

# Maintaining personal and professional boundaries

## TIP SHEET



### What are professional boundaries?

Professional boundaries are the legal, ethical and organisational frameworks that protect both clients and employees, or workers, from physical and emotional harm, and help to maintain a safe working environment.

Sometimes we encounter challenging situations in our therapeutic work which can make maintaining these boundaries difficult. For example, if a client:

- offers you gifts
- invites you to a social function
- wants to extend your relationship beyond the service provided, e.g., be your friend
- divulges information which is not relevant to the therapeutic goals.

Situations such as these require workers to have a clear understanding of their role and ethical principles, and the organisation's policies and code of conduct.

It is also important for workers to be clear and assertive with clients about the boundaries of their role and what is appropriate behaviour for the therapeutic process.

### What are personal boundaries?

Personal boundaries are the physical, emotional and mental limits people use to protect themselves from being drawn too much into their clients' lives and from being manipulated or violated by others.

They allow professionals to maintain psychological safety for themselves and their clients, and make objective decisions about the therapeutic process to most effectively assist clients to achieve their goals.

Without these personal boundaries, professionals can run the risk of getting too involved in clients' issues and wanting to "rescue" their client from their situation. While workers cannot "rescue" their clients, they can work with clients to help them achieve their goals, which may include supporting them to change their situation.

### Tips for maintaining professional and personal boundaries

#### 1 Expectations

Set clear expectations with clients at the beginning of the process about what they can expect from you, as the professional, and what you expect from them, as the client. This includes acceptable behaviours, mutual respect and a commitment to the therapeutic process.

#### 2 Your role

Be clear about your role and its limits.

#### 3 Assertiveness

Be assertive and let clients know if they are behaving inappropriately.

#### 4 Clear relationship

Only have one relationship at a time with a client, wherever possible. Having both a professional relationship and a personal friendship with a client at the same time can make it difficult to maintain boundaries and a safe and appropriate working environment.

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**5 Personal information**  
Avoid disclosing your personal information to a client.

**6 Unnecessary information**  
Do not seek unnecessary information from the client that is not relevant to the therapeutic process.

**7 Objectivity**  
Maintain your objectivity with clients.

**8 Triggers**  
Understand how to recognise and manage your triggers.

**9 Privacy and confidentiality**  
Maintain your clients' privacy and confidentiality.

**10 Critical reflection**  
Engage in regular critical reflection of your work.

**About Relationships Australia Victoria (RAV)**

RAV is a community-based, not-for-profit organisation, with no religious affiliations. Our services are for all members of the community, regardless of their religion, age, gender, sexual orientation, lifestyle choice, cultural background or economic circumstances.

Our vision is for positive, safe and respectful relationships for couples, families, schools, workplaces and communities.

Visit [www.rav.org.au](http://www.rav.org.au) or call 1300 364 277 for more information on our programs, locations and how to access our services.

**More information**

RAV provides services supporting individuals, couples, parents and families. These include counselling, relationship education courses and programs, and support groups for people affected by family violence.

We also provide a range of resources that can be downloaded free of charge from our website and run a professional development workshop on *Professional Boundaries in Therapeutic Work*. In this workshop, you'll learn about the professional and personal boundaries of helping roles, why professionals need them and why it's important for them to regularly reflect on their practice.

To learn more, call RAV's Training and Development Team on (03) 8573 2222, email [ravtraining@rav.org.au](mailto:ravtraining@rav.org.au) or visit [www.rav.org.au/ProfessionalBoundaries](http://www.rav.org.au/ProfessionalBoundaries)



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