Setting Boundaries with Clients

Past trauma can lead to a distorted sense of boundaries. This may take many forms, ranging from an extreme sense of distrust in others (guarded and suspicious) to being desperate for security and attachment.

Setting boundaries may feel like putting up walls between your group and the client. However, good boundaries build walls to create sturdy foundations for a healthy relationship.

Good boundaries ensure the client becomes self-sufficient instead of dependent, and prevent you from becoming burnt out.

- **Restoring Dignity**: Recognize there is an inherent power-differential and work to protect everyone by ensuring that mutual respect and agency are maintained.
- **Restoring Trust**: Boundaries should be expressed clearly and early in the relationship. They should communicate realistic expectations to ensure that trust is created. These boundaries should be enforced consistently.
- **Restoring Choice**: While it may be appropriate for you to provide information and cultural context to a decision a client is making, client choices should be respected even when you may disagree. This may include a client's right to decline a service you are offering.

Notes on helping boundaries

Taking on client problems as your own can feel like compassion, but it ultimately removes the power and agency from them.

Keep in mind that helping ultimately hurts when we enable rather than empower the client.

Do not be afraid to say "no." Enforcing a boundary may feel uncomfortable in the short-term, but we are looking for long-term success.

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Notes on gift boundaries

- Giving gifts: Avoid investing in expensive and/or large items such as vehicles, plane tickets, or unnecessary appliances. This may set unrealistic expectations, an undue sense of necessary reciprocity, and/or create dependency. Individual group members should consult the group and/or the agency before gifting the client directly.
- Accepting gifts: The client should never be made to feel that they owe the group anything. However, there may be a cultural practice of hospitality with which the client wishes to engage. Gifts that can be shared like food or games may be an appropriate way to allow the client to express that desire. Gifts that are individualized physical items and/or costly should be avoided.

Please consult the agency for local policies surrounding giving or receiving gifts.

Notes on information-sharing and roles

A client's right to privacy should always be respected.

While it is a privilege when a client chooses to share aspects of their past, they should never feel pressured to share. Many clients may have experienced very private traumatic events and/or may feel a desire to "start over" or "leave their past behind" in this new country.

While sharing cultures is a way of connecting, try to avoid making questions about culture or country-of-origin the sole focus of your time together. The goal is for clients to feel like a part of their new communities and not a novelty.

When asking for information, consider asking, "How much information do I really need to do my job? Am I asking because it is relevant or am I just curious?" When clients are answering, you may find them oversharing personal information for various reasons. If this happens, consider saying "I don't need to know all the details."

Questions to Consider When Setting Boundaries as a Group

- What contact information will we give to the clients?
- Which planned times will we visit the client? If we are flexible with the times we visit, what boundaries should we set for when they ask us to help with something "last minute"?
- Where will we take the clients that might require spending money?

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- For trips that might require money, how much is the group willing to spend? How will we ask the client to provide their own money for a trip, when appropriate?
- What spaces will we invite the clients into? Will clients be invited to our private homes? How might the client feel about the differences between their home and a group member's home?
- How will we as a team make sure the client knows they have the power to consent to activities or services?
- What is our role as a community sponsor and how does that differ from the role of the agency staff? How can we empower clients to communicate with agency staff when a concern falls into the agency's responsibilities?

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