Professional Boundaries and Social Media

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Learning objectives

- Describe professional boundaries and relevant ethical considerations

- Discuss issues related to professional boundaries that may arise with the use of social media

- Consider similarities and differences between maintaining professional boundaries "in person" and "online"

Getting started

- **Group chat**

    1) How do you define/describe professional boundaries?

    2) What types of issues or examples come to mind when you think about professional boundaries?

Definitions

- <u>Therapeutic relationships</u> are aimed towards care-related goals and are grounded in the values of respect and trust

- <u>Professional boundaries</u> help distinguish between behaviours in a health care professional-patient relationship which are therapeutically-oriented and those that are not (which may harm the patient and/or reduce the potential benefits of care)

Professional boundaries

- Fiduciary relationships
    - Awareness of power, training, experience and how this may influence/shape relationships with patients and families
    - Translates into key responsibilities for professionals to attend to and reflect on these relationships

History

- Concern about professional boundaries originally arose in psychiatry and psychotherapy where it was recognized that the nature of the professional-patient interaction can sometimes lead to the development of fondness or affection between the patient and the provider

- The subject is now widely acknowledged as relevant to all areas of health care
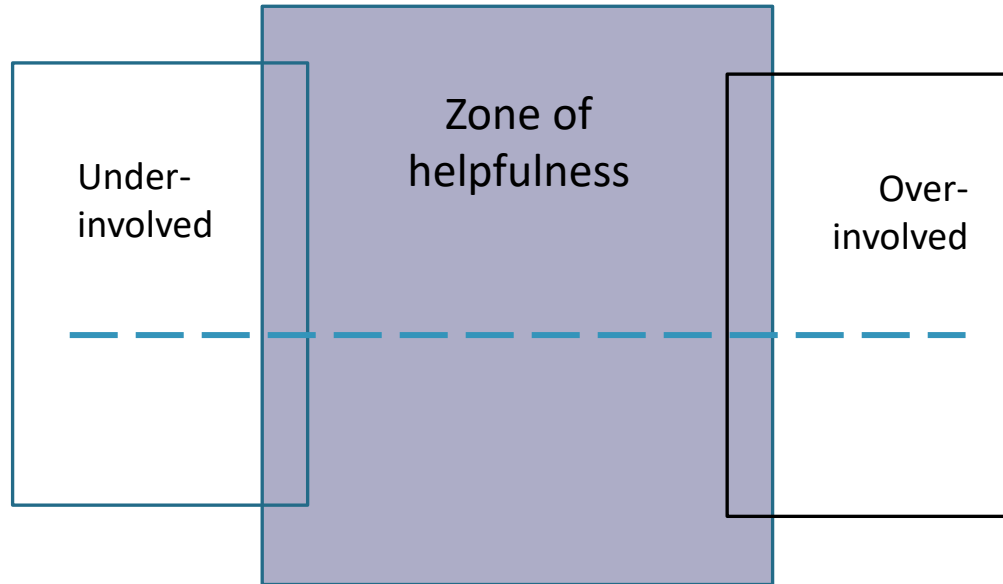
Professional boundaries

'Edge' of appropriate behaviour

- "…the expected and accepted psychological, social and physical distances between a professional and his/her patient"

(Paraphrase from Linklater & MacDougall 1993)

- Online?

"Zone of helpfulness"

Under-involved

Zone of helpfulness

Over-involved

(National Council of State Boards of Nursing)

Why is this relevant?

- Over or under-involvement can confuse the nature of the relationship, leading to mis-matched expectations, hurt feelings, discomfort and an erosion of trust

- Over or under-involvement can undermine the ability of patients to feel comfortable asking questions or answering questions honestly, compromising the quality of care

- Inherent power differentials between providers and patients can sometimes undermine a patient's ability to feel free to refuse or decline a care provider's invitation or request

- Over or under-involvement can compromise privacy and the therapeutic relationship

Ask yourself...

- Whose interests are being served in this interaction?

- Does this interaction serve a therapeutic purpose?

- Is this interaction something that I would want my peers to know about?

- Is this interaction something that, were it to become public, could undermine the public's trust of the profession?

Dual Relationships

Knowing a person in different contexts or settings

- The traditional view is that one should maintain a strict separation between professional and personal relationships. Dual relationships may inhibit patients from telling 'the whole story' and may compromise the objectivity of the provider.

- Critics of the traditional view have argued that it is too simplistic, especially for guiding providers in rural environments where overlapping or dual relationships with patients are, to a certain extent, unavoidable.

Need for professional judgment

- Determining where boundaries are and whether one is in the "zone of helpfulness" can sometimes be difficult

- Need for reflection and awareness

Context matters

- To establish and work effectively and compassionately within professional relationships, it is necessary to explore and understand particularities of *context*, for example:
  - Degree of vulnerability
  - Values and intentions/motivations
  - Cultural factors – diversity, "dear"
  - Community expectations (rural, urban…)
  - Area of practice
  - Access and/or availability of alternative services

Professional boundaries in context

- Consider...

  - Is there anything special, specific or different about the care that you or your unit, department, portfolio provides and the context you work in that may influence or shape how you think of professional boundaries?

Professional boundaries in context

• To what extent do various health *professions* have different understandings of and approaches to setting appropriate boundaries (e.g., recreation therapy vs. social work)?

• To what extent do *facilities* or *programs* have different understandings of and approaches to setting appropriate boundaries (e.g., group home versus acute care)?

