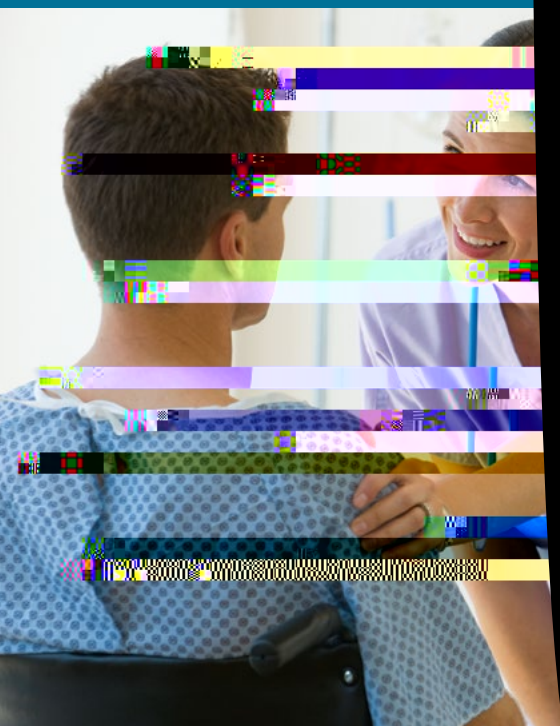


A Nurse's Guide to **Professional Boundaries**



Year after year, nursing tops national polls of the most widely respected and trusted professions. The results of these polls reflect the special relationship and bond between nurses and those under their care. Patients expect nurses to act in their best interests and to respect their dignity. This means nurses don't benefit at the patient's expense or jeopardize therapeutic nurse-patient relationships.

To maintain that trust and practice in a manner consistent with professional standards, nurses should be knowledgeable regarding professional boundaries and work to establish and maintain those boundaries.

A therapeutic relationship allows nurses to apply their professional knowledge, skills, abilities and experiences towards meeting the health needs of the patient.

Professional sexual misconduct is an extreme form of boundary violation and includes any behavior that is seductive, sexually demeaning, harassing or reasonably interpreted as sexual by the patient. Professional sexual misconduct can be intentional, negligent, and criminal, illegal.



Example: A therapist has a sexual relationship with a patient. This is a boundary violation. The therapist is not acting in the patient's best interest. This is a form of professional sexual misconduct.

Even when a therapist's behavior can be considered a boundary violation, it does not necessarily constitute professional sexual misconduct. Nurses can be held liable as a frame of reference to evaluate their behavior and consider if they are acting within the confines of the therapeutic relationship if they are not intended or intended in their patients' care. Overt involvement includes blatant offenses, blatant illegal acts and professional sexual misconduct. Under involvement includes abandonment, dereliction and neglect, and can be detrimental to the patient and the nurse. There are no definite lines separating the therapeutic relationship from involvement or involvement; instead, it is a gradual transition.

The confusion may arise from a frame of reference as to what is considered a boundary violation and what is considered professional sexual misconduct. For a given situation, the fact sheet should be reviewed to determine whether the nurse is acting as a healthcare provider or as a friend or family member. The nurse should be asked: What is the intent of the boundary violation? Was it for a therapeutic purpose? Was it in the patient's best interest? Did it interfere with the nursing care? Did the nurse rely on a personal relationship? Was the incident a violation of the code of ethics?

THE NEEDS OF THE ELDERLY

- The needs of the elderly are diverse and delineate and maintain boundaries.
- The needs of the elderly are unique and specific.
- The needs of the elderly are dynamic and changing, be a life-long process and a life-long learning.
- Variables such as the care setting, community influences, aging needs and the nature of the affective delineate the boundaries.
- Activities that are established boundaries meet the needs of the elderly.
- The needs of the elderly are diverse and specific, be a life-long process, be a life-long learning.
- Professional services are needed because the aging may need additional services. It may be difficult to determine when the elderly need professional services.
- Be careful about professional services in the aging may need additional services (such as the elderly mental health services).



Is it considered sexual misconduct if a nurse wants to date or even marry a former patient?

