

## SEARCHING FOR A MODERN MINDSET FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL PRACTICE

By Dr. Bob Woody

Throughout my forty-plus years as a psychologist, I have been aware that there is constant change in practice standards. Change is difficult for humans, but since professionalism mandates change, I believe that it is important that each of us, and most certainly for me, to keep a modern mindset.

A psychologist recently told me: "Given the way some clients are dissatisfied, no matter what is done by the psychologist, I find myself being rather distrustful, which probably leads me to be overly cautious and less effective." In this day and age, manipulations by certain managed care companies, pressure tactics by some attorneys, and the threat of a malpractice suit or a licensing complaint by clients, being somewhat distrustful is an understandable reaction. As noted, however, being overly cautious can also have a negative impact on professional quality. Perhaps a first step toward a proper outlook or logical degree of caution is to recognize the essential psycholegal conditions of psychological services in 2007. Thus, I offer the following six suggestions.

### FIRST, ACCEPT THAT PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE IS DEFINED BY LAW.

There was a time when the practitioner could exercise considerable discretion in deciding how to serve a particular client. Since becoming part of the health care industry, mental health services are now viewed as a regulated business. Professional associations, such as the American Psychological Association (APA), offer important principles, standards, and guidelines that will potentially influence the legalized governance of the profession of psychology. Consequently, the vicissitudes of public policy, including political considerations and consumer protection, reach to the legislative process, and the government establishes rule-making bodies, administered by regulatory (licensing) agencies (e.g., a state department of health), that micromanage standards for practice and discipline those licensees who do not conform to the legal prescriptions and proscriptions. *The modern mindset accepts that psychologists must be well informed about the legal bases for psychological practice.*

## SECOND, CONSIDER PSYCHOLOGY TO BE A BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE

Inherent to the contemporary psycholegal scene, any sort of clinically-oriented service must be predicated on science. Given the honorable status of the scientist-practitioner model (albeit there are other possible models as well), the psychologist can readily draw from empirically-based research as a basis for assessment, intervention, and devising a formal treatment plan (including the monitoring of objectives, measuring effects, and making appropriate modifications). *The modern mindset accepts that psychologists will adhere to applied behavioral science.*

## THIRD, REMAIN OPEN-MINDED TO ADVANCES IN BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE, THEORIES AND TECHNIQUES, AND ETHICS.

Too many folks tend to live in the past. By definition, a professional must stay abreast of new developments in the profession, especially regarding treatment strategies and the research supporting them. The approach of choice during the psychologist's years of graduate studies may have been replaced or altered with the passing years. There is also a clear ethical mandate to continue to improve and refine professional knowledge and skills. The continuing education that is necessary for license renewal is for this purpose. *The modern mindset accepts that psychologists will maintain strong personal commitment to cultivating excellence.*

## FOURTH, ADHERE STRICTLY TO PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES

Under virtually all current circumstances, humanistic blending of professional and personal qualities in psychological services is antiquated. A simple axiom is that the psychologist's relationship with the client must be cloaked in professionalism--in all ways, now and forever. The client's value as a person is elevated by the psychologist who can accord the therapeutic relationship with a hallowed status, albeit irrevocably professional and not subject to shifting to, say, social, business, or other relations. *The modern mindset accepts that psychologists will hold to the belief: "once a client, always a client."*

## FIFTH, ASSIDUOUSLY PROTECT CONFIDENTIALITY OF INFORMATION

In contemporary times, there are many attempted invasions of the right of privacy, as relevant to what occurs between a psychologist and the client. For example, legal processes (e.g., a subpoena) can be used to draw psychological information into litigation; third-party payment sources may condition financial reimbursement for psychological services on release of confidential information; and government and insurance sources may maintain computerized data banks that portend to infringe on a person's (or psychologist's) right of privacy. *The modern mindset accepts that psychologists take informed and assertive steps to protect confidential information.*

## SIXTH, ALWAYS HAVE COMPETENCE FOR THE PROFESSIONAL SERVICE THAT IS PROVIDED

When engaged in day-to-day decisions, professionals may be tempted to wander into unknown treatment terrains. That is, in the course of comprehensive treatment, the psychologist is potentially vulnerable to starting, in terms of competency, on firm ground and, for no ill motive, ending up in a quagmire. *The modern mindset accepts that psychologists will carefully screen for treatment matters that are outside of one's well-grounded set of competencies, and will make referrals to appropriate specialists.*

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