Social Work Boundaries as an Ethical Consideration

N. Joel Fry, MSW, LISW
President / Therapist
TEAM Restoration Ministries, LLC
Consultant, Weatherbee Resources, Inc.
Simpson College Faculty
University of Iowa School of Social Work Faculty

Objectives

- This program will provide an understanding about boundary expectations in the social work profession as indicated by the NASW Code of Ethics and Iowa Rules of Conduct.
- Participants will gain an understanding of boundary violations as outlined by the NASW Code of Ethics and Iowa Rules of Conduct.
- Participants will be challenged to consider when they have been in a boundary violation and what a social worker should do once they discover the boundary violation.
Boundaries by Definition

- Practitioner stops and client begins
- Rigid or flexible
- Permeable or impermeable
- Give guidance about appropriate behavior

Lack of Boundary Indicators

- Always saying “yes” rather than “no”
- Time spent on the job
- Lengthy visits
- Client’s access to you
- Personal knowledge of patient
- Patient’s personal knowledge about you
- Sarcasm
Social Worker’s Role with Power and Boundaries

- Rank and power
- Trust is the beginning and end of the professional relationship
- Caring, advocating and educating clients
- Opportunity to assist with critical issues

Potential Boundary Violations

- Gift giving and accepting
- Encountering clients outside the professional relationship
- Triangulation
- Interrupting patient/client when speaking
- Stepping into the clients physical and emotional space
Common Consequences of Boundary Violations

- Less personal free time with friends and family
- Less satisfaction of job
- Co-worker frustrations
- Burnout
- Compassion Fatigue

Extreme Consequences of Boundary Violations

- Loss of job
- Loss of license
- Loss of professional identity
- Loss of peers
- Loss of personal relationships
The Social Worker and Client Relationship

- Who’s needs are being met, client or social worker?
- Can clients ever be our peers?
- Should/can we have social contact with patients and clients?
- Is your house clean and do you have healthy boundaries?

Boundary Case Study

- What do you hear as boundary violations?
- What are some general consequences of these boundary violations?
- Have you been there yourself?
Other Boundary Areas to Consider

- Conflicts of Interest
- Privacy and confidentiality
- Access to records
- Sexual relationships
- Physical contact
- Sexual harassment
- Derogatory language
- Payment for services
- Interruption of services
- Termination of services

Contact Information

N. Joel Fry  
515.238.9010  
jfry@team-restoration.org
Social Work Boundaries as an Ethical Consideration

N. Joel Fry, MSW, LISW
President / Therapist
TEAM Restoration Ministries, LLC
Consultant, Weatherbee Resources, Inc.
Simpson College Faculty
University of Iowa School of Social Work Faculty