Professional boundaries in context

- Managing professional boundaries well also includes reflection on how you work with team members, colleagues, leaders, learners, volunteers

- How we treat each other can and does impact how well we provide care for patients and families as part of being in the 'zone of helpfulness'

Now layer on...Social media

- Consider...

  - How does the use of social media influence or shape what we have been discussing and reflecting on with respect to professional boundaries?

Consider...

- **Group chat**

  1) What issues with professional boundaries and social media have you encountered to date?

  2) What is your main concern about the use of social media and maintaining professional boundaries?

Social media and professional boundaries

- Various concerns and issues have arisen (while recognizing that there can be benefits as well)

    - Issues related to confidentiality and privacy most commonly identified

    - Harder to maintain distinction between personal and professional identities online

    - Permanence of online information; decreased inhibition (just click!)

    - "Sphere of influence" has changed

    - Organizational and professional reputations may be affected (as stories go viral)

    - Questions about "fake news" – supposed health care breakthroughs?
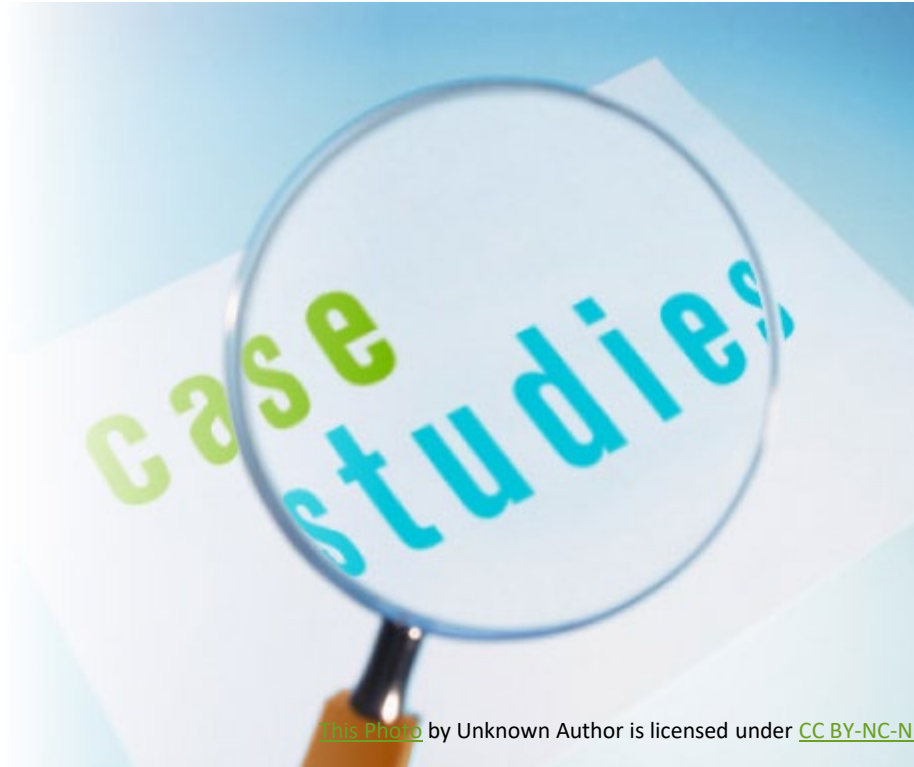
Case studies

Case #1: Word has gone around that what Abdul and Rhianna are saying in their "journey" blog about the health care team isn't very flattering…

- Should you say anything to them?

- How might knowing about this online blog impact the care you provide?

Case studies

Case #2: Andreas has started a GoFundMe® page to raise money for travel and hotel stays while his partner receives treatment. He tells the team about this page…

- Should you make a donation? Share the link with others?
- What if you feel Andreas isn't spending the money appropriately?

Case studies

Case #3: The sister of a patient admitted to the unit where you work sends you a 'friend request' on Facebook. The sister is also someone who you know from high school. You accept the invitation, reasoning that you have lots of former high school classmates as Facebook friends. She messages you asking if you think her sister could be doing better with a different course of treatment or with a different health care team.

◦ How should you respond to her question? What might be helpful to keep in mind?

Notice...

- Variations of these types of cases have arisen well before the advent of social media

- But potentially relevant differences include the:

  - Scope and range of potential contacts (and possible dollars raised)

  - Effects of seeing something written down, even if online ("for all the world to see")

Social media and professional boundaries

- Suggest that the focus on professional boundaries and the relevant values (such as privacy, confidentiality, trust, respect, avoiding harm, vulnerability…) isn't changing

- But how we enact, protect and understand these values and "boundaries" in practice, both online and in person, is changing

Social media and professional boundaries

- And these changes encourage us to reflect on how we (in health care) can build on the promise and possibility of social media to help better achieve the best possible care for patients, while addressing (avoiding) the potentially negative impacts on the therapeutic relationship

For further reflection

- How do you know when boundaries need to be reset?

- How do you do it?

- Is this easier or harder to do online?

- Do you talk with your colleagues about these types of issues?

- Does it feel normal or 'safe' to raise questions about professional boundaries and/or social media use?

Wrapping up

What is one key tip that you'd like to share with others about professional boundaries and social media?

Wrapping up - You are not alone!

- Seek out guidance on professional boundaries from your licensing bodies and associations
  - Many Colleges have also social media guidelines

- Seek out/establish space for these conversations
  - With peers, Managers, Professional Practice, Practice Consultants from licensing/regulatory authorities, the Health PEI Ethics Committee

Thank you

- Questions, comments?