

How PSWs set and maintain safe and respectful professional and personal boundaries with clients

Personal Support Workers (PSWs) are often asked by clients to perform tasks that go beyond the stated care plan or in a way that accommodates their preferences. While many of these requests are reasonable and doable, some of these requested tasks have the potential to compromise PSW and client safety. This study explored compassionate strategies used by PSWs for setting limits to prevent exploitation, harassment, or injury.

High-performing PSWs and their supervisors identified key strategies and tactics to establish and maintain professional and personal boundaries in common but challenging situations. The strategies include setting appropriate client expectations, reinforcing a boundary when it is challenged, and acting to prevent problematic situations from recurring. Online and in-person training programs will be developed to spread these strategies to other PSWs and their supervisors.

Project Overview

Personal support workers (PSWs) often work alone in the community. The care is guided by a care plan, but how the care is provided, which activities are prioritized, and when additional helpful activities can be completed are negotiated between the PSW and client, often in the moment. Choosing when to set limits on how or what extra care is provided or additional tasks are done, and how to do so successfully, is a challenge for many PSWs. Failure to establish and maintain professional and personal boundaries can compromise PSW and client safety (e.g., putting PSWs at risk for exploitation or harassment; leading to injury for PSWs or clients).

Some PSWs are very skilled at setting limits with clients and their families, while maintaining a positive relationship. To explore how these “positive deviants” establish and maintain boundaries, we invited these PSWs to workshops and asked them to share how they manage boundary negotiations. Supervisors were included in these workshops, as their support is important for reinforcing PSWs’ limits.

What did we do?

A total of 13 PSWs and supervisors from 3 regions in Southern Ontario participated in the workshops. Potential participants were identified as high-performing individuals in their work roles by directors and supervisors to whom they report. They were presented with common care scenarios in which a PSW might feel pressured to perform a task unrelated to planned care. For each care scenario, participants identified the professional or personal boundary they would establish or enforce, and the specific strategies, tactics, and language they would use. All the care scenarios were based on real situations that emerged from conversations with PSWs and their supervisors during the PSW Safety in the Community study conducted at SE Health in 2016-2017. A summary of that project is available.¹

What did we find?

Setting expectations: A core strategy identified by PSWs and supervisors was to establish expectations early and reinforce these as needed. PSWs and supervisors agreed this should be done during the

supervisor's first visit with the client to develop a care plan. They said that this step helps ensure the client has accurate information regarding services, visit duration, and scheduling. PSWs should then review expectations during their first visits with their clients, and whenever a boundary is challenged.

Reinforcing boundaries: PSWs emphasized the importance of maintaining a positive tone and staying 'on the client's side' when reinforcing boundaries. They said that emphasizing what they *can* do to address client concerns helps maintain a positive relationship. For example, a PSW can suggest providing care in different and safer ways, they can connect with their supervisor to seek additional services or supports, and they can remind clients that they can address further 'extras' and spend more time together during the next visit.

Making exceptions: In situations where a high-performing PSW chooses to make exceptions to established boundaries, they remind clients of the limits and inform their supervisor that they have made an exception. Keeping supervisors informed about exceptions or persistent client/ family requests for 'exceptions' allows them to understand changing client needs and promotes safety for all members of the PSW team.

Self-awareness: Beyond specific strategies to set boundaries, PSWs and supervisors emphasized the importance of PSWs knowing their own core values, having a clear vision of their role, and understanding the importance of self-care. These insights were helpful in enabling PSWs to continue to work well and enjoy their lives and relationships outside of work.

What is the impact?

In addition to a publication currently under review,² we are looking for funding to support the translation of the findings into a training program which may involve both online and in-person components.

Modules for the program are anticipated to include:

- different types of boundaries;
- situations where these may be tested;
- clear and compassionate strategies for establishing boundaries;
- appropriate responses when they are challenged;
- how to reinforce boundaries for future visits.

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References

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