

Handouts for
"Creating and Maintaining
Professional Relationships & Boundaries
between Staff and Service Users"

GertJob, 2007

Behaving Professionally

Activity

Why do you think the clarification of the professional relationship and its boundaries between staff and service users is important?

Because the nature of our professions may require very close working relationships with service users it is important to be clear when to draw the line between professional and unprofessional behaviour.

*Many people with disabilities live isolated lonely lives. Staff members are often the only people for service users that they have regular contact with outside their families. So it should not come as a surprise to us that some service users project all their personal relationships expectations onto staff members. Some service users consider staff their friends. Some might even have a **crush on staff**. The service users are not to be blamed for their feelings. They need to learn to distinguish between their friends and people whose job it is to work with them, either in a paid or voluntary capacity. Equally staff have to know what their role in this professional relationship is, where the boundaries are and how to "explain" these boundaries to the service user.*

It is important to distinguish between friendliness as a quality in professional contact and personal friendships.

Before looking in more detail at different forms of contact and boundaries it may be helpful to look briefly at the meaning of the words "professional" and "relationship" in this context.

Clarification of Terms

"Professional"

A key aspect of the word "professional" is that it has to do with work or employment as opposed to personal and private matters.

"Professionals" are expected to demonstrate a particular level of competence in their job or employment. This can be broken down into the following attributes:

- the knowledge essential to carry out the different tasks included in their work i.e. "They understand what they are doing"*
- the specific skills required to perform the duties appropriately and the more general skills in the area of communication, presentation, teamwork etc.*
- certain attitudes and values towards the work itself, the service provider, colleagues and the service users, their families or carers, e.g. a caring attitude, respect and openness towards the views of others, as well as an understanding of confidentiality, reliability and accountability*
- the experience necessary to perform the job with confidence*

and finally

- Personal qualities like patience, sensitivity, initiative, honesty, courtesy, friendliness, empathy, trustworthiness and good humour.*

"Relationship"

The term "relationship" should here be understood as interaction, communication, rapport and contact between two parties / people.

The "Professional Relationship"

The term "Professional Relationship" is used here for the purpose of describing all relationships between staff, trained or untrained, and service users, their families or carers.

Professional Conduct and Clarification of Boundaries

Staff are employed to provide appropriate services based on assessment of needs and agreed policies and guidelines.

Many agencies use Care Plans as a means of making decisions about the management and conduct of professional relationships

At no time must the needs of a staff member, unrelated to their professional practice, take precedence.

*In general, staff are advised not to initiate **conversations on personal and sensitive issues**, unless this is agreed as a team decision or is specifically part of the professional brief.*

Decisions about Physical Contact with Service Users

There are many opportunities to enhance the lives of service users through physical contact once it is performed in a professional manner.

This can range from basic greeting gestures to intimate care procedures, which service users are unable to manage themselves.

The decision to use a particular form of physical contact will depend on a number of considerations:

- *Service user's ability level (high - low)*
- *Service user's disability (learning or physical etc.)*
- *Staff member's professional qualification and job specifications*
- *Special circumstances (emergency situations or accidents)*
- *Kind of service attended by service user (day or residential)*

An example might illustrate the last point.

"Hugging and kissing between staff and service users may be entirely inappropriate in workshops and day services. But in residential settings, which are the service users' homes, it might be acceptable as a greeting or comfort gesture if:

- It is initiated by a service user and not by staff*
- It is a team decision (not the decision of one staff member alone) and*
- Approved by unit management.*

However, no staff member should be expected or put under pressure to engage in this form of physical contact, if they feel uncomfortable in a situation like this. "

Staff working in this field should therefore be aware of the possible potential and impact of physical contact.

For many service users physical contact, like a hand on their shoulder, might have a calming effect and give them feelings of belonging, self worth and closeness while others are extremely uncomfortable with most forms of touch. This discomfort may relate to a particular medical condition or traumatic experiences in the area of physical contact such as physical or sexual abuse.

Situations, which begin harmlessly can develop into abusive ones. How this can happen is demonstrated in the following quotation.

"For example a man with learning disabilities may start by sitting next to a woman staff member, holding her hand, but after some time may move his hand up her arm eventually touching her breast or caressing her hair. If the hand-holding is considered appropriate by the woman, it can be very difficult for her to determine at what point the touch became invasive and she may also feel responsible for allowing some contact in the first place. This ambiguity may not all lie with the man as the services are also very confused about boundaries." (Thompson, D. & Brown, H. , 1998, Response-ability, pg 136)

It is important that staff use team discussions to clarify individual needs of service users. Physical contact between staff and service users should be based on team decisions and not on isolated judgments of individual workers.

Activity

The following chart is not an exhaustive list of possibilities. Read through the items and tick (✓) the boxes you consider appropriate. Mark those forms of physical contact, which, in your opinion, are only appropriate with additional training with a tick "✓" and a "+".

