

Chapter 1

Roles, Self-Care & Boundaries

Cultural Competency

Each of us has a “cultural perspective” that is made up of our beliefs, values, ethnicity, geography, religious beliefs, social experiences, education level, traditions and customs, communication, and behaviors. Cultural Competency describes our knowledge, value, appreciation, and respect for the different cultural perspectives of those we interact with, such as the individuals we support, their family and friends, other stakeholders, our supervisors, and our peers.

In order to communicate more effectively and best meet the needs of others, we must identify, understand and respect how someone else’s cultural perspective might differ from our own. Because differences can be reflected in both verbal and non-verbal communication, it’s extremely important to set aside our preconceptions and become knowledgeable about the cultural perspective of the people we work with and support. Most importantly, it’s crucial that we extend acceptance, appreciation, and respect to all we encounter.

Ethics and Professionalism

Although you will be working in a residential environment, what is acceptable in your own home or the home of a friend is not always acceptable in the homes of the individuals you’ll be supporting. It will be important for you to always act as professionally as you would if you were working in an office environment. At the same time, you must be keenly aware that you are in another person’s home and respect their prerogative while being mindful of your own limitations. The list below includes examples of what professional behavior requires.

- Arriving on time for your shift
- Being calm and level-headed rather than reactive and emotional
- Being objective and not taking things personally
- Being a contributing, supportive team member
- Avoiding power struggles
- Communicating respectfully and listening carefully
- Not using profanity or unprofessional language
- Being empathetic and non-judgmental
- Caring about your job and giving your very best each day
- Being mindful of how your choices and behaviors impact others

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- Abstaining from all gossip
- Owning up to and correcting your mistakes
- Not using your cell phone and personal electronics while on shift
- Dressing appropriately and professionally
- Choosing a positive attitude throughout your day
- Separating your personal life from your professional life

Professional Boundaries

Professional boundaries are essential to providing excellent support, maintaining healthy relationships, and protecting your own well-being. Here are some of the dangers of not maintaining professional boundaries:

1. **Appearance of Favoritism:** If an individual receiving services believes that he/she is favored by a particular staff member, it can easily lead to hurt feelings and resentment between the the individual and others that live in the home. It can also introduce resentment towards other staff members, making it difficult for them to provide them with excellent support. To avoid the appearance of favoritism, be certain to follow these rules:
 - ✓ Share successful communication and support practices with others on your team, and be observant and open to learning successful practices from them. Doing so will allow them to receive the highest level of support 24 hours a day, and not only during certain days or shifts.
 - ✓ In homes where there are multiple individuals receiving services, do not give more positive attention to some persons than others.
2. **Confused Roles and Relationships:** Significant emotional attachments, whether realized or perceived, can lead to a great deal of pain for both DSPs and the individuals they support. Sometimes, when a DSP allows a more significant emotional attachment than is healthy, both the DSP and the individual they support can experience significant loss and go through a full grieving process when the DSP leaves or is transferred to work with someone else. Likewise, an individual were to misinterpret “signals” from a DSP that caused them to believe that their relationship with a DSP was more personal than professional, there could be serious long-term pain and anger when the DSP leaves, or when they realize that their feelings are not returned. To avoid the appearance of a personal, rather than a professional relationship, be certain to follow these rules:
 - ✓ Do not pursue a personal relationship outside of work. This includes both extending or accepting an invitation.
 - ✓ Do not lend or give money, clothing, or other items to the individuals you support.
 - ✓ Do not give gifts unless they come from your entire team or company
 - ✓ Be aware of appropriate physical contact with individuals you support based on the individual’s personal preferences and support needs. Physical contact that is appropriate for most individuals includes handshakes, high-fives, and brief pats on the shoulder.
 - ✓ Do not give your cell phone number, email address, or home address to the individual you support. As well, do not “friend” them on Facebook or other social networking sites.
 - ✓ Do not share details about your personal life.
 - ✓ Do not stay longer than your shift requires or is required when transferring information from one shift to another.
 - ✓ Do not do favors for individuals during your personal time or that are not a part of your job.
 - ✓ Do not wear provocative or revealing clothing.
3. **Transferring Negative Emotions:** Moods and attitudes can be very contagious. This is great for positive moods and attitudes, but can have painful consequences for everyone when negativity and turmoil are absorbed. To avoid this, be certain to follow these rules:
 - ✓ Do not discuss problems with peers or supervisors in front of or within earshot of anyone.

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- ✓ Do not engage in power struggles with individuals receiving services or fellow employees.
- ✓ Avoid all sarcasm, caustic remarks, negative body language, and tone of voice.
- ✓ Do not share your personal problems with the individuals you support.
- ✓ Be “present” when on shift, and leave your personal life at home.

