

Professional Boundaries Policy



POSITION STATEMENT

ZAR Wellness staff have a responsibility to provide a safe and effective service. Whilst it is recognised that staff must establish a rapport with clients, and provide friendly and accessible services, they are responsible for establishing and maintaining appropriate boundaries between them and clients and for providing an equitable service. There is no single all-encompassing definition of what constitutes professional boundaries. The intention of this policy is to achieve a shared understanding of acceptable and unacceptable practice, enabling ZAR Wellness to apply clear and consistent standards.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this policy is to set guidelines for establishing and maintaining effective and appropriate professional boundaries with the people we assist. It recommends adopting a course of acceptable behaviour when working with the people we assist that has their best interests in mind.

SCOPE

This policy relates to all ZAR Wellness staff, contractors and volunteers – referred to as ‘Staff’ hereon in.

This policy is used in accordance with the guidelines of the Australian Counselling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics and Practice and provides guidelines on appropriate behaviour for maintaining professional relationships between staff and the people we assist, and visitors. The policy focuses on maintaining a professional relationship at all times in the process of offering counselling services.

Due to the limitations of the policy to provide recommended behaviour that covers all scenarios, the Code of Conduct should always be consulted together with this policy when questions arise. It is expected that everyone who falls under the scope of this policy will always exercise good professional judgement and ask for assistance when unsure.

PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES

Professional boundaries can be hard to establish because it is values-driven and boundaries separating the professional from non-professional are often blurred. Boundaries are also often influenced by cultural contexts and expectations. As such, people may have different ideas about what is acceptable behaviour within a professional boundary setting.

For the purpose of this policy, a professional boundary is the ‘line’ between a professional and personal relationship. Professional boundary violations by a staff member represent a breach of trust and a failure to meet a duty of care to clients.

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THERAPEUTIC RELATIONSHIPS

Staff should always be aware that they are responsible for providing therapeutic support that is goal-oriented and planned to meet specific needs. Staff should also be mindful of the power imbalance that exists which make the client more vulnerable in the professional relationship. As such, support must always be person-centred and inclusive. Accordingly, staff must always behave and make decisions in the best interests of the client and refrain from crossing the boundaries of professional relationship that can lead to potential harm.

PRINCIPLES

Clients' rights and needs should be respected at all times. The relationship between a client and a staff member is not one of equal balance. The quality of outputs achieved in any collaboration depends on the level of trust between the participants.

POLICY

- Staff recognise and understand that they may be in a position of power. This power must not be abused at any time. It is essential therefore, that all interactions between clients and staff are seen in terms of a professional relationship.
- Staff have a clear framework within which to provide a service.
- Individual staff are responsible for maintaining professional boundaries. Staff are required to ensure that professional relationships are not misread or confused with friendship or other personal relationships. This is essential in order to protect clients at a time when they may be vulnerable. It also protects staff from any risk of potential false allegations. Failure to meet this responsibility may lead to formal disciplinary action being taken against them.
- Staff are supported to maintain and monitor professional boundaries.
- Clients are provided with information on their right to express a grievance or make a complaint.

DUAL RELATIONSHIPS

Staff should avoid engaging in dual relationships with the people we assist as there may be a potential conflict of interest and may cause problems for the person to receive effective support. In situations where dual relationships seem likely, staff are required to inform their manager/supervisor immediately and discuss possibilities of continuing or finding someone else to take their role of providing services. If the second option is difficult (for example where there are limited workers available or the case has progressed significantly where it would cause more harm to switch staff), staff should seek guidance from their manager/supervisor and regularly consult and ask for supervision until it is safe and possible for another staff member to take their place or for the relationship to naturally come to an end.

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ZAR Wellness acknowledges that in some cultural contexts, dual relationships may be unavoidable and, in such cases, professional boundaries will be appropriately managed to still be effective and safe for both the people we assist and staff.

