

Professional Boundaries for Caregivers

Professional boundaries are guidelines for caregivers at work. Staying within those boundaries will result in a better outcome for you and those you care for. Listed below are some examples of professional boundaries and how to stay “in bounds.”

Type of Boundary	Staying In-bounds
Sharing Personal Information: It may be tempting to talk to your patient about your personal life or problems. Doing so may cause the patient to see you as a friend instead of seeing you as a health care professional. As a result, the patient may take on your worries as well as their own.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use caution when talking to a patient about your personal life • Do not share information because you need to talk, or to help you feel better • Only share personal information if you think it might help the patient, such as a teaching example or encouragement
Emotional Reactions: The actions of patients will trigger emotional reactions in caregivers. It is normal for a caregiver to feel sadness, annoyance, fear, attraction, protectiveness, frustration, or sympathy in reaction to a patient's behavior. It is normal to feel such emotions but it is not helpful to express or act on emotional reactions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on the needs of those in your care, rather than personalities • Remember that a patient's behavior may be caused by illness • Practice treating each patient with the same quality of care and attention, regardless of your emotional reaction to the patient
Nicknames/Endearments: Calling a patient 'sweetie' or 'honey' may be comforting to that patient, or it might suggest a more personal interest than you intend. It might also point out that you favor one patient over another. Some patients may find the use of nicknames or endearments offensive.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid using terms like honey and sweetie • Ask your patient how they would like to be addressed. Some may allow you to use their first name. Others might prefer a more formal approach: Mr., Mrs., Ms, or Miss • Remember: The way you address a patient indicates your level of professionalism
Touch: Touch is a powerful tool. It can be healing and comforting or it can be confusing, hurtful, or simply unwelcome. Touch should be used sparingly and thoughtfully.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use touch only when it will serve a good purpose for the patients • Ask your patients if they are comfortable with you touching their arm • Be aware that a patient may react differently to touch than you intend • When using touch, be sure it is serving the patient's needs and not your own
Tone of Voice: Take a moment during your workday and listen to the sounds of the voices around you. You may hear sounds of annoyance and frustration but you will also hear sounds that are encouraging and cheerful. You can contribute to an atmosphere of fear or one of caring through the sound of your voice. It is a choice we all make every time we speak.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be aware that the tone and volume of your voice is a reflection of your emotions • Adjust your voice to convey comfort and caring • The sound of your voice can be a powerful tool in caring for a patient

<p>Gifts/favors: Giving or receiving gifts, or doing special favors, can blur the line between a personal relationship and a professional one. Accepting a gift from a patient might be taken as fraud or theft by another person or family member.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow your facility's policy on gifts • Practice saying no graciously to a resident who offers a gift that is outside your facility's boundaries • To protect yourself, report offers of unusual or large gifts to your supervisor
<p>Clothing: Clothes help to define the boundaries of your role as a caregiver. Clothes send messages about how you feel about yourself and your role. Clothing choices can support your professional caregiving role or undermine it.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Think about what message you are communicating with your choice of clothing. • Outside of work you may dress to look more attractive. • At work, your choice of clothing should reflect that you are a professional caregiver and sincere about your job. Your organization may provide guidelines about appropriate clothing choices.
<p>Scheduled Time: A caregiver relationship is different than a personal relationship. Personal relationships involve two-way helping. A friend or family member is often expected to be available when needed. But a paid helper is scheduled for particular times.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be aware that spending unscheduled time with a patient may indicate that boundaries are getting blurred. • If you spend lots of personal time thinking about a particular patient, you may be crossing professional boundaries • If you recognize any of these warning signs, talk it over with your supervisor or other trusted professional
<p>Seeing Behavior as Symptomatic: Sometimes caregivers react emotionally to the actions of a patient and forget that those actions are caused by a disorder or disease (symptomatic). Personal emotional responses can cause a caregiver to lose sight of her role or miss important information from a patient. In a worst case, it can lead to abuse or neglect of a patient.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on the fact that the behavior of a patient may be directly related to a disease or disorder • Take a moment to collect yourself when you realize you are about to respond emotionally or reflexively to an action • Note that the patient may think their action is the best way to solve a problem or fill a need. Ask yourself if there is a way to problem solve and help the patient communicate or react differently.
<p>Romantic or Sexual Relationships: It is never permissible for a professional caregiver to have a romantic or sexual relationship with a patient. In some situations, sexual contact with a patient may be a crime.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While it may be normal to be attracted to someone in your care, know that it is never appropriate to act on that attraction • Do not tell sexually oriented jokes or stories. It may send the wrong message to your patient • Discourage flirting or suggestive behavior by your patient • If you feel that you are becoming attracted to someone in your care, seek help from your supervisor or other trusted professional right away
<p>Secrets: Secrets between you and a patient are different than patient confidentiality. Confidential information is shared with a few others members of a team providing care to a resident. Personal secrets compromise role boundaries.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not keep personal or health-related secrets with a patient • Be aware that keeping personal or professional secrets indicate that you may have crossed a professional boundary