



## How to Build Good Boundaries in Support Work

Providing care to clients with disabilities (physical, intellectual, mental health, or neurological) raises many challenges for support workers. The role of the support worker can mean that you are in many intimate situations with clients and their friends and families. You may have access to private or confidential information. You may also encounter situations where you are confronted with needs, requests or demands for services or support that are not your role as support worker or carer. This information sheet is aimed to provide practical information on some of the key ethical and boundary issues in providing support in the community.

### Qualities of a Good Support Worker

The qualities of a good worker are many and varied. Everyone brings different strengths to their role, different values, beliefs and practical knowledge and skills. But there are some key skills areas that make workers more effective, for example:

- Ability to listen and understand
- Good communication skills
- Interest in working within the disability field
- Acceptance of people with a disability
- Willingness to collaborate and consult with others
- Ability to accept and respect the choices of other people
- Respect for different needs, values, beliefs, culture
- Commitment to increasing independence and capability in others
- Ability to share knowledge and skills but not to take over
- Having a positive attitude
- Being aware of realistic goals and limitations – making sure you understand each person and their strengths, needs, goals and support needs

- Consistency and ability to follow through
- Professional – human, friendly, but not needy or dependant

### Why do we Need Ethical Standards?

Ethics are the beliefs that we hold about what constitutes the right conduct in a particular situation or job.

We need to have a sound ethical framework to provide good quality care and to protect the rights of individuals with a disability, especially those who may be more vulnerable. Some people will have limited ability to evaluate the quality of care provided to them by workers, to communicate their concerns or complaints. Individuals themselves may also lack awareness that their behaviour and expectations places demands on workers to do things that are not appropriate or in their role.

Ethical guidelines are important in providing a safe and clear working environment for workers in assisting them to provide effective and goal-directed services and support. Simply, they tell everyone what is expected of them in the performance of their work.

They also ensure that individuals providing services have adequate training, skills, knowledge or expertise to provide the services that they are offering in the community.

### Privacy

All clients have a right to privacy in their personal information, and workers should not seek information that is not relevant or necessary to the performance of their duties. Support workers also have a right to privacy, and these boundaries will often need to be set with clients and families who may seek personal information about you, or want to have a relationship with a worker.

## Confidentiality

Confidentiality means that any information obtained or received by workers must be kept absolutely confidential, except with the written or verbal consent of the individual with a disability or their legal guardian.

Workers must not discuss or disclose confidential information with anyone without this permission. It is expected that workers will sometimes need to discuss matters with co-workers, peers or supervisors but this should always be in an appropriate and respectful way.



## Duty of Care

Support workers have a duty of care to anyone who might reasonably be affected by their activities, requiring them to act in a way that does not expose others to an unreasonable risk of harm – physical, psychological or financial. Workers are both ethically and legally accountable for their actions.

As a worker you are required to protect an individual from risks of injury or harm that you can foresee or anticipate. This means you are required to act with a knowledge of the individual (particularly about their disability and their living situation), and of your own abilities, knowledge and limitations. You should not give assistance or advice outside your role or expertise (e.g. financial advice, family counselling, relationship advice).

## Friendships

The role of a support worker is to build, support and strengthen the existing social, family and community network of a person with a disability. The role of a friend is different from the role of worker and constitutes a conflict of interest in doing your job.

Support workers may find this difficult as clients are often isolated, lonely and in need of friends, but it is the role of worker to build friendships, **not to be the friendship**. Similarly relationships with client family

members are also not appropriate and risks blurring the boundaries of your professional relationship. Be careful not to include clients in your social or family life and activities.

An inappropriate relationship with a client or family member has risks for workers including:

- Increasing/or unreasonable demands and expectations from the client or family
- High worker stress and burnout
- Inability to provide professional and objective support
- Difficulty setting limits and dealing with behaviour
- Favouring of certain workers over others
- Distress when relationships break down
- Grief and loss for clients when workers leave

## Drugs and Alcohol

Workers should not be involved in the purchase or consume alcohol or legal/illegal drugs with clients. Workers should also take care not to assist with transporting a person to purchase alcohol or drugs or in encouraging or facilitating drug use and potentially themselves engaging in illegal activities.

