

Nursing Ethics: Balancing Care and Professional Boundaries

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Abstract

Nursing ethics focuses on maintaining a balance between providing compassionate care and upholding professional boundaries. These boundaries are crucial to establishing therapeutic relationships that protect client dignity, ensure trust, and promote positive health outcomes. This paper explores the foundational principles of nursing ethics, emphasizing the nurse's accountability in forming and maintaining appropriate boundaries. Guidelines are provided to address common challenges such as boundary crossings, cultural considerations, ethical dilemmas, and the influence of power dynamics. By adhering to these principles, nurses can deliver ethical, equitable, and culturally sensitive care that aligns with professional standards and client needs.

Keywords: Nursing ethics, professional boundaries, therapeutic relationships, ethical care, cultural humility, nurse-client relationship, power dynamics, safeguarding clients.

1. Introduction

The importance of maintaining healthy professional boundaries in nurse-client relationships to ensure safety, respect, and therapeutic outcomes. Professional boundaries are defined as the clear lines that separate a nurse's therapeutic behavior from actions that could potentially harm the client or compromise care quality. These boundaries are critical for fostering a relationship where the client feels safe and respected while receiving care that meets their needs effectively. Nurses across all domains of practice, whether as employees or volunteers, must understand the distinction between therapeutic and non-therapeutic relationships and adhere to these guidelines in every setting (Fronek & Kendall, 2016).

The Research aims to serve three primary purposes. First, it defines professional boundaries explicitly for nurses, emphasizing their role in upholding these lines to maintain a therapeutic focus. Second, it outlines the expectations nurses must meet in forming and maintaining appropriate therapeutic relationships with clients. Third, it provides guidance on recognizing and responding to instances where colleagues may exhibit behaviors indicative of boundary violations. By addressing these aspects, the guidelines ensure that nurses are equipped to protect the integrity of the nurse-client relationship (Smythe et al., 2017).

These guidelines are grounded in ethical principles as outlined in the Canadian Nurses Association's (CNA) Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses (2017). They also align with other critical documents, including the Practice Standards for Registrants (2023), Entry-Level Competencies for the Practice of Registered Nurses (2022a), and the Protection of Patients from Sexual Abuse and Sexual Misconduct Standards (2022b). These foundational resources provide nurses with the conceptual and practical tools needed to establish and maintain professional boundaries.

Furthermore, legislative amendments to the Health Professions Act (HPA, 2000) underscore the importance of these guidelines. These amendments, introduced in April 2019, increased penalties for nurses found guilty of sexual abuse or misconduct. The document incorporates these legal changes, specifying the expectations for nurse-patient relationships to prevent and address such violations. For example, it explicitly prohibits sexual relationships between a nurse and a client and extends this prohibition for at least one year following the termination of the therapeutic relationship. In cases involving psychotherapeutic treatment, a sexual relationship is permanently barred. Overall, the nurse's responsibility to maintain professional boundaries and safeguard client welfare. By adhering to these

guidelines, nurses can navigate the complexities of the therapeutic relationship while upholding the highest standards of ethical and professional conduct.

2. Guidelines

First Guideline: The nurse is accountable for establishing therapeutic relationships with their clients

Nurses are tasked with using their professional knowledge, skills, and judgment to foster relationships that are safe, competent, compassionate, and ethical. These relationships are foundational to achieving positive health outcomes and are essential in all contexts, including direct patient care, educational settings, research, administrative roles, and interdisciplinary collaborations (College of Nurses of Ontario, 2006).

A therapeutic nurse-client relationship is defined by five essential components:

1. **Trust:** The client, often in a vulnerable position, must trust that the nurse is knowledgeable, responsible, and acting in their best interests. Trust is the cornerstone of the therapeutic relationship.
2. **Respect:** Nurses are required to value each client as a unique individual, acknowledging their dignity and worth irrespective of personal attributes or social determinants of health.
3. **Professional Intimacy:** This arises from the close interactions and shared knowledge inherent in providing care, encompassing physical, emotional, and psychological dimensions.
4. **Empathy:** Nurses must strive to understand and resonate with the client's situation while maintaining a professional emotional distance to ensure objectivity in care.
5. **Power:** The nurse inherently holds a position of power due to their expertise and access to the client's personal health information. This power differential must be used responsibly to benefit the client.

Nurses are responsible for ensuring that therapeutic relationships remain within professional boundaries, which protect the client's well-being and the integrity of the care provided. These boundaries differentiate the therapeutic interaction from personal relationships and prevent role confusion, exploitation, or harm.

