

Emotional Support Animals and Role Conflicts in Psychotherapy

Every so often there is a question posed to one of the Society's listservs about writing a letter in support of a need. The latest was a letter for the purpose of assisting with an immigration problem. Previously the questions have been about accommodation for disability and, most often, in support of a patient having an Emotional Support Animal (ESA.)

In response to each of these requests for information about how to go forward with this ("Does anyone have experience with") we have written that a treating clinician, in our case a clinical social worker, is creating a dual relationship with her/his patient because s/he is stepping outside of the role of a treating professional and into the role of a forensic professional. We have stated that the best position to take is to refer the patient making the request to another professional who will act in the forensic role and who, hopefully, has expertise in the area of request. Considering that we are mandated to be aware of appropriate boundaries by taking three hours of CE, and that dual relationships is one of the ways in which boundaries are blurred/violated, this is a timely topic.

We have located an article that does an excellent job of explaining this concept more fully and well than I have. I've seen it before but did not have an active link that did not involve a paywall. It's written about professional treating psychologists but could actually apply to **any** treating professional and certainly applies to clinical social work. Here is the link:

<https://europepmc.org/backend/ptpmcrender.fcgi?accid=PMC5127627&blobtype=pdf>

Note: we have recently been informed that some airlines are not allowing ESAs to travel inside the cabin in airplanes and must travel with pets. A rule change in December 02020, which went into effect January 02021, limited the animals that will be allowed in the cabin of an airplane to be dogs trained to perform a specific function for their owners – in other words, a Service Animal (SA). This is very different from an ESA, which requires no specialized training and could be any animal. ESAs are still allowed in apartments and are protected by federal rules. You can learn more about the requirements for ESAs in apartments/housing at this website:

<https://esadoctors.com/hud-housing-rules-emotional-support-animals/>

This does not change the gist of what we are saying, which is that performing an assessment and writing a letter (or completing a form) to request accommodation creates a role conflict and dual relationship which, in turn, can have a negative effect on the therapeutic relationship. The better, safer position is to refer the patient making the request to another clinician who specializes in making those assessments and completing the required documents, especially in cases like accommodations for disability or immigration.

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