

# How personal support workers (PSWs) set and maintain safe and respectful limits with clients

Personal Support Workers (PSWs) are often asked to perform tasks that go beyond the stated care plan or to accommodate client preferences. Some of these tasks have the potential to compromise PSW safety. This study explored compassionate strategies used by PSWs to set limits to prevent exploitation, harassment, or injury.

PSWs and their supervisors identified key strategies and phrases used to establish and maintain limits in common but challenging situations. These include setting appropriate client expectations, responding to reinforce a boundary when it is challenged or to prevent problematic situations from recurring. Online and in-person training programs are being developed to teach these strategies.

## Project Overview

Personal support workers (PSWs) often work alone in the community. The care provided to clients is guided by a care plan, but how it is provided, which activities are prioritized, and when additional helpful activities can be completed are negotiated between the provider and client. Choosing when to set limits on how or what care is provided, and how to do so successfully, is a challenge for many PSWs. However, failure to establish boundaries can put PSWs at risk for exploitation or harassment and may lead to injury for the PSW or their client. 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, PSWs were asked to share how they manage boundary negotiations. Supervisors were included in these

conversations, as their support is important for reinforcing PSWs’ limits.

The goals of our study were: 1) to identify strategies that highly skilled PSWs and their supervisors use to set and maintain appropriate boundaries with clients; and 2) to develop training materials to share these strategies with others.

### What did we do?

PSWs and supervisors from 3 regions in Southern Ontario participated in the study workshops.

Participants 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 boundary they would establish or enforce, and the specific strategies and phrases they would use. All vignettes were based on real situations that emerged during

the study of PSW Safety in the Community, conducted at SE Health in 2016-2017. A summary of that project is available [here](#).<sup>1</sup>

### What did we find?

**Setting expectations:** A core strategy identified by PSWs and supervisors was to establish expectations early and reinforce these as needed. Both PSWs and supervisors stated this should first be done at the supervisor's initial visit with the client to develop a care plan. This ensures the client has accurate information regarding services, visit duration, or scheduling. PSWs should then review expectations at their initial client visit, or if a limit is challenged.

**Reinforcing boundaries:** PSWs emphasized the importance of maintaining a positive tone and staying 'on the client's side' when reinforcing set boundaries. This is accomplished by emphasizing what they *can* do to address client concerns. For example, providing care in different ways, connecting with a supervisor to seek additional services or supports, and reminding the client that they can address further 'extras' and spend more time together during the next visit.

**Making exceptions:** In situations where PSWs choose to make exceptions to established boundaries, they remind clients of the limit and inform their supervisor of the exception. Keeping supervisors informed about exceptions or persistent client/family requests for 'exceptions' allows them to understand changing client needs and promotes safety for the full complement of PSW team.

**Self-awareness:** Beyond specific strategies to set boundaries, participating 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 planned publications, the outcomes

from this study form the basis for a training program being developed for PSWs. This program will be made available both online and in-person.

Modules for the program will cover:

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

Additional resources to support PSWs and supervisors in maintaining appropriate boundaries will also be made available.

The effectiveness of the two training delivery methods will be evaluated in a future study.

### How was the research funded?

This research was funded by Women's College Hospital as part of the Women's Xchange \$15k Challenge. Emily King was supported by MITACS Accelerate and a CIHR Fellowship.

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### Reference

1. SE Research Centre (2020). *PSW safety in the home care*. [https://research.sehc.com/SEHCResearch/media/Research\\_Centre/pdfs/HCE-108-179-2020-02-06-ROTR-PSW-Safety-Final.pdf](https://research.sehc.com/SEHCResearch/media/Research_Centre/pdfs/HCE-108-179-2020-02-06-ROTR-PSW-Safety-Final.pdf)