

Navigating Boundaries in VA Peer Support Services

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Learning Objectives

- Discuss three components of boundaries in peer support relationships in the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).
- Identify differences between boundary crossings and boundary violations.
- Discuss a decision-making framework for navigating boundary issues in peer support relationships in VA.

What is meant by boundaries?

- Boundaries are principles and rules that guide VA peer support providers' relationships with others:
 - Peer support provider & peer support provider
 - Peer support provider & group member/individual Veteran consumer
 - Peer support provider & Veteran's family member(s)
 - Peer support provider & VA clinical staff
- Boundaries are influenced by where you are, who you are with, and the cultural backgrounds of yourself and others.

Why are boundaries important?

- Demonstrates respect for others
- Promotes honesty
- Fosters trust between individuals
- Maintains safety of everyone involved
- Clarifies roles & expectations

What do boundaries include?

Boundaries are involved in relationships in the following areas:

- Confidentiality
- Language use
- Actions

Confidentiality Defined

Confidentiality involves keeping others' personal information private.**

- Verbal: What a Veteran says to you should remain between you.
- Written: Any personal identifying information you write about a Veteran needs to be kept in a secure place (ex. progress note in Veteran's electronic medical record).

** There are exceptions where you must share private information with others (ex. threat of suicide; threat of homicide; suspected abuse of children and/or elderly).**

Language Use Defined

- Language is the way we communicate and what we say to others.
- The words we choose are important because they can be used to promote respect, trust, and safety.
- Respectful language fosters positive relationships with others.
- Disrespectful language (i.e., racial slurs, sexist comments, swear words) can damage relationships and compromise their safety.

Actions Defined

- Actions are how we behave and what we do in our daily lives.
- The actions we choose to take are important because they can be used to promote respect, trust, and safety in relationships.

Example Actions

DO

- Clarify your role in every setting where you work as a VA peer support provider.
- Do seek out supervision.
- Refrain from any financial transaction with Veterans you are helping (Ex. Do not buy/sell cigarettes for your peer support group members).

DON'T

- Provide peer support services to any of your family members.
- Date or have sex with anyone to whom you are providing or formerly provided peer support services (no intimate relationship).
- Discuss a Veteran with your family, friends, other Veterans, or anyone else who is not directly involved with the Veteran's health care. **If you are asked to provide information about a Veteran to the Veteran's family, first you must ensure the appropriate release of information forms have been signed.**

Boundary Crossing vs. Boundary Violation

Boundary Crossing

- Often ambiguous
- Occurs whenever your actions deviate from your established role as a VA peer support provider
- Dependent on where you are, who you are with, and the cultural backgrounds of all involved parties
- Decision-making process can be complex

Boundary Violation

- Often clear-cut
- Crossing which creates a reasonable risk of harm or exploitation of a person or people
- Boundary rules apply regardless of where you are, who you are with, or the cultural backgrounds of anyone involved
- Decision-making process can be difficult but is usually straightforward regarding what you should do

Boundary Crossing & Violation Examples

Boundary Crossing

- Hugging
- Giving a Veteran your personal cell phone number and/or home address
- Self-disclosure about political affiliation, sexual orientation, and/or religious affiliation
- Accepting gifts from Veterans you are assisting

Boundary Violation

- Sexual advances (i.e., flirting)
- Sexual contact
- Verbal and/or physical aggression
- Financial transactions (i.e., borrowing/lending money)

Decision-Making Framework

When thinking through how to act in a situation, here are important questions to ask yourself:

- Are there any policies/rules/codes of conduct about the issue? What do they say? If rules exist, follow them.
 - VA has several policies to guide staff behavior. Be sure to learn what the policies are at the VA site where you are working.
- What is my supervisor's advice? Consult your supervisor whenever possible.
- What do my gut instincts tell me to do?



Boundary Vignettes

(Refer to the Boundaries Vignettes Handout)

Golden Rule about Ethical Decision-Making

When in doubt...CONSULT!:

- Talk with your supervisor(s).
- Talk with the director of the program (if different than your supervisor) where you are working as a VA peer support provider.

Reference

Reamer, F. G. (2001). *Tangled relationships: Managing boundary issues in the human services*. New York: Columbia University Press.

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