

Understanding Professional Boundaries

For workers and supervisors

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The definition of professional boundaries

- A sense of professional identity and self definition that has consistency and cohesion over time.
- The framework within which the worker-client relationship occurs.
- The line between the self of client and self of worker
- Prescribes a system of limits and expectations

Why are professional boundaries important in our work?

- Provides safety for both the worker and the client
- Reduces client/worker anxiety as rules and roles are clear
- Increases well-being of the worker
- Provides a therapeutic environment underpinned by mutual respect.

Consequences of poor professional boundaries

- Leads to potentially unsafe practice
- Increases client/worker stress
- Undermines the therapeutic relationship
- Can compound clients difficulties

How are professional boundaries established?

- Professional codes of conduct
- By law
- Clinical governance
- Code of ethics

Who Negotiates Boundaries?

- Duty of the worker to act in the best interest of the client
- The client may have a life experience where boundaries have been compromised and/or may not be aware of the need for boundaries, or able to defend themselves against boundary violations
- The worker is ultimately responsible for managing boundary issues

Potential contexts in which boundary violations can occur

- Touching
- Receiving money or gifts from clients
- Loss of respect within the client/worker relationship
- Having dual relationships with clients
- Client confidentiality
- Self disclosure

Factors that impact on professional boundaries

Organisational Factors:

- Roles
- Culture
- Organisational Structure
- Management and supervision
- Appropriate training

Factors that impact on professional boundaries

The Client Group:

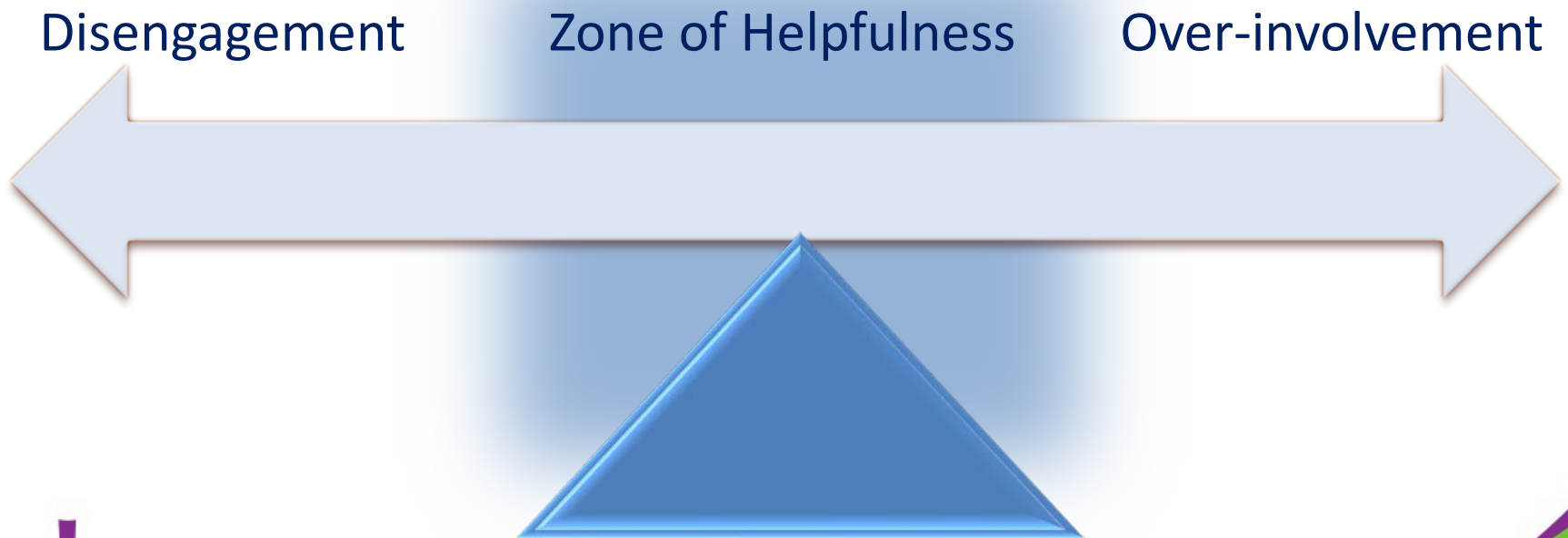
- The capacity of the client (ability to communicate and to understand the worker/client relationship)
- Impact of transference and counter-transference, i.e. the feelings that arise in the context of the relationship, both for the client and the worker