While staff should not socialise with the people we assist, their relatives or carers, ZAR Wellness understands circumstances outside of work can be hard to control and that staff have personal lives. In situations where workers encounter the people we assist outside of work (e.g. as members of a same social club, etc.), they should be guided by the person to determine the level of interaction. If the encounter happens frequently or regularly staff should inform their manager/supervisor of the situation.

PROHIBITED RELATIONSHIPS

In the course of providing services, staff may develop strong feelings towards the people we assist, their relatives or carers and vice versa. Staff must remember it is their responsibility to conduct themselves professionally and maintain professional boundaries with the people we assist at all times. If a staff members notice a change in the relationship or signs they or the person seek a change in the relationship, they should inform their manager/supervisor and discuss ways to continue to maintain the professional nature of the relationship.

Some examples of relationships that are prohibited are:

- Personal relationship (being friends, assuming the role of a parent/guardian)
- Sexual relationship (regardless of consent, especially with children and young persons)
- Financial or business relationship (entering into contracts, giving or lending money, etc.)

Staff should never seek out relationships with former or current clients. Staff should also show caution with exchanging messages and making connections on social networking sites (refer Social Media Policy) and other electronic means with the people we assist as this can blur the safe zones of professional boundaries. If staff have concerns or questions about appropriate behaviour workers should always consult their manager/supervisor.

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CONFIDENTIALITY

Staff should be familiar with and strictly adhere to ZAR Wellness' privacy and confidentiality policy and be vigilant in securing and protecting information obtained in the course of their work. This could include information relating to ZAR Wellness (e.g. HR matters), staff or the people we assist. Staff must never breach client confidentiality except in cases where it concerns the safety of the person or other(s) in their care. e.g. the person is having suicidal thoughts, child safety concerns, etc. In these cases, staff should approach their manager/supervisor for guidance and recommended course of action(s).

REPORTING

Staff should always keep an accurate and detailed record of their meetings with the people we assist and report any concerns about possible breaches of professional boundaries relating to them or other staff to their manager/supervisor. The manager/supervisor should respond promptly to any concerns or breaches reported.

SUPPORT

If staff have concerns or questions about professional boundaries, they should seek guidance from their manager/supervisor. If necessary, the manager/supervisor should consider staff seeking professional support for any distress experienced in the course of providing support services.

Managers should include concerns and questions on professional boundaries for reflection in staff meetings where appropriate, to explore best practices and effective ways to maintain professional boundaries. Managers and staff should also consult Learning and Development for relevant training and ensure they attend to be up to date and consistent with best practice.

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The following questions are a guide to assist staff monitor their relationship with clients:

- Am I dealing in a different manner with a particular client than with others under the same circumstances?
- Is my dress/availability/language different from the normal with a particular client?
- Would I do or say this if a colleague were present?
- Would I condone my conduct if I observed it in another organisation?
- Are the consequences of my actions likely to have negative outcomes for clients?
- If I were the client's parent/guardian/carer would I want an adult behaving this way towards the client?

Befriending and Friendship

- Staff cannot overstep professional boundaries and confuse befriending clients with friendship in any situation.
- Befriending a client is a professional relationship, made to meet client's needs.
- Becoming a client's friend is a relationship that focuses on the needs of both people. A professional relationship focuses solely on the client's needs.
- Befriending is an appropriate relationship for staff and part of building the necessary trust to work with clients.
- Becoming a client's friend is inappropriate; staff are employed by ZAR Wellness to walk alongside clients as part of the contract of employment and it is potentially an abuse of power to represent the relationship as a friendship.
- Staff and clients should be in a mutual relationship where they can learn and grow together.

Influence

- Staff must be careful not to influence clients with their own beliefs and personal values.
- Although morality, religion and politics are common areas of conversation, and clients may wish to discuss their views with staff, staff are never to promote or impose their own views on these subjects.

