



What you should know about... PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES

Overview:

It is important for all paid care workers and health professionals to establish clear boundaries regarding what is appropriate and inappropriate behaviour when working with clients. This is often referred to as establishing “professional boundaries” and recognises the need for all health care workers to understand their role(s) when working with clients and to carry out their responsibilities appropriately.

It is up to each individual health care worker to behave in a professional manner at all times, even if a client, their family or guardian is difficult to manage, or behaves poorly. However, sometimes it is difficult for a health care worker to know what professional behaviour is. For example, it is not unusual for a health care worker to form some level of friendship with a client. Is it unprofessional behaviour to have clients as friends? While it certainly may make the job more satisfying for both parties, it can also blur the line between one’s work and personal life making it difficult and sometimes impossible for the health care worker to carry out their paid or unpaid duties appropriately. For this reason, it would be seen as unprofessional and unhelpful for a health care worker to socialise with their client outside of their work role.

There will be many situations that you encounter as a paid employee or as a volunteer, that cause you to reflect on whether you have established and are maintaining appropriate professional boundaries. Often there is no simple right or wrong answer; however, there are some basic questions you should ask yourself to guide you in forming an appropriate response. What is happening here? How do I feel about what is happening? What does this mean for me? What does this mean for the client? Would I easily be able to explain my actions/behaviour to my supervisor or employer? If you are having trouble answering any of these questions it is likely you need to seek support from a supervisor who can assist or advise you in your specific situation. In addition, the information that follows may provide useful advice that helps you to establish and maintain appropriate professional boundaries in your role as a health care worker.

Key Points:

- Know the role(s) and responsibilities of your position (outlined in your Duty Statement).
- Know what your organization/employer expects of you (e.g., every organisation should have clear Policies and Procedures to follow).
- Identify who to contact in the organisation if you have any questions or concerns about professional boundaries.
- Explain your role clearly to your client(s), including both what you can and cannot do.
- Respond to inappropriate behaviour immediately. Don’t wait and hope things will change if you ignore the situation.
- Take some time to reflect on any difficult situations you have encountered, so that you identify how you and/or the client may have contributed to the problem. In this way you can learn from these mistakes and avoid repeating them. Discuss any concerns with your supervisor.
- Don’t be afraid to ask for help!

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs):

1. What should I do if my client behaves in a sexually inappropriate way towards me (e.g., tells me they want to have a relationship with me or tries to kiss me)?
2. If I observe a colleague behaving inappropriately with a client (e.g., swearing at a client, or fondling a client) what should I do?
3. If a client tells me something personal that may be harmful to him/her (e.g., their partner beats them), and demands that I keep it a secret what should I do?
4. What should I do if I have a concern but don’t feel comfortable to talk to my immediate supervisor because I don’t trust him or her?

Responding to FAQs:

1. Firstly, don't ignore the situation and hope it will go away. Politely explain to the client that their behaviour is not appropriate and will not be tolerated. It is important that the client is also reminded that you are there to do a job and that such inappropriate behaviour only makes it difficult, if not impossible for you to do that job. Further, clearly tell the client that if he/she is unable to control their behaviour you will have to stop working with him/her. In addition, you should definitely report this incident to your supervisor so that he/she is aware of the problem and to allow you to determine what steps should be taken if this issue arises again. If you are upset by this incident discuss this with your supervisor.
2. You have two main options. The first would be to confront your colleague as soon as possible after observing the incident to ask for an explanation. The second option would be to report the incident to your supervisor as soon as possible, since ignoring the issue is unacceptable. The 9th Disability Standard requires you to notify your supervisor of concerns regarding potential abuse.
3. While you may be tempted to confront your colleague, the best choice is to report the incident to your supervisor. Why? You cannot predict how your colleague will respond towards you and/or the client. For example, he/she may threaten, or try to intimidate you and the inappropriate behaviour with the colleague may escalate. Alternatively, the colleague may apologise and promise not to continue to behave inappropriately, while asking you not to say anything. However, this puts you in the difficult situation of maintaining a secret, while at the same time trying to monitor the situation to see if his/her behaviour has changed. So, you should report the incident to a supervisor who can arrange an appropriate investigation and ensure that your organisation's Policies and Procedures are appropriately implemented. In the mean time you should seek any support you require to ensure you can get on with doing your job. If your colleague wants to find out what you know, or if you were the person who reported him/her, politely remind your colleague that he/she should address questions to the person carrying out the investigation and that it is not appropriate for staff to be discussing the situation.
4. The critical issue here is your concern that this client may be at risk of harm. In such a case, you have a duty of care to report this incident to your supervisor as soon as possible, regardless of the effect that doing so may have on your relationship with the client. Standard 9 Policy and Procedure require you to report concerns to your supervisor.
5. If for whatever reason, you do not feel able to talk to your immediate supervisor about any matter, you should seek to identify a different supervisor, or line manager who you are comfortable with so you have an alternative pathway. Be sure that this individual is aware of why you are speaking to him/her in preference to your direct supervisor. Also, it would be worthwhile for you to identify what behaviours in your immediate supervisor make you feel unable to communicate openly with him/her. By doing so you may be able to directly or indirectly assist this individual to develop their skills to the point where you feel you can develop greater trust in him/her.

Useful Resources:

1. Your organisation's **Policies and Procedures Manual**.
2. If you belong to a health professional group, there should be a **Code of Conduct** for your profession.



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