

Responder Boundaries and Self-Care

Module 4, Chapter 3

Boundaries are the limits that define appropriate behavior. The client/helper relationship is rife with opportunities to overstep your boundaries. There is an inherent power differential between you and your client. You have the power to accept or deny this person as a client. You will be seen as more powerful because you have control over resources needed by this person requesting services.

There are a number of ways to misuse or abuse this power, even unintentionally. It is your responsibility to manage your role and your interaction with each client so as to avoid this misuse or abuse.

Your role as a staff member is a professional one. The relationship you develop with your clients must stay on that level even though you will be dealing with very personal information and circumstances. Some examples of boundary problems are listed below.

- **Social interaction that is not part of the job**, like seeing movies together, dinner together, or an invitation to your home is inappropriate. You will be establishing a dual relationship, one of professional helper and simultaneously as a friend. It is too easy to lose objectivity as someone's friend, and it is confusing and frustrating when limits must be set later on.
- **Sharing personal information** can break appropriate boundaries with your client. Though it may help establish rapport to self-disclose an event in your life, great care should be taken to make sure roles are not reversed; that is, that the client isn't taking care of you.
- **Probing too deeply** with a client can also be inappropriate. Make sure the information you request is germane to your needs in providing assistance. For instance, knowing your client is a survivor of rape may be important to managing this case. A detailed account of the rape is unnecessary.
- **Sexual relationships are always inappropriate.** A sexual relationship consists of everything from flirting to sexual intercourse.
- **Providing too much help** is a very common way helpers go beyond the professional limits in this type of work. How much is too much can only be determined by the specific case. Too much help has been provided when you have done something that the client could have accomplished him/herself. Providing too much help encourages dependence upon you and others. Think of yourself as a caregiver, not a caretaker.

Boundary issues are always complex and difficult to define in specific cases. In general, rely on consultation with others when you are not sure. If you are feeling burnt out, chances are you are doing too much, look at boundaries between you and clients.

Crisis responders will experience situations in which a recipient requests or expects a responder to overstep boundaries. When this occurs, the responder must set reasonable limits with the recipient. The following is a guide to limit setting.

Limit Setting

(From Maureen Malloy, R.N., *Behavioral Emergency Outreach Program*)

1. Listen to the person.
2. Try to understand what the person is communicating
3. State the limit in a simple way.
4. Set the limit in a firm way.
5. Set the limit in a kind way.
6. Give the person a reason for the limitation.
7. Encourage the person to express feelings about the limitation.
8. Accept the person's feelings about the limitation.
9. Be consistent.
10. Evaluate the limit in terms of what the limit accomplishes.

Promoting Health and Preventing Burn-Out of Crisis Staff

An organizational approach to reducing staff burnout includes the following elements.

Effective management structure and leadership

Staff members need to be clear about who is in charge and sets and enforces policies. This reduces ambiguity about organizational relationships and subsequently relieves stress. Additionally, leaders in the organization need to model stress management techniques that they expect their employees to follow.

A clear purpose and set of goals

Staff members need to know what the purpose of their organization is. If the organizational role and goals are clear, it is easier to determine what services can and should be provided. This is helpful in understanding and setting reasonable limits and boundaries with recipients of the services.

Functionally defined roles

Staff roles need to be clearly set out. This reduces conflict and encourages support.

Team support

Organizations need to structure settings and ways in which staff members can support each other.

Plan for stress management

One role of management staff is to be aware of the stress levels of the staff providing direct services, and cue staff members to address their own stress when they seem to be unaware of it. Management also needs to be including stress reduction activities into the milieu of the organization.

Critical incident stress debriefing

Management staff will need to develop a system to provide informal and formal de-briefings of staff following critical incidents (such as completed suicides, assaults, or other distressing events) that occur in the course of delivering crisis services.

Realistic expectations and support of line staff needs to be a program norm

Crisis work by its very nature is often unpredictable and may at times be risky. Despite staff's best efforts to follow best practices and to keep their own safety and that of the recipient and others on the scene at the forefront, there will likely be poor outcomes at times. At these times, it is important to remember that staff at the scene did the best they could with the information they had and factors beyond their control may have developed during the intervention. These unfortunate outcomes are often the catalyst for learning and program planning. Care should be taken to avoid shaming or blaming of those involved as the case is reviewed and plans are made for similar incidents in the future. Informal and formal de-briefings should be provided for all involved.

Self Care for Crisis Responders

The following are important elements in reducing stress and preventing burnout.

Workload management

In this era of being asked to do more and more with fewer staff and less time, being able to prioritize "essential" versus "less important" tasks is a necessary skill for every person.

A balanced lifestyle

A balance between work and home life, physical and mental endeavors, spiritual and practical concerns are essential to remaining centered and resilient.

Stress reduction strategies

Everyone has a number of stress reduction strategies that he or she engages in. These vary from reading to playing sports to socializing with friends. Those people who experience stress as somatic (body oriented) can benefit from activities that reduce muscle tension such as exercise, massage, etc. Those who find stress affecting them mentally can benefit from mentally-distracting interventions such as reading, listening to music, arts and crafts, etc. Most people are a mixture of both types, and respond

to all of these interventions to a greater or lesser degree. Every person must find the stress relievers that work best for him or her.

Self-awareness

OK, everyone gets stressed. Stress can be both productive and destructive. The destructive aspects of stress occur when a person's stress level is too high or has been high for too long. Knowing your own thresholds for destructive stress and ways to intervene is essential.

In addition to knowing one's stress limits and interventions, it is important for a crisis responder to be aware of his or her preconceived ideas about crisis intervention and his or her own abilities and limits.