Approachability

- Staff must be approachable, open to fair and reasonable challenge and feedback and positively interact with clients. They should not be seen by clients as intimidating or inaccessible.
- Clients are not discouraged from accessing support within agreed boundaries or from making complaints.

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Touch – Physical Contact

Also refer to APPENDIX B – Touch and physical intervention for more detail

- Some clients may misinterpret physical contact as an affection outside the professional relationship. Clients may also see physical contact as expressions or favouritism e.g. where a staff member hugs one client and not another. All staff should therefore be aware that physical contact presents the risk of being misunderstood, and it may result in staff being vulnerable to allegations of inappropriate professional behaviour.
- When touching occurs, it is required to only take place within the context of a professional relationship and with the client's agreement. The limits and boundaries for touch between staff and clients are required to be fully described and documented on the individual's plan.
- In those service contexts where touching is an integral part of service delivery, staff discuss the subject regularly at staff meetings so as to ensure consistency and clarity of approach.

Financial Relationships:

- Staff do not enter into any financial transactions with clients including buying, selling, exchanging, or bartering goods or services.
- Staff do not lend their personal money or possessions to clients.
- Staff do not borrow money or possessions from clients.
- Staff do not give or accept gifts from clients.
- Staff do not accept monetary charitable donations to the service without the prior agreement of the Practice Director.
- Staff do not normally handle money on behalf of clients.
- Staff do not agree to become trustees, beneficiaries or executors in relation to clients' wills.

Relationships and Contact with Clients Within Work:

- Where staff members know clients prior to them entering the service, the staff member informs their manager/supervisor.
- When new staff members start work and find that they know existing clients, they bring this to the attention of their manager/supervisor. The manager/supervisor explores with the staff member any issues around confidentiality and risk.

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Relationships and Contact with Clients Outside of Work:

- Staff only arrange for a client in-home visit if this in-home visit (at the client's home) is approved by their manager/supervisor. This will only be done following a thorough risk assessment and in the context of the client's preferences and individual plan. The risk assessment includes completing the required documentation.
- Staff do not encourage clients to develop friendships with the staff member's relatives or friends.
- Staff do not give clients their personal contact details, for example postal address, phone number, email address, social media contact details.
- Staff do not give clients the personal contact details of any colleague.
- Staff who encounter clients out of hours should be pleasant and civil if approached by the client but should generally discourage prolonged social contact.
- Staff should not approach clients in any social setting if the contact is not instigated by the client, especially where the client's behaviour indicates that they do not want to be recognised or indeed identified as a ZAR Wellness client.
- Staff do not arrange out-of-work-hours contact with clients.

Discussing Others:

- Gossip or hearsay does not feature as an aspect of ZAR Wellness' service culture and is actively discouraged among both staff and clients.
- Staff never share personal details about other staff with clients.
- Staff never discuss other staff members with clients except on issues relating to service provision e.g. discussing the possibility of a new client moving into a house.
- Staff never discuss clients with other clients and other third parties unless it is the staff member's role and related to service delivery.
- Where any of the above does occur, the incident is brought to the attention of the relevant manager/supervisor as soon as possible.

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Managing Boundary Issues

- Staff may unwittingly be put in a position where their relationship with clients is compromised or be drawn into conversations or situations where their boundaries are being stretched or crossed. In some situations the fine line between good and bad practice may not always be obvious or clear. In this situation a staff member seeks the guidance of their manager/supervisor if they are unsure about the nature of a relationship developing with a client or if they need advice on how they intend to deal with a situation. Similarly, if the immediate manager/supervisor requires advice they consult with their manager.
- In situations where it has not been possible to access manager/supervisor support, any action which has been taken is discussed with the manager/supervisor as soon as is possible.
- Other people in the team, particularly those who are likely to work with the client, are informed of where a boundary has been blurred or crossed so they can maintain consistent practice with that client (and a consistent explanation with other clients) and to ensure that the action taken is transparent.
- A written record of a broken or blurred boundary is kept on the employee's file.
- Boundary issues are discussed with the manager/supervisor and within each team on a regular basis, and on occasions specific team training or facilitated discussion may be appropriate.

