setting and maintaining professional boundaries

The ability to set and maintain professional boundaries is critical to an effective, sustainable career in social work. Social workers make judgments regarding boundaries on a daily basis, and these decisions affect not only their own well-being but also that of their clients, colleagues, and loved ones. It is not surprising, then, that the topic of boundaries pervades social work education from introductory curricula through advanced professional development workshops.

Not even the most skilled social worker can anticipate every situation in which challenges to professional boundaries may arise. At the same time, every social worker can—and should—examinate, in an ongoing way, how her or his professional boundaries enhance or harm the following domains:

› Relationships with clients
› Relationships with colleagues
› Relationships with supervisors and administrators
› Amount of time devoted to work
› Amount of time and quality of energy spent on off-the-job activities and relationships
› Ability to cope with work-related stressors

THE FOLLOWING STRATEGIES CAN HELP YOU SET AND MAINTAIN APPROPRIATE PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES.

› Examine your motivations for devoting extra time and attention to particular clients. Although some clients require more energy than others, treating one client differently than you do others may be a cue that your boundaries are overextended. In such situations, assess whether your services are congruent with the client’s care plan, your job description, your professional scope of practice, and your organization’s mission.
Recognize that exceeding your professional boundaries with clients sets up your colleagues and organization for failure.

- Be attuned to signs of workplace bullying (Whitaker, 2010). You deserve the same respect and dignity in your work environment that you offer to your clients and colleagues.
- Ship systems to address client needs do not exist within your organization—or if clients repeatedly experience difficulty in accessing services—collaborate with your supervisor or administrator to address the problem, rather than trying to fill those gaps single-handedly.
- Develop strong working relationships with your colleagues. Although your colleagues need not be your friends, friendly workplace alliances can be invaluable in coping with the stresses of social work practice and maintaining your sense of humor. Moreover, trusted colleagues can help you think through boundary-related questions.
- Recognize that exceeding your professional boundaries with clients sets up your colleagues and organization for failure. Going beyond the parameters of your service system or role creates an unfair expectation that your coworkers do the same. Inconsistent professional boundaries within teams and organizations may confuse clients and erode their confidence in your organization.
- Use supervision and consultation to help you determine appropriate professional boundaries in challenging situations. Maintain an ongoing dialogue with your supervisor about your workload. Use tangible tools, such as assessment forms and NASW standards of practice, to communicate your clients’ needs and the ways in which you spend your time on the job.
- Be attuned to the ways in which you absorb work stress and take steps to manage that stress. Even social workers with excellent external boundaries (such as a regular work schedule), supportive colleagues, and manageable caseloads often find themselves “taking work home” on an emotional level. This can result in persistent worry about client situations while away from the job or unboundedly fears of professional inadequacy. Work-related stress can also result in hypervigilance within a social worker’s personal life—for example, fearing the onset of illness, despite the absence of symptoms, because of constant exposure to client illness. Writing about your feelings or talking with someone you trust can help you process the impact of work on your life and maintain clear internal boundaries between your professional and personal lives.
- Apply, on a consistent basis, your sense of humor. Moreover, trusted colleagues can help you think through boundary-related questions.
- Be discriminate in your use of social media. Avoid “friendizing” clients on Facebook, for example, and limit the amount and type of online information you make available to the public—or even to your friends’ social networks—to prevent conflicts of interest with clients (Hobdy, 2011). Similarly, don’t attempt to access, without informed consent, online information about your clients (Hobdy, 2011). Realize, too, that posting negative information about your workplace may demonstrate a lack of respect for colleagues and violate the NASW Code of Ethics (2008) (Reamer, 2009).
- Develop strong working relationships with your colleagues. Although your coworkers need not be your friends, friendly workplace alliances can be invaluable in coping with the stresses of social work practice and maintaining your sense of humor. Moreover, trusted colleagues can help you think through boundary-related questions.
- Recognize that exceeding your professional boundaries with clients sets up your colleagues and organization for failure. Going beyond the parameters of your service system or role creates an unfair expectation that your coworkers do the same. Inconsistent professional boundaries within teams and organizations may confuse clients and erode their confidence in your organization.
- Devote time off the job to activities that nurture you. Spending time with family or friends, reading, watching a movie, singing, journaling, meditating, exercising, or other diversions can reenergize you to return to work. Allow time for rest, too.
- Be attuned to the ways in which you absorb work stress and take steps to manage that stress. Even social workers with excellent external boundaries (such as a regular work schedule), supportive colleagues, and manageable caseloads often find themselves “taking work home” on an emotional level. This can result in persistent worry about client situations while away from the job or unboundedly fears of professional inadequacy. Work-related stress can also result in hypervigilance within a social worker’s personal life—for example, fearing the onset of illness, despite the absence of symptoms, because of constant exposure to client illness. Writing about your feelings or talking with someone you trust can help you process the impact of work on your life and maintain clear internal boundaries between your professional and personal lives.
- If you find yourself struggling consistently to maintain professional boundaries, consider seeking support from a licensed mental health professional to understand your behavior and evaluate the sustainability of your current role or work environment.
In a consistent basis, your organization’s processes for dealing with clients. Such situations can include (or otherwise), dedicated resources, exception cases, or services, all the staff, and all offices to 911, emergency rooms, or by mental health crisis centers. Think you’re helping clients by applying existing procedures—example, by encouraging them to do it directly in a crisis, rather than through appropriate means. At some point, however, you need to respond to a client in that happens, the client may not be your friends, and your colleagues need not be your friends, either. Hobdy, 2011). Realize, too, that exceeding your social boundaries with clients can create an unfair expectation that you are friends with clients. At some point, however, you need to respond to a client in that happens, the client may not be your friends, and your colleagues need not be your friends, either. Hobdy, 2011). Similarly, don’t use social networking on your personal life.” Such as assessment forms and NASW standards of practice, to communicate your clients’ needs and the ways in which you spend your time on the job. If systems to address client needs do not exist within your organization—or if clients repeatedly experience difficulty in accessing services—collaborate with your supervisor or administrator to address the problem, rather than by trying to fill those gaps single-handedly. Be attuned to signs of workplace bullying (Whitaker, 2010). You deserve the same respect and dignity in your workplace environment that you offer to your clients and colleagues. Find ways to nurture yourself throughout your workday and during your commute. Take regular lunch breaks—if possible, away from your desk, outside your car, or otherwise apart from work responsibilities. Find ways to change pace occasionally during the day. Stand and stretch occasionally. Lay out at a desk, listen to music, an audio book, or an enjoyable radio program while driving to client visits or during your commute. Take a brief walk, or simply breathe deeply and consciously for a minute. Take time away from your job to rejuvenate. Show to maintain a regular work schedule and avoid working overtime on a routine basis. Determine—improving professional knowledge and professional effectiveness. University of Toronto Press (2008). (words, charts and diagrams) need to be described verbally. Other disabilities, they are also appreciated by people seated at a distance.
If you find yourself struggling consistently to maintain professional boundaries, consider seeking support from a licensed mental health professional.

REFERENCES


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