Boundaries Without Walls

Setting boundaries is about learning to take care of ourselves, no matter what happens, where we go, or who we’re with. Boundaries emerge from deep decisions about what we believe we deserve and don’t deserve; they spring from a belief that what we want and need, like and dislike, is important.

The goal of having and setting boundaries isn’t to build thick walls around ourselves. The purpose is to gain enough security and sense of self to be able to develop relationships with others without feeling like we are losing ourselves or being invaded, and without infringing on another person’s sense of self or creating confusion in a relationship. When we have a sense of self, we are able to better develop closeness and intimacy with others. However, the most important consideration in setting boundaries at work, is that the client with whom we work is always a priority.

As Community follow-Up Workers, setting healthy boundaries between ourselves and our clients is important to the work we do, and also require us to understand the power that we hold. Given the nature of the work, maintaining these boundaries can sometimes be a challenge. Often, CFWs come from the same or similar communities as the client; sometimes they may have relatives who are receiving services from other COBRA teams, and sometimes CFWs have transitioned from being a client to being a CFW.

While any similarity between you and your client is a strength because of your ability to relate to their situation, it can also be a challenge when feelings get attached to the client. This might happen because that person reminds you of someone else, of yourself, or of a situation you have been through (transference). Sometimes, it is the client that attaches their feelings for someone else onto you (counter transference). While certain boundaries may be quite clear, such as the restriction on engaging in intimate relationships with clients, in other situations, maintaining healthy boundaries may be more challenging and confusing. Sometimes, you may not be able to sort it out yourself and you may need to use your supervision as support for you to figure out a strategy in dealing with the issue at hand. Recognizing boundaries and sticking to them is an ongoing process that will require patience on your part, and an understanding that it is your responsibility – not the client’s – to set healthy boundaries.
BREACHES IN BOUNDARIES include:
(any circumstances that are defined by our personal needs rather than the needs of our clients)

- Engaging in sexual activities with clients
- Any behavior that is seen as exploitative, coercive or manipulative with our clients
- Accepting gifts
- Giving gifts
- Selling things to clients
- Buying things from clients

Recognizing boundaries keeps us aware of:

- Not crossing them
- The fact that the client’s needs come first
- The purpose of working with the client is to meet the needs of the client, not to have your needs met
- Keeps you on target on what is acceptable and what is not