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Examples of Violation of Professional Boundaries

Refer also to APPENDIX A – FAQ frequently asked questions.

All staff are responsible for maintaining professional boundaries between them and a client. This means establishing clear professional boundaries with clients that serve to protect everyone from misunderstandings or a violation of the professional relationship.

The following table, whilst not exhaustive, has examples of violations of professional boundaries:

Professional Staff Boundary	Example of Violation
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Inappropriate comments about a client’s appearance including excessive flattering comments. - Inappropriate questions regarding client hygiene or sanitary issues. - Inappropriate conversation or enquiries of a sexual nature (e.g. questions about a client’s sexuality). - Use of inappropriate pet names e.g. names describing a person’s physical appearance. - Vilifying or humiliating comments about the client to the person or others. - Jokes or innuendo of a sexual nature about the client to the person or others. - Obscene gestures and language. - Facilitating access to pornographic or overtly sexual material. - Failing to stop harassment between clients. - Correspondence of an inappropriate personal nature, including letters, email, phone, SMS text. This correspondence will violate the boundary if it uses language which may confuse the relationship e.g. “love you”. - Body language of the nature described in this section.
Personal Disclosure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Discussing personal details of lifestyle of self or others (it may be appropriate and necessary, at times, to draw on relevant personal life experiences when mentoring). - Sharing of personal information about other staff or clients. - Keeping secrets of a personal nature after client disclosure i.e. encouraging clients to have secrets.

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Privacy, Dignity and Confidentiality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Failing to comply with the relevant policies which details personal hygiene procedures, clients' rights to personal relationships, clients' property and personal information.
Location	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Inviting/allowing/encouraging clients home without ZAR Wellness' authority. - Attending clients' homes or social gatherings for personal reasons without ZAR Wellness' authority. - Being alone with a client outside of a staff member's responsibilities without ZAR Wellness' authority e.g. visiting a client's home out of work hours. - Inappropriately entering a client's room without knocking.
Targeting Individual Clients	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Giving personal gifts and special favours. - Adopting a role that is the responsibility of another staff member e.g. psychologist, or doing so without the knowledge of manager/supervisor. - Treating a client inequitably contrary to the client's best interest.
Physical Contact (refer also to Appendix B – Touch and Physical Intervention)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Unwarranted, unwanted and/or inappropriate touching of a client personally or with objects. - Initiating or permitting inappropriate physical contact (physical contact is appropriate when in accordance with the individual plan e.g. giving personal care and in some ZAR Wellness-approved group activities e.g. Somatic therapy). - Failing to be sensitive to a person's personal space. - Applying unnecessary force
Role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Acting beyond the responsibilities of role and expertise. - Acting without parent (if appropriate) or individual's consent or outside of the individual plan. Examples are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • taking photographs without consent • cutting hair, fingernails or toenails without consent • performing alternative therapies • conducting religious rituals.
Dress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Wearing inappropriate clothes e.g. sexually revealing
Gifts and Hospitality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Accepting gifts given by the client which could be construed as in return for preferential treatment. Where it is difficult to refuse a gift, staff are required to discuss this with their manager/supervisor immediately.
Client Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Concealing client information from colleagues, this might include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • personal information • the intention of the client to self-harm or harm others

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • not reporting violent or critical incident/issues • child protection issues • not completing full records of client interactions.
Drugs & Alcohol	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Providing substances of any kind to clients
Client Finances and Personal Possessions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Inappropriately handling client's finances - Lending or borrowing clients' possessions without permission. - Consuming clients' food. - Making private phone calls on a client's phone. - Using a client's computer for private use.
Discrimination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Making derogatory comments and discriminating against a client related to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • culture or race • gender • sexual orientation or preference • age • physical characteristics • any other personal aspects.
Dependence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Staff have a responsibility to discourage client dependency. - Some examples of this abuse of power and the potential for creating a dependency are as follows: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • socialising outside the professional boundary • using the client for the staff member's emotional needs • buying the client gifts or paying their bills • discouraging a client's right to make their own decisions and choices • failing to balance duty of care and dignity of risk.