The key word here is former. The following are important factors to consider when making these decisions:

- What is the length of time between the relationship and dating?
- What kind of harm did the patient receive? Assessing a patient with a physical or mental problem, such as a broken limb, is different than providing long-term care for a chronic condition.
- What is the nature of the knowledge the nurse has had access to and how has it affected the relationship?
- Will the patient need harm in the future?
- Should we ask the patient?

What if a nurse lives in a small community? Does this mean that they cannot provide care for neighbors or friends?

The difference between a caring relationship and an emotional relationship is sometimes difficult to discern. A nursing professional living and working in a small, rural community, for necessity, has business and social relationships with patients. In these instances, it is recommended that nurses do not acknowledge their dual relationship with patients and remain separate when they are performing in a professional capacity.

The nurse must ensure the patient's care needs are met. When this is not possible, nurses should examine themselves for the possibility of a professional relationship that is not a self-interest or illegal.



Do boundary violations always precede sexual misconduct?

Boundary violations are a common feature of sexual misconduct. Many are ambiguous and difficult to label. Boundary violations may or may not lead to sexual misconduct. Some cases feature sexual misconduct, such as assault or rape, but no boundary violations, while at other times they are a crime for which no boundary violations, including criminal behavior.

Does patient consent make a sexual relationship acceptable?

If the patient consents, and even if the patient initiates the sexual conduct, a sexual relationship will be considered sexual misconduct for a health care professional. It is an abuse of the non-sexual relationship that the nurses need to fix. It is also the responsibility of a health care professional to establish a clear boundary in their conduct and former actions.



Some behavioral indicators can also be subtle at first, but early warning signs that should raise a “red flag” can include:

Signs of inappropriate behavior can be subtle at first, but early warning signs that should raise a “red flag” can include:

- Discouraging in praise or negative feedback
- Engaging in behavior that is inappropriate or unprofessional
- Keeping secrets or information from you
- Believing that you are the only one who understands and can help you
- Sending messages that are unnecessary or inappropriate
- Seeking inappropriate relationships or involvement
- Showing favoritism
- Meeting you in settings besides the setting where you are intended to direct your care when you are not working

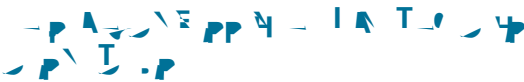
Patients can also demonstrate signs of a problem when asking you about a particular issue, seeking personal information. If you suspect, then these indicators are a red flag for a possible inappropriate or illegal behavior.

What should a nurse do if confronted with possible boundary violations or sexual misconduct?

The nurse needs to be prepared to deal with inappropriate behavior from a member of the healthcare team. Patients have the right to be safe. If a healthcare provider's behavior is ambiguous, if the nurse is not sure if you are being sexually abused, then the nurse should report you to a supervisor or colleague. Incidents should be thoroughly documented in a timely manner. Nurses should be familiar with reporting requirements and the guidelines for discipline in their respective jurisdictions; they are expected to comply with the legal and ethical mandates for reporting.

What are some of the nursing practice implications of professional boundaries?

Nurses need to practice in a manner consistent with professional standards. Nurses should be knowledgeable regarding professional boundaries and acknowledge and maintain these boundaries. Nurses should examine any boundary-crossing behavior and seek assistance and counsel from their colleagues and supervisors when crossing occurs. Nurses also need to be cognizant of the boundary implications when using social media to discuss patients, their families, or their employers. These issues are discussed in depth in NCSBN's brochure *An e' Get t' the Social Media*. Other resources about social media guidelines can be found at ncsbn.org/boundaries.



NCSBN offers a variety of resources explaining professional boundaries:

- The **Professional Boundaries in Nursing** guide, at ncsbn.org/boundaries-guide, helps explain the common forms of professional behavior and the consequences of boundary crossings, boundary implications and professional responsibility. Internal and external factors that contribute to professional boundary issues, including social media, are explored.
- The **Understanding the Standard: Professional Accountability in Nursing** online course is developed as a companion to the guide. The cost of the course is \$50. Unsubscribed full course fee is \$45. Course materials are available. Register at ncsbn.org

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- Be aware.
- Be cognizant of feelings and behavior.
- Be observant of the behavior of other professionals.
- Always act in the best interest of the patient.

