Infatuated with therapist [1]

Dear Alice,

I am seriously infatuated with my therapist, which is really embarrassing. How do I keep this from influencing our sessions, which have been very helpful to me? Should I tell him? Is this common?

Embarrassed Grad Student

Answer

Dear Embarrassed Grad Student,

It's quite common for people to have strong, often romantic, feelings towards their therapist. Whether you work with a social worker, psychologist, psychiatrist, or another type of counselor, a big part of the relationship involves you, the client, sharing intimate details of your life. A good therapist listens carefully and is empathetic, caring, encouraging, thoughtful, and reliable. It seems likely that your therapist helps you to feel valued; your work together is helping you to discover and utilize your best self. These are all qualities that help us to feel safe and connected, whether we're talking with a professional or a friend. These are also qualities that many look for in potential romantic partners.

It seems only natural, then, that you might find yourself thinking an awful lot about this person— one who makes you feel so good. You've also probably had some hard sessions together, but made it through. Your feelings for your therapist are nothing to be embarrassed about. Rather, they can help you to learn more about yourself and your experiences in relationships.

For example, some people find that their therapist reminds them of a relative, or a person from their past—perhaps a mother, father, or an old flame—whom they respect. For others, a counselor makes them feel cared for in a way that they never have. Either way, these are feelings that are important. In fact, they may even be essential to explore as part of the therapeutic work you are doing. It is completely appropriate for you to talk about these feelings with your therapist. At first, it may feel awkward. You might be nervous about side-tracking your conversations, or offending him/her. Perhaps you're concerned your feelings will be rejected. Or maybe you might think your therapist will return your infatuation, and make things confusing. Know that your counselor is professionally trained and experienced with all kinds of client-provider dynamics, including attractions like yours.

It's important to express to your therapist how this experience, including talking about it,
makes you feel. In a healthy, professional relationship, you should be able to discuss this and have your sense of things validated, while also exploring what meaning it has in the context of your life. If at any time you feel uncomfortable, it's fine to take a break and talk about other things, allowing yourself to reassess where the sessions are going. Keep in mind, also, that it is illegal and against a therapist's professional code of ethics to enter into a relationship with a client outside of the therapy. This includes romance, intimate friendships, and business.

The relationship between a therapist and a client is a complicated one. It sounds like yours has been useful so far. With some courage, hard work, and patience, these feelings are likely to be a constructive part of your work together.

Alice!
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