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DEFINITIONS

- **Personal space** Personal space is the area immediately around a person's body. Personal space is viewed differently by different cultures.
- **Professional boundary** For the purpose of this policy, a professional boundary is the 'line' between a professional and personal relationship. Professional boundary violations by a staff member represent a breach of trust and a failure to meet a duty of care to clients. When staff violate professional boundaries they risk:
 - o harmful consequences for the client
 - o serious undermining of their professional reputation and that of ZAR Wellness
 - o disciplinary action.
- **Staff** means everyone who works at ZAR Wellness and includes those paid and unpaid, including contractors and volunteers.
- **Conflict of Interest** in the context of this policy, conflicts of interest occur where personal interests or values may compromise the professional relationship and prevent people from accessing the support they need e.g. financial or personal gain, personal values or emotions clouding judgment on serving the best interests of the people we assist.
- **Dual Relationships** when there is a second dimension to the professional relationship between a worker and the people we assist which may cause a conflict of interest e.g. volunteer and the person they assist are also friends.

APPENDIX A – Frequently Asked Questions

What do I do if a client raises significant personal problems with me?

You need to tell a manager/supervisor if a client raises significant personal problems with you as they may need to be referred, preferably with their knowledge, to a person with specialised skills, for example, a psychologist.

It may be decided that you can continue to play a counsellor role with the client in collaboration with specialist staff if it is in the best interests of the client.

What is considered sexual behaviour?

Staff must not, under any circumstances, engage in an intimate, overly familiar or sexual relationship with a client. Improper conduct of a sexual nature by a staff member with a client includes all forms of sexual activity and any other form of abuse as well as but not limited to the following:

- obscene language or gestures of a sexual nature
- suggestive remarks or actions
- jokes of a sexual nature
- unwarranted and inappropriate touching
- undressing in front of clients
- failing to provide adequate facilities for opposite gender clients to get changed in privacy
- correspondence (spoken or text) with clients in respect of the staff member's sexual or personal feelings for the client
- deliberate exposure of clients to sexual behaviour of others.

1. *What if the client is initiating the inappropriate behaviour toward you?*

If a client is initiating sexual behaviour with you, you should take immediate respectful steps to discourage the client. If the behaviour is significant, the matter should be reported and documented promptly and a plan of action developed to support the client and relevant staff member. Depending on the age/ability of the client and contextual information this plan of support may involve:

- communication with parents
- referral to and liaison with specialist counselling/psychology
- formalised support which may include closer monitoring or supervision
- referral to and liaison with appropriate agency.

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APPENDIX A – Frequently Asked Questions cont.

What is appropriate physical contact?

At times, staff members will be required to give practical assistance to a client who is hurt or needs particular assistance or encouragement. The following examples of physical contact are acceptable:

- administering of first aid
- helping a person who has fallen
- part of Somatic Therapy
- assisting with toileting and personal care needs as described in an individual plan
- non-intrusive gestures to comfort a client who is experiencing grief and loss
- non-intrusive touch e.g. congratulating a client by shaking hands. Staff should remember the importance of accompanying such touch with positive and encouraging words.

