

LET'S TALK ABOUT...

→ *The Power Differential*

It is difficult to understand the therapeutic relationship between client and practitioner without comprehending the dynamics of power in a therapeutic relationship. There is a natural power differential in many but not all relationships: between parent and child; between teacher and student; between employer and employee; and of course between health care practitioner and client.

A parent, teacher, employer or health care practitioner has the more powerful position. They are the authority figures whose actions, by virtue of their role, directly affect the well being of the other. The child, the student, the employee and the client are in the more vulnerable position. In theory, and in ethical practice, the power differential exists for the purpose of bringing benefit to these more vulnerable individuals: the child's well being should be enhanced by the parent's care; the employee should benefit from the employer's management.

In the health care field the power differential is amplified by the physical aspects of practice. The client takes a position—usually lying or sitting—in which he allows the practitioner access to his body. The practitioner positions herself within the client's physical space, often leaning over the client. Furthermore, in many professions the client is partially or fully unclothed. Although draping is used for privacy, the psychological effect of the unclothed client and the clothed practitioner increases the imbalance of power. Finally, as the practitioner's hands make physical contact with the client's body, the client's physical safety is literally in the practitioner's

hands.

Excerpted and adapted from, The Ethics of Touch: The Hands-on Practitioners Guide To Creating a Professional Safe and Enduring Practice by Ben Benjamin and Cherie Sohnen-Moe