

ETHICS AND BOUNDARIES IN HELPING PROFESSIONS



WEST CAP

What are Ethics?

Law vs. Ethics

- Law – legal justice; following the norms established by society through the political process.
- Ethics – focus is on social justice; doing what is right. Ethics may be in conflict with unjust laws.



Definitions

- **Ethics:** the “rightness” or “wrongness” of an action. Moral standards by which people judge and behave.
- **Code:** a “set” of personal ethical principles which guide an individual’s decision making.
- **Professional code:** a set of guidelines for performance and evaluation based on core values and principles of a profession.



NASW Code of Ethics

- Accepted Standard of Practice for Social Work even if you are not a licensed Social Worker
- Ethical Standards and Responsibilities
 - To Clients
 - To Colleagues
 - In Practice Settings
 - To the Profession
 - To Broader Society



NASW Core Values

- Service – helping people in need
- Social Justice – challenge injustice
- Dignity & Worth of the Person – respect for each individual
- Importance of Human Relationships – recognition and support
- Integrity – act honestly and responsibly
- Competence – increase knowledge

What are Boundaries?

- Clearly established limits that allow for safe connections between service providers and their clients
- Understanding of the limits and responsibilities of your role as a service provider



Importance of Boundaries

- Role modeling healthy communication and professional relationships
- Avoiding “rescuer” role
- Staying focused on your responsibilities to the client & provision of appropriate services to the client
- Avoiding compassion fatigue (burn-out)
- Maintaining healthy, functioning team (if working with other providers)
- Maintaining physical and emotional health and safety

Awareness

- Understanding your own needs
- Understanding your role as a professional
- Staying focused on the job at hand
- Taking care of your emotional and physical health
- Establishing clear limits



Boundary Crossings and Violations

- Intimate Relationships
- Personal Benefit
- Emotional and Dependency Needs
- Altruism
- Unavoidable Circumstances



Consequences of Poor Boundaries

- Compassion fatigue – service provider’s role may not feel sustainable
- Client may not receive appropriate or helpful services, which could affect his/her willingness or ability to accept future services
- Client may feel betrayed, abandoned, or poorly served
- Teamwork with other agencies may fall apart
- Service provider may act unethically
- Reputation of agency/profession may be compromised
- Client and/or service provider may be emotionally traumatized and/or put in physical danger



Why is it difficult to establish/maintain boundaries?

- Dual relationships – service provider & client know each other from another setting
- Values conflicts – client and service provider do not share similar viewpoints on choices, relationships, lifestyle, etc.
- Vicarious trauma – service provider may experience trauma symptoms due to hearing about client's experiences
- Playing the “hero” – service provider feels the need to “save” the client
- Service provider does not trust other team members, believes they can provide services better, believes they are the only ones who can help client

Dual Relationships

- Some dual relationships may be unavoidable
 - You and a client belong to the same church
 - A client lives in your neighborhood
 - Your agency hires clients as staff or utilizes clients as volunteers



Questions to Ask in Examining Potential Boundary Issues:

- Is this in my client's best interest?
- Whose needs are being served?
- How would I feel telling a colleague about this?
- How would this be viewed by the client's family or significant other?
- Does the client mean something 'special' to me?
- Am I taking advantage of the client?
- Does this action benefit me rather than the client?



Signs of Boundary Issues

- Service provider & client begin referring to each other as friends
- Service provider receives gifts from or gives gifts to clients
- Sharing of home phone numbers or other significant personal information
- Asking/expecting socialization outside of professional setting
- Service provider reveals excessive personal information to client
- Discussion regarding work/clients dominates service provider's social interactions with friends & family
- Service provider offers to provide assistance to client outside of his/her role (babysitting, transportation, etc.)
- Service provider finds him/herself “venting” with client about other service providers

Creating & Maintaining Boundaries

- As early as possible in the relationship, establish clear agreements regarding your role as a service provider, your availability, best ways to communicate with you, what to do if you see each other in a public setting
- When boundary issues appear, address them quickly and clearly being sensitive to your client's feelings
- If you disclose personal information, make sure it is relevant to the client's goals. Too much self-disclosure shifts the focus from the client to the provider and can confuse the client's understanding of the relationship.

Creating & Maintaining Boundaries

- You may need to frequently clarify your role and boundaries to ensure understanding.
- Use your supervisor or professional colleagues as a sounding board if you have questions or concerns.
- Dual relationships – if you had a social relationship with a client prior becoming a service provider you must consider how future interactions impact a client's confidentiality, and physical and emotional security.

Creating & Maintaining Boundaries

- Working with a team of providers: Promote positive, open communication and respectful sharing of information. Build trust and recognize that you can't and shouldn't be the only help your client receives.
- Take care of yourself! Make sure you are getting enough sleep, eat well, have healthy relationships, exercise and “leave work at work”.

Scenario

A tenant, who is a mother of three children, is facing the breakup of her marriage. She is very concerned about how her children will respond, what steps she can take to minimize the disruption to their lives, and how she will manage financially with the reduced income. You decide to relate your own experience of divorce and the parenting issues which followed.

Scenario

One of your favorite tenants moves out of your housing units. After several years you see the tenant at a shopping mall. She offers to take you to the food court for lunch to show appreciation for all the help provided during the time she lived in your housing project.

Scenario

You have a tenant who recently started his own small tax accounting business. He has shared with you that the business is struggling and he does not know what he will do if the business fails. The client asks to prepare your taxes this year.

Resources & Contact Info

- <http://www.naswdc.org/>
(National Association of Social Workers)
- <http://www.zurinstitute.com/>
- rthibado@wcap.org
- Carrie.poser@icalliances.org