

Healthy Boundaries

By: Amy Biller Daniels, M.S.W., C.A.P.S.W., Psychotherapist at JFS

I had an interesting experience that I'd like to share with you.

My responsibility at JFS is to provide Late Life Counseling to residents of Milwaukee County who are 60 years and over.

Mary* is a 67 year old woman who lives in West Allis and has a volunteer from another organization. Her volunteer has been coming to see her weekly for the past 5 weeks. Mary has many health issues and recently has been seeing some new health providers. Her volunteer had been taking her to these medical appointments. Last week, her volunteer took it upon herself to cancel several of these appointments and make new ones with other doctors. This was done without Mary's permission. Mary was understandably upset. She called me, and we talked about how she would deal with this. Mary spoke with both her volunteer and the agency she works for. Mary explained that she had never asked the volunteer to cancel the appointments nor had she given her permission to do so. Mary's talk with her volunteer wasn't easy, as her volunteer was hurt and felt that she had gotten into trouble. Mary explained that this wasn't her intention, but she wanted the volunteer to work with her, not take over. Mary and her volunteer worked out their problems and their relationship is better as both people understand their expectations and boundaries.

I'm sharing this incident with you because it demonstrates someone not adhering to boundaries. Mary's volunteer felt that she knew what was best for Mary and took it upon herself to act upon her own beliefs. The volunteer forgot a key element in their relationship: Mary's right to self-determination. Mary is entitled to make her own decisions. She is the one who decides which doctors she will see and which she won't. Her volunteer should have respected her wishes. That is the volunteer's role.

I have also had experiences with clients who have no boundaries. Often, they have gotten into trouble because they have assumed that everyone in their life, volunteers and professionals included, are their friends. One client tried to keep in contact with a caregiver from another agency. She called the manager of the agency and kept badgering her for the caregiver's phone number. The

manager tried being diplomatic and reminded the client that some information is personal and not given out to clients. The client persisted and the manager had to be very direct. In the end, the manager felt that the agency couldn't continue providing services to the client as she had overstepped her boundaries.

As you can see, it is important for volunteers and professionals alike to reflect on their boundaries when working with clients. For instance, what do we do when a client asks us a personal question? The answer is determined by our agency's mission, ethics and standards as well as our own code of conduct. Recently a client asked me who else I saw in her retirement community. I told her that was confidential information and reassured her that if anyone asked me if I saw her or knew her, my response would be the same.

Certainly, there are times that it can be helpful to share personal information or experiences with a client. My clients have asked what part of Milwaukee I live in, whether I have children and how long have I been doing "this work". I always try to think of the best way to answer and the way that might be most helpful to them. Maintaining boundaries are important in so many of our relationships. As volunteers and professionals, we need to remember that it is very important to understand the difference between a friendship and a professional or volunteer relationship when working with a JFS client. I think if we understand the difference in these relationships, we can help our clients understand this too.

If you have questions about any of the issues raised in this article, please contact your Case Manager, Program Manager or Susie Gruenberg. I'd like to thank you for the important and wonderful work that you do enriching our clients' lives.

*name changed to protect identity/confidentiality

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