DSP Self-Care

Because of the emotional and physical investment that is sometimes required, be certain to take the following advice:

1. Just as you should leave your personal life at home when working, leave your work-cares at work when home.
2. Take care of your body - get plenty of sleep, eat well, exercise and limit your alcohol intake.
3. When facing challenges at work, practice “rational detachment.” To remain objective, remember that taking comments, events or situations personally will only create pain for yourself and prevent you from properly addressing or solving problems.
4. Do not “own” the problems or negativity of others. Assist as needed, but don’t absorb their negative emotions.
5. Start well; end well. Make it a habit to begin and end each day with uplifting conversations with others. The pattern of doing so will eventually become second nature and extend to other parts of your day.
6. Every once in a while, take a few days to get away. Being away from your normal environments is refreshing and provides greater perspective.
7. Be learning and growing. Learn something new, expand your knowledge and develop your existing talents. People who are active learners tend to experience happiness at higher levels than those who don’t.

Direct Support Professional Roles

All of the roles that you play have a common focus on supporting individuals to live the life they desire. You are a teacher, partner, resource, ambassador, advocate, encourager and provider. You are not a boss, or one who orders people around and makes them do things they may or may not want to do. Likewise, you are not a parent to the people you support. Your job carries a great deal of responsibility, and it is easy to get these roles confused. Unlike a parent, legal guardian, or conservator, you do not have the responsibility to make important life decisions for the individuals you work for and with (such as medical or financial decisions). Instead, the individuals themselves, with the assistance of parents, legal guardians, or conservators, as appropriate, make decisions about their own lives.

Direct Support Professional Attire

What you wear and how you take care of yourself have an impact on the individuals you support as well as the agency you represent. Some individuals will look to you as a model of how to dress. The community you engage with will see your attire and personal hygiene as a direct reflection of the care you and the agency you work for provide to the individuals you support. Here are a few things to remember:

- You should dress in a manner that can safely and comfortably support a variety of home living activities.
- Your attire should not call attention to you or set you apart from the person you are supporting.
- Dress modestly - do not dress provocatively.
- Refer to your agency’s dress policy for specific guidelines.

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Nurse Delegation

Washington has a statewide process where Registered Nurses can delegate certain procedures to a DSP who has fulfilled specific requirements including: Completing and passing the Nurse Delegation Core Training Curriculum, attaining a Nursing Assistant Registered (NAR) license through the Department of Health and keeping it current annually, and being trained specifically on tasks for an individual by a delegating Registered Nurse. The DSP with the NAR will receive non-transferable delegated training for each individual he or she is tasked with providing specific services to such as applying a cream, instilling an eye drop, giving insulin injections, inserting a suppository. The RN is responsible for providing 90 day follow up and review for the DSP to ensure he or she is only doing tasks delegated, and to ensure the DSP is aware of the medications being delegated.

Grief and Loss

Because of the nature of the work, DSPs and other long term care workers will experience grief and loss. While it can be experienced as a result of the passing of a person, it can also be experienced from other circumstances such as the transfer of a person or a DSP, an individual moving to another city, a job loss or even compassion fatigue. As is true with all forms of grief, how it is experienced and how it is processed will look quite different from person to person. Some of the symptoms of grief and loss that a DSP may experience could include:

- Sadness with or without crying
- Inability to concentrate
- Guilt feelings
- Sleeplessness
- Fatigue
- Lethargy
- Mood swings
- Withdrawing from social activities
- Appetite changes
- Anxiety

If you believe you are experiencing grief, in addition to the resources mentioned earlier in the chapter here are a few ideas to consider when attempting to cope with a loss:

1. Give your grief attention; don't try to avoid it. Blocking the pain of grief emotionally, or trying to dull it with distractions and/or alcohol will only prolong your ability to heal and move forward.
2. Don't hold back tears, but don't be concerned if there are no tears. Some people cry more easily and often than others. There is no right or wrong way and it is not a measure for the pain of loss.
3. Don't obsess over the individual, but neither should you block them out of your mind. Remember good times and share stories about the person with others who knew the individual or who would understand.
4. Don't give your grief a time limit. It is entirely different with every individual and cannot be predicted.
5. Grief is not a steady process that starts off strong and gradually diminishes. It is much more of a roller coaster than a steady process or series of stages.
6. Most importantly, talk about your grief and draw close to others. Do not suffer through it alone; it won't work. Take advantage of family and friends, join a grief support group or talk to a therapist. No matter what, healing will require processing with the help of others; whether help is professional or personal.