

PROFESSIONAL & PERSONAL BOUNDARIES

As with all professions, social care/support workers are expected to uphold key boundaries to protect themselves, their clients and the organisation they work for. These boundaries are meant to ensure that relationships between workers and clients remain professional, even when working on very personal and difficult issues.

In a recently updated guide for 'Community Care Inform', Frank Cooper covers the boundaries workers need to observe, how to manage them, and how to deal with situations when boundaries have been crossed.

Here are a few key pieces of advice from the guide.

What are the boundaries?

These are a few of the major boundaries that may have implications for your practice and behaviour.

1. **Client focus.** You are expected to place the needs of service users on your caseload at the centre of any decisions that you make about them and their lives.
2. **Self-disclosure.** Information about yourself and your personal life should not be disclosed to clients.
3. **Dual relationships.** You should not hold more than one type of relationship with a client, for example, they cannot work for you, be a family member or receive extra private support from you, as well as be one of your clients. Your family/friends cannot be involved in anything to do with your client, either in a paid, or voluntary, position.
4. **Working within your competence.** It is important that you understand the limitations of your role and of your personal capabilities, and when to refer to your line supervisor or to seek further support and advice for yourself and your clients.
5. **Looking after self.** It is your responsibility to ensure that you are in a fit state to do the job that you are required to do. This covers not only your behaviour outside work but also how you manage your stress and emotions within work and caused by your work.

Crossing or breaking boundaries

The reality of work in the social care sector is that boundaries will get crossed at various points for a variety of reasons, whether it is simple human error, tiredness, stress, manipulation by clients, difficult situations, bad luck or just a bad day at the office. It is your job to spot potential and actual boundary crossings and to take appropriate action.

A boundary crossing is usually part of a pattern or a build up of behaviour between you and your client. Much of the build up may be internal for one, or both, of you. It is not practical for us to challenge everything that a client says or does that might be a crossed boundary and so we have to work in a world where we are essentially doing an ongoing dynamic risk assessment of the situation, intervening where necessary.

The services to clients are funded by a professional body – a Giving Grant Organisation &/or the Local Authority, and a contract has been signed to confirm that the charity conforms to the rules/grant conditions., which includes Professional & Personal Boundaries.

All queries, ideas etc, and case notes, must be discussed and agreed by the supervisor, who may need to take any queries forward to the Charity Manager, for further clarification.

Remember that serious break of the guidelines could lead to investigation, disciplinary, and potentially dismissal.

Personal versus professional

The key to managing many of these boundaries is understanding the difference between a professional and a personal relationship and ensuring that your behaviour always remains on the right side of the line.

Professional relationships are time bound; have a distinct role and purpose; have some structure; one participant holds the power and is specifically trained and supported for the role; there is a power imbalance in favour of the professional; the professional has a responsibility for the welfare of the non-professional and there are rules and boundaries that guide the relationship.

Once you have allowed a relationship to stray into some personal areas, it is much harder for you to maintain other professional boundaries. You will also find that when you do behave in a professional manner, clients will be surprised, unhappy and resentful as they may have been expecting a personal response.

You will also find that it may be much harder for you to make the decisions that your role or your service requires you to make if they are detrimental to the client.

You and your client need to be clear that you are not literally, potentially or figuratively their friend, parent, partner or child, and it is your responsibility to ensure that this is not the case.

The guidelines above are here for yours, and your clients, protection.