The First Guideline emphasizes that the nurse, not the client, is accountable for initiating, maintaining, and ending therapeutic relationships appropriately. This accountability is particularly important as the nurse navigates the continuum of professional behavior, which ranges from under-involvement (e.g., neglect) to over-involvement (e.g., boundary violations). The therapeutic relationship must remain at the center of this continuum, ensuring balanced and professional care. This guideline reinforces the importance of professional judgment in maintaining a therapeutic focus, safeguarding the client's dignity, and fostering an environment of trust and respect. By adhering to these principles, nurses can build relationships that are both effective and ethically sound.

Second Guideline: The nurse is responsible for maintaining healthy professional boundaries, not the client

The nurse's responsibility for maintaining healthy professional boundaries in therapeutic nurse-client relationships. It emphasizes that the onus of upholding these boundaries lies with the nurse, not the client. The guideline explains the dynamic nature of professional boundaries and how they safeguard the client's well-being by preventing under-involvement or over-involvement, both of which can harm the therapeutic relationship (Gardner et al., 2017; Green, 2017).

The nurse-client relationship is placed on a **continuum of professional behavior**:

- **Under-Involvement:** This includes behaviors such as disinterest or neglect, which can lead to a lack of adequate care for the client.
- **Over-Involvement:** This occurs when boundaries are crossed or violated, manifesting as inappropriate behaviors such as favoritism, dependency, or even sexual misconduct. The ideal position is at the center of this continuum, where the therapeutic relationship remains balanced, professional, and goal-oriented.

Key Concepts of Professional Boundaries

1. Definition and Importance:

Professional boundaries are described as the "spaces between the nurse's power and a client's vulnerability." They separate therapeutic actions from those that could inadvertently harm or exploit the client. Breaching these boundaries, whether through negligence or over-familiarity, can erode trust and diminish the quality of care.

2. Adjusting Boundaries:

Boundaries may need to be redefined depending on factors like the physical environment, the duration of the relationship, or the therapeutic goals. However, any adjustments must be communicated transparently to the client to avoid misunderstandings.

3. Legislative and Regulatory Frameworks:

Boundaries are governed by legislation, regulatory standards, and employer policies. Nurses are expected to adhere to these rules to ensure their behavior aligns with professional expectations and client protection.

4. Safeguarding Vulnerable Clients:

Clients may not always recognize the significance of professional boundaries or might expect behaviors from the nurse that conflict with professional standards. Nurses must clearly explain these boundaries and their purpose to foster understanding and protect clients from harm.

Handling Boundary Crossings and Violations

Boundary crossings are temporary deviations from professional boundaries, often made with the intent of meeting a client's therapeutic needs. For example, sharing a relevant personal anecdote might help build rapport. However, such actions must be minimal, purposeful, and carefully evaluated to ensure they do not shift into boundary violations.

Boundary violations occur when a nurse's actions prioritize their own needs over the client's. Examples include excessive self-disclosure, secrecy, or inappropriate relationships. Violations can cause harm to the client, even if the nurse's intentions were not malicious. Nurses are urged to reflect on their behavior, seek guidance when in doubt, and address concerns promptly to protect the therapeutic relationship.

By maintaining professional boundaries, nurses ensure that their actions remain focused on the client's needs while upholding ethical and professional standards. This guideline reinforces the critical role of nurses in creating a safe, respectful, and effective therapeutic environment.

Third Guideline: The nurse is accountable for ensuring ethical nursing care and practice

Emphasizing the nurse's accountability for ensuring ethical care and professional practice. It aligns with the values and principles outlined in the *Canadian Nurses Association's (CNA) Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses (2017)*, which serves as the foundation for nursing practices that respect human rights, equity, and fairness. The guideline highlights that nursing care must be free from discrimination, and nurses must actively promote inclusivity and justice in all aspects of client care.

Core Ethical Principles

1. Promoting Justice and Equity:

Nurses are ethically obligated to provide care without discrimination based on factors such as race, culture, gender identity, age, health status, or socioeconomic background. The principle underscores the importance of equal and fair treatment, ensuring all clients feel respected and valued.

2. Cultural Humility and Safety:

The guideline stresses the role of cultural humility in creating culturally safe environments for clients. Cultural humility requires nurses to be open, self-aware, and reflective about their biases, engaging with clients in ways that respect their cultural values and practices. Nurses are encouraged to learn about and incorporate clients' cultural beliefs into care plans, fostering trust and collaboration.

3. Respecting Religious and Spiritual Beliefs:

The document highlights the need for sensitivity towards clients' religious and spiritual values. Nurses are urged to create an environment that supports clients' health practices and decisions,

even when these differ from their own. Collaboration with cultural or spiritual leaders is recommended to enhance culturally sensitive care.