Factors that impact on professional boundaries

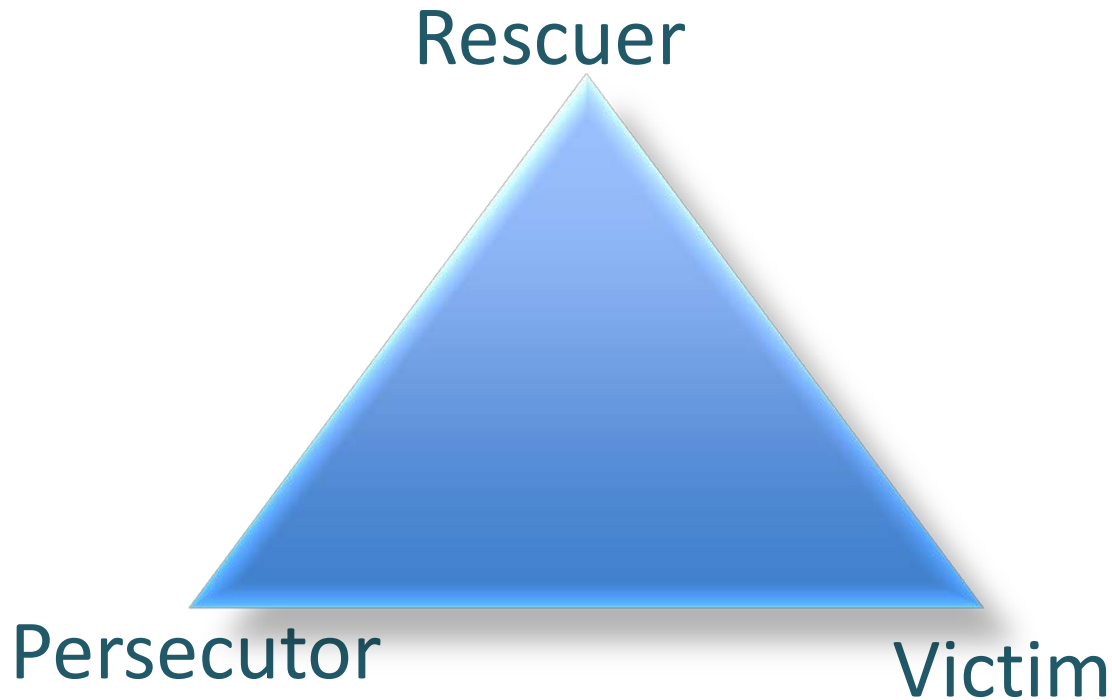
Personal Factors:

- Dual relationship with the client
- Resilience/personal vulnerability
- Valency, i.e. the tendency to react in predictable ways to certain situations

Models for understanding boundary transgression: the 'Zone of Helpfulness'



Models for understanding boundary transgression: the Drama Triangle



The role of the manager and/or supervisor

Primary responsibility is to ensure that the worker or supervisee maintains appropriate professional boundaries in their work

- Understanding how boundaries become compromised
- Ability to provide emotional containment to the worker when work is emotionally demanding
- Willingness to challenge/address boundary issues

Questions to Ask in Examining Potential Boundary Issues:

- Is the worker reluctant to talk about this?
- Is this in the client's best interest? If not, whose needs are being served?
- How would this be viewed by an onlooker?
- Does the client mean something 'special' to the supervisee?
- Is the worker disinterested in or avoiding the client?
- Is the worker taking advantage of the client, or being taken advantage of?

Minimizing Risk of Exploitation and Boundary Crossing: A checklist for managers

- A clear understanding of what is ethical and professional behaviour
- Awareness of organisational factors that can compromise professional boundaries
- Maintain supervision or consultation relationships (isolation is often a major factor in boundary violations)
- Be alert to potential /actual conflicts of interest
- Understand and be willing to address the emotional impact on workers when working with clients in need.

References

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