to enjoy creating conflict among the adults overseeing her case and life.

A simpler example of how sharing personal experiences benefited my relationship with a client was when a 12-year-old girl was suffering from severe anxiety concerning medical settings. I also suffer from similar issues and shared some of my past experiences and how they always ended much more comfortable than I anticipated. I also shared some techniques I use to help myself during those situations. She benefited from the coping mechanisms. She felt more normal after learning I have the same weaknesses and am capable of functioning in the world and doing things that seem so impossible in my mind sometimes.