



How to Build Good Boundaries in Support Work

Providing care to Service Users with disabilities raises many challenges for support workers. The role of the support worker can mean that you are in many intimate situations with Service Users and their friends and families. You may have access to private or confidential information. You may also encounter situations where you are confronted with needs, requests or demands for services or support that are not in your role as a support worker. Below, please find some information that is aimed to provide practical information on some of the key ethical and boundary issues in providing support in the community

Qualities of a Good Support Worker

The qualities of a good support worker are many and varied. Everyone brings different strengths to their role, different values, beliefs and practical knowledge and skills. But there are some key skills areas that make workers more effective for example

- ❖ Ability to listen to understand
- ❖ Good communication skills
- ❖ Interest in working within the disability field
- ❖ Acceptance of people with a disability
- ❖ Willingness to collaborate and consult with others
- ❖ Ability to give and respect the choices of other people
- ❖ Respect for different needs, values, beliefs and cultures
- ❖ Commitment to increasing independence and capability in others
- ❖ Ability to share knowledge and skills but not to take over
- ❖ Having a positive attitude
- ❖ Aware of realistic goals and limitations
- ❖ Consistency and ability to follow through
- ❖ Professional, human, friendly but not needy or dependent

Why do we Need Ethical Standards?

Ethics are “the belief that we hold about what constitutes the right conduct” in a particular situation or job.

We need to have a sound ethical framework to provide good quality care and to protect the rights of individuals with a disability. Ethical guidelines are important in protecting individuals with a disability that makes them vulnerable in the community. People with a disability may have limited ability to evaluate the quality of care provided to them by their support workers, to communicate concerns or complaints. Individuals themselves may also lack awareness that their behaviour and expectations places demands on workers to provide services or support that is not within their role.

Ethical guidelines are also important in providing a safe and unambiguous working environment for workers in assisting them to provide effective and goal directed services and support. Simply, they tell everyone what is expected of them in the performance of their work. They also ensure that individuals providing services have adequate training, skills and knowledge or expertise to provide the services that they are offering in the community.

Privacy

All Service Users have a right to privacy in their personal information and workers should not seek information that is not relevant or necessary in the performance of their duties. Support workers also have a right to privacy and these boundaries will often need to be set with Service Users and their families who may seek personal information or a relationship with the worker.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality means that any information obtained or received by workers must be kept absolutely confidential except with the written or verbal consent of the individual or their legal guardian

Workers must not disclose or discuss confidential information with anyone without their permission. It is expected that workers will discuss matters with co-workers, peers and supervisors in an appropriate and respectful way.

Duty of Care

Support workers have a duty of care to anyone who might reasonably be affected by their activities, requiring them to act in a way that does not expose others to an unreasonable risk of harm – physical, psychological or financial.

As a worker you are required to protect an individual from risks of injury or harm that you can foresee or anticipate. This means you are required to act with a knowledge of the individual (particularly about their disability and their living situation) and of your own abilities, knowledge and limitations. Workers are both ethically and legally accountable for their actions.

Friendship

The role of the support workers is to build, support and strengthen the existing social, family and community network of a person with a disability. The role of a friend is different from the role of a worker and constitutes a conflict of interest.

Support workers may find this difficult as Service Users are often isolated, lonely and in need of friends but it is the role of the worker to build friendships, not to be the friendship. Similarly, relationships with Service User family members are also not appropriate and risks blurring the boundary of your professional relationship. An inappropriate relationship with a Service User or family member has risks for workers that may include:-

- ❖ Increasing or unreasonable demands and expectations.
- ❖ Higher work stress and burnout
- ❖ Inability to provide professional and objective support
- ❖ Difficulty in setting limits and dealing with behaviour
- ❖ Favouring of certain workers over others
- ❖ Distress when the relationships break down
- ❖ Grief and often loss for Service Users when workers leave

Drugs and Alcohol

Workers should not be involved in the purchase or consumption of alcohol or legal/illegal drugs with Service Users. Workers should also take care not to assist with the transportation to purchase alcohol or drugs.

Gifts

Acceptance of gifts should be considered with caution, particularly gifts of money of a high monetary value. Gifts should not be solicited or requested.

Sexual Relationships

A sexual relationship between workers and Service Users or between workers and family can lead to a serious breach of ethical responsibilities. See Code of Conduct.

Setting Limits

It is important to be clear about your role and your goals and objectives right from the beginning

- ❖ Discuss your role with the Service User or family
- ❖ Review how you are going from time to time
- ❖ Discuss any concerns or worries about your own work, or other workers, your peers or your supervisors
- ❖ Workers may also have an obligation to formally report concerns regarding other workers.

Signs of Boundary Problems

- ❖ Discussing your personal, marital, financial or other problems with Service Users or their family
- ❖ Visiting clients outside of shifts
- ❖ Inviting clients to your home or introducing clients to your family members or friends
- ❖ Staying longer and longer after a shift has ended
- ❖ Worrying about Service Users when you have gone home
- ❖ Accepting expensive gifts or money from Service Users or their family
- ❖ Noticing inappropriate and or/ unwanted feelings of friendship or sexual attraction to Service Users or their family
- ❖ Having Service users or their family refer to you as their “friend”

How to get support

It is important that if you notice any signs of boundary or ethical problems that you ask for assistance as soon as possible. The staff members at Quality Lifestyle Alliance Inc. are always available to answer any questions you may have and you are encouraged to do so.

Taking Care of Yourself

Supporting a person with a disability can be demanding and stressful. You need to take care of yourself to prevent burnout. Ways to take care of yourself may include

- ❖ Have a range of activities outside your work that you enjoy e.g. social, recreational or leisure – don't make work your whole life!
- ❖ Plan for regular breaks and holidays from work or event from particular Service Users
- ❖ Be aware of signs of tension and stress (psychological and physical) and plan relaxing activities that make you feel great
- ❖ Make sure you have someone you trust to talk to – a co-worker, supervisor, friend, family member, counsellor or psychologist.
- ❖ Give yourself permission to have emotions and feelings and to express them in the right situation.
- ❖ Take care of your general health and wellbeing, e.g. sleep, healthy food and regular exercise and/or relaxation

Remember, you cant do it all – so set good limits about when you work, how long you work and who you work with – do the things you enjoy the most.

