

Professional Boundaries in Mental Health Care

Introduction

It is the professional caregiver's responsibility to set and maintain clear, appropriate, professional boundaries with patients. This is especially important in a psychiatric hospital setting. Exceeding professional boundaries indicates that a caregiver is becoming over-involved with and/or exploitative of the patient(s). You cannot be a friend AND a professional caregiver. Boundary violations may be both unethical and illegal.

What are Professional Boundaries?

Professional Boundaries provide the framework for healthy relationships between a healthcare providers and patients. They are the physical and emotional limits that protect the patient's vulnerability and protect staff from becoming over involved. Healthy professional boundaries keep the care provider-patient relationship a safe one where the focus remains on the patient.

What is the relationship between healthcare provider and patient?

Health care providers protect the trust of patients and their families when we pay careful attention to the professional boundaries of our relationships with them. The provider needs to respect how a person's healthcare experience can affect their feelings of personal power. Providers are in a position of power regarding this relationship, so they are responsible for the managing issue of boundaries, even if a patient's behavior seems to encourage boundary violations.

What is the difference between a professional relationship and a social relationship?

Professional Relationship

Paid
Service oriented
Time limited/Location limited
Asymmetry in power
Focused on patient needs
Goal directed

Non-Professional Relationship

Not paid
Social in nature
Spontaneous
Power is shared
Focused on shared interests
Casual

It is possible for health care professionals and patient to have a *dual relationship* or more than one kind of relationship with the same person. Boundary issues can arise under these circumstances. For example, if a provider is working with a patient who is also a neighbor, it is up to the provider to maintain healthy boundaries and, if necessary, remove him or herself from the professional relationship.

What are some warning signs of unhealthy boundaries?

Boundary violations occur one small step at a time and almost always without warning, yet if we are aware, the warning signs are there. Listed below are a few signs that professional boundaries are being weakened or crossed.

- You share personal problems or aspects of your intimate life with patients.
- You keep secrets with patients.
- You have received gifts from a patient.
- You speak to the patient about your own professional needs or inability.
- You speak poorly of co-workers or the hospital to patients.
- You talk to patients/families about things that are out of your scope of practice.
- You give a patient personal contact information or money.
- You feel that you understand the patient's problems better than other members of the healthcare team.
- You frequently think of the patient when away from work.
- You spend free time with the patient.
- You selectively report a patient's behavior (negative or positive).
- You have swapped assignments to work with a particular patient for personal reasons.

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What is a boundary violation?

A *boundary violation* occurs when a healthcare provider violates or exploits the provider-patient relationship. Often this can happen when the provider has displaced or confused his or her own needs with that of the patient's. Examples include:

- excessive self-disclosure
- deliberate socialization outside the professional environment
- keeping secrets for a patient
- breaching confidentiality.

Harmful and unethical boundary violations include:

- abuse
- sexual relationships
- exploitative business relationships.

What are the consequences of unhealthy boundaries/boundary crossing?

Patients are extremely vulnerable because they trust us as their health care providers. They come to us in a time of need, presenting with physical and emotional distress. When professional boundaries are violated or inappropriately crossed it causes the provider-patient relationship to become untrustworthy, ambiguous and possibly unethical. Boundary violations can discourage patients from seeking help in the future, precipitate exacerbations of psychiatric disorders and promote dependence.

What do I do if I witness others violating professional Boundaries?

If you see other healthcare providers violating professional boundaries, you do not help the patient or the professional by ignoring the issue. Take the time to mentor less experienced staff with what they could have said or done. If the violation is repeated, inform your supervisor.

How do I maintain healthy Professional Boundaries?

When avoiding boundary violations in healthcare, the best thing you can do is to remain mentally healthy. Take time to take care of yourself and your family. If you are feeling vulnerable with a specific situation or patient, do not be afraid to ask a peer or manager for help.

To Maintain Professional Boundaries Follow these Guidelines:

- Avoid caring for family, friends, and people with whom you do business. Change assignments if necessary.
- Do not use offensive language, make sexual comments or jokes.
- Use touch correctly and appropriately.
- Do not give or accept gifts, loans, money, or other valuables to or from patients.
- Do not visit or spend extra time with a person that is not part of your assignment.
- Do not share personal or financial information with the person.
- Maintain a courteous and respectful attitude with all patients equally.

Strategies for Maintaining Clear & Appropriate Boundaries

It is important to note that caregivers who violate professional boundaries often are not aware of their feelings and/or they do not fulfill their emotional and social needs outside of work. They may not have anyone available to talk with at home.

- In your interactions with patients, remind yourself, "Whose needs are being met?" Your professional focus should be on patient's needs, safety, and health;

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- Recognize that while you have chosen health care as a profession, you cannot be all things to all people at all times. These kinds of thoughts can lead to improper interactions and/or compassion fatigue;
- Be aware of the possibility of "Compassion Fatigue," where some health care professionals can experience emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion as a by-product of caring for others;
- Respect others' personal space, physically and verbally. Remember that you are modeling appropriate boundaries for the patients. Seek help from your supervisor as needed, and notify your supervisor if you observe or become aware of boundary violations;
- Seek and maintain healthy relationships and experiences in your own life outside of work. If you are overly involved in your work or if you are in an emotional crisis due to a divorce or relationship break-up, you may be more vulnerable to discussing personal information and thereby committing boundary violations;
- Be aware of any intimate feelings for patients and discuss them with a supervisor, so you will have assistance in promoting clear and appropriate boundaries. Remember that reassignment may be necessary in some situations.

You should anticipate that patients in a psychiatric hospital might act inappropriately with you. For example, patients may ask personal questions, ask for personal information, flirt, offer or ask for gifts, express attraction, make suggestive/sexual comments, expose themselves, express possessiveness or a desire only to cooperate with you. They may even become jealous or silent if you interact with other patients. However, it is always the professional's responsibility to control the situation and establish clear and appropriate boundaries.

Always be prepared to:

- (1) Clarify your professional role ;("My role as a nurse/mental health assistant is to..." "Right now, we are working on...")
- (2) Set appropriate verbal boundaries ("It's inappropriate when you speak that way; Please don't say --, instead please say --;" "Let's continue working on...")
- (3) Set appropriate physical boundaries. Move away from the patient as necessary. Redirect behavior as possible. If you feel uncomfortable, discuss the situation with your instructor. Some situations require reassignment and additional therapeutic intervention.
- (4) Document your interactions with the patient.
- (5) Maintain respect and privacy in your interactions.