

Is it OK to go on a date with a former client?

Recently, Jamie, an RD, was asked out on a date by a former client. Jamie had seen the client for just one counselling session two months earlier. When discharging their client, Jamie provided them with contact information for follow-up questions. The client then contacted Jamie for a date. Jamie is not sure whether to accept or refuse the date. Since the therapeutic relationship ended two months ago, is it OK to accept the invitation to go on a date?

MINIMUM ONE YEAR PERIOD AFTER A CLIENT IS NO LONGER A CLIENT

RDs are not permitted to have a romantic or sexual relationship with a former client for a minimum of one year from the date at which the RD-client therapeutic relationship has ended beyond all doubt. The period of one year is the minimum waiting period required. Since Jamie ended the therapeutic relationship only two months ago, date the client be considered sexual misconduct.

Relationships and communications with clients can be confusing. Because Jamie provided follow-up contact information, it is possible that the client understood that the therapeutic relationship was ongoing or, perhaps, thought that Jamie was open to another type of relationship. It is important to be aware of how actions and words can affect clients. Be very clear and precise in your communications with clients to avoid misunderstandings.

WHEN IS IT OK TO DATE A FORMER CLIENT?

When considering a romantic relationship with a former client, use professional judgement and proceed with caution. The therapeutic relationship has to be clearly documented and ended beyond all doubt for the minimum period of one year before a romantic or sexual relationship can begin. Keeping

in mind the power imbalance between a health professional and their client, before dating or having a sexual relationship with a former client, an RD should carefully consider:

- The duration of the therapeutic relationship: A romantic relationship with a former client is more likely to be inappropriate where an RD treated the client over a number of years than a romantic relationship with a client with whom there was only one consultation.
- The client's vulnerability: The more vulnerable a client is, the more likely it is that having a romantic relationship with them at any point after the end of the one-year period would be an abuse of the power of the RD and potentially harmful to the client; and
- Continuing care for other members of the former client's family: If an RD continues to care for other members of a client's family, the combination of personal and professional relationships may be inappropriate.

USE THOUGHTFUL, REASONED, ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING

Whether or not a romantic relationship could be ethically acceptable depends on the duration of the therapeutic relationship, the frequency of RD-client interaction and the former client's vulnerability. An RD may decide that it would never be appropriate to form a romantic relationship with a former client.

Although the ethics of a relationship may be situational, a regulated health professional could still be found guilty of disgraceful, dishonourable and unprofessional conduct towards a former client, if that client was abused in any way.