Addressing Vulnerability and Power Dynamics

Clients are inherently vulnerable in healthcare settings, which increases the nurse's responsibility to uphold ethical and professional standards. Nurses must acknowledge and navigate the power differential in nurse-client relationships with care, ensuring that their actions promote autonomy and empowerment for the client. Nurses are cautioned against exploiting this dynamic and are expected to act solely in the client's best interests.

Abuse and Neglect

The guideline addresses various forms of abuse, including physical, emotional, verbal, sexual, financial, and neglect. Nurses are responsible for recognizing and reporting any form of abuse to protect the client. The document also details specific legislative requirements, such as Alberta's *Protection for Persons in Care Act (2009)*, which mandates reporting abuse of adults in care, and the *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act (2000)* for reporting concerns related to children. Nurses who fail to act against abuse may face disciplinary action, legal consequences, or loss of licensure.

Role of Nurses in Ethical Practice

Nurses are expected to uphold ethical care by:

- Ensuring that their behavior aligns with professional codes of ethics and regulatory standards.
- Recognizing and addressing instances of potential harm or unethical practices in the workplace.
- Seeking guidance from supervisors, colleagues, or regulatory bodies when faced with ethical dilemmas.

By adhering to these ethical principles, nurses safeguard the integrity of their profession and the trust placed in them by clients and the public. "Guideline 3" reinforces the importance of maintaining professional behavior, promoting justice, and addressing vulnerabilities to ensure ethical and equitable care for all clients.

Fourth Guideline: The nurse is responsible for establishing therapeutic relationships for specific client health-care needs and within the boundaries of sound professional judgement and professional expectations

Outlining the nurse's responsibility for establishing and maintaining therapeutic relationships tailored to specific client healthcare needs, while staying within the boundaries of professional judgment and expectations. Nurses must prioritize client safety and well-being, ensuring that their relationships remain focused, professional, and ethically sound.

Providing Care to Family Members or Friends

Nurses may occasionally be required to care for family members or friends. In such cases, the guideline recommends transferring care to another healthcare provider whenever possible to maintain objectivity and professionalism. If transferring care is not feasible, the nurse must strictly adhere to professional standards to ensure the relationship remains therapeutic and free from personal bias or conflicts of interest. Dual roles, such as being both a caregiver and a family member, demand careful boundary-setting to prevent any compromise in care quality or ethical practice (British Columbia College of Nurses and Midwives, 2018; College of Registered Nurses of Manitoba, 2011).

Gift-Giving and Receiving

Gift-giving in the nurse-client relationship is addressed as a complex issue. Clients may offer gifts as acts of gratitude, but nurses must evaluate the intent and context of such gifts to avoid ethical dilemmas (CRNA, 2023).

- **Cash gifts:** These are never appropriate and should always be refused.
- **Small, symbolic gifts:** May be accepted if they reflect genuine gratitude and have nominal value, but nurses must follow employer policies and consult supervisors if needed.
- **Nurses giving gifts:** This is discouraged unless explicitly appropriate for therapeutic purposes, as it could create the perception of preferential treatment.

The guideline emphasizes that nurses must never suggest or imply that care is contingent upon receiving gifts. Additionally, nurses should refuse any involvement in clients' wills, such as being designated as beneficiaries, to prevent conflicts of interest.

Social Media Use

The rise of social media necessitates specific boundaries to protect client privacy and confidentiality (Green, 2017). Nurses are expected to:

- Maintain a clear separation between personal and professional online activities.
- Never post client information or images, even anonymously, to ensure compliance with privacy laws.
- Use the highest security settings on social platforms and remain mindful of the rapid spread of online content.
- Evaluate the implications of connecting with clients on social media to prevent boundary issues or dependency.

Social media interactions must align with professional standards, as public behavior can reflect on a nurse's professional reputation.

Social Relationships with Former Clients

The guideline warns against forming personal or social relationships with former clients. While these relationships may develop, nurses must evaluate key factors before engaging, such as:

- The length and nature of the previous therapeutic relationship.
- The client's emotional and mental health status.
- The risk of confusion between therapeutic and personal dynamics.

Special caution is advised if the nurse-client relationship involved psychotherapeutic treatment, as such relationships may perpetually affect the client's perception of the nurse's role (CLPNA, CRNA, & CRPNA, 2022).

3. Conclusion

Upholding professional boundaries is a cornerstone of ethical nursing practice. These boundaries safeguard the therapeutic relationship, ensuring it remains focused on the client's well-being. Nurses must navigate complex dynamics involving power, cultural differences, and ethical challenges while maintaining objectivity and professionalism. Adherence to established guidelines fosters trust, respect, and equitable care, strengthening the integrity of the nursing profession and ensuring positive outcomes for clients. By prioritizing ethical principles and professional accountability, nurses can address vulnerabilities, prevent harm, and support a healthcare environment rooted in justice and respect.

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