APPENDIX B – Touch and Physical Intervention

Touch

- Where appropriate, seek clients' permission to touch, including mobility aids such as wheelchairs.
- Always explain what you are going to do when touch is required.
- Unless required as part of documented planned service delivery, avoid touching a client anywhere other than the hand, arm, shoulder, or upper back.
- Unless required as part of documented planned service delivery, avoid being with a client in a one-on-one, out-of-sight situation and never touch a client in such a situation.
- Do not presume that a hug or a touch is acceptable to a particular client. Even non-intrusive touch may be inappropriate if a client indicates they do not wish to be touched.
- Respect and respond to signs that a client is uncomfortable with touch.
- Use verbal directions and prompts rather than touching e.g. ask a client to turn this way, rather than physically placing the client in the required position. Use this approach for demonstrations in dance, sport, music, drama and personal care. Where touch is essential for safety reasons e.g. with aquatic activities, always tell the client that you need to hold them in a particular way and seek their permission to do so.
- In some circumstances, staff may need to discourage clients from unnecessary reliance on touching such as holding hands or wanting to have hugs or cuddles. This should be done in accordance with details written on the individual plan.
- Clients must not be left in states of high distress for long periods. A manager/supervisor needs to be contacted under these circumstances.

Cultural aspects

Different cultures have different attitudes and traditions surrounding the concept of appropriate touch. Staff have a responsibility to become as familiar as possible with the values of the individuals supported by ZAR Wellness.

Physical intervention - Clients at risk of being hurt by a client

- Non-physical intervention is the recognised means of managing high risk situations. Where a problem with a client becomes apparent, non-physical interventions include:
 - talking with the individual
 - directing the client to a safe place
 - directing other clients to a safe place
 - sending for assistance from other staff or, in extreme cases, the police.

APPENDIX B – Touch and Physical Intervention cont.

- Use of verbal directions is always preferred to physical intervention. It is not appropriate to make physical contact with a client (e.g. pushing, grabbing, poking, pulling, blocking etc) in order to ensure they comply with directions. Under no circumstances should staff engage in any form of conduct which might cause physical or emotional harm to clients.
- If a client's safety is threatened, physical intervention can involve:
 - coming between clients
 - blocking a client's path
 - leading a client by the hand or arm
 - shepherding a client away by placing a hand in the centre of the upper back
 - removing potentially dangerous objects
 - using strategies to divert a client from an unsafe activity.
- Staff must never use physical interventions unless client safety or that of others is clearly threatened.
- Appropriate physical force may be permitted to ensure that ZAR Wellness' duty of care to protect clients and staff from foreseeable risks of injury is met. Everyone has the right to defend themselves against an attack, provided they do not use a disproportionate degree of force to do so.

APPENDIX C – General Rules

The following are some recommended general rules staff should adopt. When unsure, staff are encouraged to consult their manager /supervisor to receive guidance about appropriate behaviour. When uncertain, staff should also consider what impact their actions can have to the people we assist, the Society and themselves before taking action.

1. Do not pursue personal relationships with the people we assist, their relatives or carers. Once the boundaries are crossed it will be increasingly difficult to maintain a professional relationship. Remember the boundaries are there to protect both you and the people we assist.
2. Do not engage in intimate or sexual relationships with the people we assist, their relatives or carers regardless of whether consent is given. Breaching this rule will result in serious disciplinary action. Keep physical contact with the people we assist to a minimum.
3. Do not introduce the people we assist to your family or friends and limit sharing personal information about you, your family or friends or other workers.
4. Do not socialise with the people we assist outside of work. If you meet in a public space, act appropriately (acknowledge if the person initiates a greeting) but avoid engaging with the person and joining or inviting them.
5. Do not give advice outside of your skills and expertise – e.g., financial, medical, legal, etc. Refer them to appropriate professional services.
6. Do not discuss information about the people we assist with your family or friends. Talk to your manager/supervisor if you would like support or advice.
7. Do not enter into any financial arrangements with the people we assist or pursue business relations.
8. Exercise caution when engaging in any form of electronic communication with the people we assist that is not work-related and consider the possible impact to your professional relationship. e.g. Requests and connecting via social platforms including, but not limited to, facebook, instagram, twitter; exchanging personal messages, emails, photos, etc.
9. Do not supply, use or share alcohol, drugs or tobacco with the people we assist.