Green = Usually positive, permissible forms of physical contact

Amber = Use with caution and consultation

Red = No-Go Areas

<i>Physical Contact</i>	<i>Green</i>	<i>Amber</i>	<i>Red</i>
<i>Shaking Hands</i>			
<i>"High Fives"</i>			
<i>Dancing</i>			
<i>Lifting and support when walking</i>			
<i>Feeding</i>			
<i>Personal Care</i>			
<i>Intimate Care</i>			
<i>First Aid</i>			
<i>Hand on the shoulder</i>			
<i>Holding Hands</i>			
<i>Holding back to prevent an accident</i>			
<i>Support when getting on and off the bus</i>			
<i>Hugging*</i>			
<i>Kissing * (peck on the cheek)</i>			
<i>Restraining</i>			
<i>Tickling</i>			
<i>Petting</i>			
<i>Assisting with Masturbation</i>			
<i>Sexual Intercourse</i>			
<i>Physical Punishment e.g. Hitting</i>			

Decisions about Verbal Contact with Service Users

What can staff members do or say if delicate issues are brought up by a service user?

The following quotation describes a situation, where a service user verbally harasses a staff member. It not only answers the above question but also discusses it in a wider context.

*"Similarly, verbal harassment of staff, which involves the man asking staff explicit questions about sex, usually starts with relative innocuous questions. The man may move from asking where the staff member lives to whether she has a boyfriend, to whether they have sex, and to finally asking whether he puts his penis into her vagina. Different staff will have different ideas about when such questioning becomes too personal and abusive. What is needed is a clear consensus and briefing and support for women staff members so that they are not left to deal with this as a personal choice rather than a matter of professional practice. The staff group, including men, should question, why the man might want to know such intimate information and if his curiosity is judged to be genuine to provide a proper forum for sex education. Is it because he is looking for answers, which he does not know, are the answers irrelevant to his pleasure in engaging women staff in talks about sex? (...)
There is no contradiction between services having a strong commitment to sex education and teaching men they have no right to talk about sex when they want with whoever they want."*

(Thompson, D. & Brown, H., 1998, Response-ability, pg. 136)

Activity

The following chart describes a number of appropriate and inappropriate ways of addressing or referring to service users.

It is not an exhaustive list of possibilities. Read through the items and tick (✓) the boxes you consider appropriate.

Green = Usually positive, permissible forms of verbal contact

Amber = Use with caution and consultation

Red = No-Go Areas

<i>Verbal Contact</i>	<i>Green</i>	<i>Amber</i>	<i>Red</i>
<i>Addressing a Service User:</i>			
<i>by First Name</i>			
<i>by <u>"Terms of Endearment"</u> "Darling", "Love", "Hero" "Gorgeous", Poor Thing ...</i>			
<i>by Staff given Nick Name</i>			
<i>as a "Friend"</i>			
<i>as "Boy / Girl Friend"</i>			
<i>as "Lover"</i>			
<i>by <u>Derogatory or ridiculing</u> <u>Terms</u> "Clever", "Stupid", "Idiot" or Sarcasm</i>			

Activity

The next chart describes a number of appropriate and inappropriate subjects of conversations with service users.

It is not an exhaustive list of possibilities. Read through the items and tick (✓) the boxes you consider appropriate. Mark those forms of verbal contact, which, in your opinion, are appropriate only with additional training with a tick "✓" and a "+"

Green = Usually positive, permissible forms of verbal contact

Amber = Use with caution and consultation

Red = No-Go Areas

<i>Verbal Contact</i>	<i>Green</i>	<i>Amber</i>	<i>Red</i>
<i>Sharing or Talking about:</i>			
<i>The Weather</i>			
<i>TV - Programmes</i>			
<i>Service User's Family</i>			
<i>Staff Members Family</i>			
<i>Service User's Holidays</i>			
<i>Staff Members Holidays</i>			
<i>Personal Relationships Staff Member</i>			
<i>Personal Political Views</i>			
<i>Personal Views about the Service Provider</i>			
<i>Personal Relationships Service User</i>			
<u>Sensitive, Controversial Issues</u> e.g.: <i>Contraception, Abortion, Adoption, Divorce</i>			
<u>Topics of a Sexual Nature:</u> <i>Kissing, Sexual Intercourse, Masturbation, Pornography, Prostitution, Homosexuality</i>			

Other Problematic Areas

- *Off-duty arrangements*
- *Favouritism*
- *Ambiguous communication*
- *Staff handing out their home number or address*
- ...

Risks of Bad Practice or Unprofessional Behaviour

- *Confusion, distrust and jealousy amongst service users towards staff*
- *Possibility of staff compromising their professional role and discrediting the agency*
- *Staff making themselves vulnerable to accusation*
- *Prospect of disciplinary measures or dismissal*
- *Risk of legal action*
- ...

"Best Practice" Rules - Procedures regarding: recording, reporting, referring, confidentiality & decision making

- *Team decisions*
- *Management involvement*
- *Supervision*
- *Training*
- *Policies and guidelines*
- *Clear communication with service user and others involved...*

Questions or Comments:
