

Maintaining Personal and Professional Boundaries

How do I maintain professional boundaries when I live and work in the same small community?

How do I maintain boundaries when I see my clients outside of work?

What should I do if I'm attracted to a client or one of their family members?

Introduction

Challenges in the relationship between social workers and clients can emerge unexpectedly. When social workers live and work in the same community as their clients, the challenges of maintaining personal and professional boundaries can be even greater.

This guidance note provides advice about maintaining professional standards of integrity and conduct, in relation to maintaining personal and professional boundaries.

Notifications

The SWRB receives notifications about breaches of professional boundaries by registered social workers. These may be complaints or concerns raised by members of the public, people receiving social work services, employers or colleagues, including situations where social workers have:

- entered into personal relationships with their own clients or clients of the service they work for, members of the client's whānau or someone else in the client's support network
- sent emails, images/photos via social media, or text messages to clients, that are unrelated to their professional role
- maintained contact with clients "off the books" following the end of the professional client-social work relationship
- invited clients into their home
- provided their own money to assist clients financially
- asked clients for references or other favours
- not declared or discussed a personal or potential conflict of interest with their supervisor.

The SWRB Code of Conduct

The Code sets out the minimum professional standards of integrity and conduct that apply to registered social workers. The following are relevant to maintaining professional boundaries:

Principle 1: Act with integrity and honesty.

- Act honestly and ethically in all personal and professional behaviour.
- Communicate in an appropriate, open, accurate and straightforward way.
- Decline any request to be a legal representative or power of attorney for a client.
- Avoid working in a situation where there is a conflict of interest.

Aotearoa New Zealand is a small country, so people are often interconnected, especially if you live and work in the same community, possibly including whakapapa and whanaungatanga connections. It is important that you recognise any dual relationships and identify these in a transparent way with clients and your supervisor, so that your different roles are clear.

Principle 5: Protect the rights and promote the interests of clients.

- Maintain personal and professional boundaries. Don't form inappropriate relationships with clients or those close to them.
- Abstain from sexual relationships or any form of sexual interaction with clients or those close to them. Avoid any behaviours or comments which might reasonably be interpreted as a sexual advance or sexually demeaning.
- Avoid having a sexual relationship or any sexual interaction with former clients or those close to them. It could appear that you have, intentionally or unintentionally, used the power imbalance, knowledge, or influence obtained while you were their social worker to exploit, coerce, or manipulate.

There is always a power imbalance between a social worker and a client with the potential to harm the client.

Occasionally, you may be attracted to clients. One characteristic of ethical practice is your ability to identify and properly manage these feelings. This may include ending the professional relationship. Your supervisor or manager will be able to assist you.

Principle 10: Keep accurate records and use technology effectively and safely.

Set and maintain clear and appropriate personal and professional boundaries in all forms of communication.

Be clear in your communication with clients as you will want to avoid accidental boundary violations and confusion about your professional relationship.

Emails and texts are often casual, informal and use slang. Use email and text messages sparingly, as mistakes can easily be made and messages misunderstood. It can also create a perception that social workers are contactable and available at any time. You need to set clear boundaries around this. For example, you could agree with your client when messages can be sent and answered.

You should politely decline any requests from clients or former clients who wish to be 'friends' on personal, non-work-related sites, and do not make requests yourself. Managing your privacy settings can stop clients connecting with you on social media.

Reflections

You could reflect on the following questions in supervision:

How am I identifying and properly managing any attraction I feel towards clients?

How am I maintaining professional relationships with my clients at all times?

How am I being mindful of power imbalances within the professional relationship and avoiding inappropriate relationships?

How am I ensuring that my own personal needs are not influencing interactions between myself and the client?

Am I aware of and avoiding any conflicts of interest that mean I cannot be totally professional and impartial?

If I have to end a relationship with a client, for either personal or professional reasons, how can I best protect their interests and needs?

Summary

Maintaining appropriate professional boundaries is an important discipline, skill and professional obligation for all social workers, and the overwhelming majority maintain clear and professional boundaries with clients. However, as a professional, you need to be vigilant to avoid inappropriate relationships. Failure to maintain appropriate professional boundaries can lead to complicated relationships which are likely to be confusing and damaging to the client. This could result in serious misconduct charges and impact on public trust in the social work profession.

Related advice

Social Workers Registration Board Ngā Ture Whanonga/ Code of Conduct - <https://swrb.govt.nz/practice/code-of-conduct/>

2019 ANZASW Code of Ethics - <https://www.anzasw.nz/index.cfm/code-of-ethics/>



swrb.govt.nz