## Gifts

Occasionally clients and family members may offer gifts to workers as a “thank-you” for work done, for example, chocolates, flowers, cards etc. We may not want to refuse a small token gift and cause offence. However acceptance of gifts should always be considered with caution, particularly gifts of money or expensive items. You can always respond “Your thanks is enough – this is my job.” Be aware of your organizational policy on acceptance of gifts. Gifts should never be solicited or requested.

## Sexual Relationships

A sexual relationship between workers and clients or between a worker and a family member of a current or previous client is a serious breach of ethical responsibilities and should not occur under any circumstances.

## Tips for Setting the Limits

It is important to be clear about your role and your goals and objectives right from the beginning.

- Discuss your role with the client or family right at the beginning, and be sure to set limits about inappropriate or unreasonable requests.
- Review how you are going from time to time.
- Keep your own family and personal life private and separate to your work – be careful about self-disclosure and providing too much personal information about yourself or other workers.
- Ask for help when you need it – support work can be isolating with high levels of independence and responsibility.
- Discuss any concerns or worries about your own work with your peers or your supervisors.
- Workers also have an obligation to report concerns regarding other workers – individuals with brain injury may be vulnerable to exploitation from others and may not be able to voice concerns or advocate for their needs and rights.

## Signs of Boundary Problems

- Disclosing your own personal information with your clients or their family.
- Discussing your personal, marital, financial or other problems.
- Visiting clients outside of shifts.
- Inviting clients to your home or introducing clients to your family members or friends.
- Staying for longer and longer after your shift has finished.
- Worrying about clients when you go home.

- Feeling that you are the only one who “understands” the client.
- Accepting money or expensive gifts from clients or their family.
- Asking clients or their families for “favours” with shift arrangements.
- Noticing feelings of friendship or sexual attraction towards clients or their family members.
- Having clients or family members refer to you as their “a friend” or a “part of the family”.

## Taking Care of Yourself

Supporting individuals with brain injury can be demanding and stressful. You need to take care of yourself to prevent burn-out. Ways to take care of yourself might include:

- Have a range of activities outside your work that you enjoy e.g. social, recreational or leisure – don’t make work your whole life!
- Plan for regular breaks and holidays from work or even from particular clients.
- Be aware of signs of tension and stress (psychological and physical), and plan relaxing activities that make you feel great.
- Make sure you have someone you trust to talk to – a co-worker, supervisor, friend, family or a counsellor or psychologist.
- Give yourself permission to have emotions and feelings and to express them in the right situation.
- Take care of your general health and well being e.g. sleep, healthy food, and regular exercise or relaxation.
- Remember, you can’t do it all so set good limits about when you work, how long you work for, and who you work with – do the things you enjoy the most!!



## Simple Rules for Keeping Boundaries



1. Do not seek out a personal relationship with your clients, or with their family, friends, or support network. Have a balanced work and home life so your personal needs are met outside of work.
2. Do not have a sexual relationship with clients, their family, friends or people in their support network.
3. Do not introduce clients to your own family, friends, or support network e.g. don't invite people home for family gatherings etc. Work and home should be kept separate.
4. Do not socialise with clients or their family, friends outside of work hours. Your work finishes at the end of your shift.
5. Do not supply or use alcohol, drugs or other illegal substances during work.
6. Turn up on time for your shift. Don't arrive late and leave early. People notice, including your clients. Organise your commitments and travel so that you have plenty of time.
7. Do not smoke in front of clients, and do not lend or buy cigarettes for your clients. Encourage healthy lifestyle choices.
8. Do not borrow, ask for or lend money to clients. Do not talk about your personal financial or other life problems with clients.
9. Do not ask for money, gifts, or special favours from your clients.
10. Do not allow clients to drive your own/work motor vehicle.
11. Do not give advice outside of your skills and expertise – e.g. financial, marital, relationship, medical – refer on to qualified professionals for any support needed.
12. Respect confidentiality and privacy – do not discuss information about your clients with your family or friends. Talk to colleagues and use peer supervision.
13. Consider whether clients have guardians to assist with personal decision making or administrators to assist with financial decisions and consult as necessary.
14. Do not disclose personal information (yours or other workers or other clients) e.g. phone numbers, address, email, marital information.
15. Do not criticize, complain about or discuss issues relating to other workers, staff, or your employer with your clients or their family. Work related issues and complaints need to be dealt with in the workplace.