

# Boundaries:

In the context of a higher education setting



# Plan



Effective boundaries



Boundary violations

When things go wrong



Real examples



**US**  
UNIVERSITY  
OF SUSSEX

# why are boundaries important?

---



**1**

Safe, open, stable, transparent and consistency affords student a sense of control.  
*Change/uncertainty can create anxiety.*

**2**

Avoid role confusion (e.g. slipping into personal relationships, friendships or parental roles).

**3**

Past experiences may lead to student becoming over-reliant, disempowered or stunt independence development.

**4**

Harder to enforce boundaries later.

**5**

Effective boundaries could lead to less demands on you, preventing burn out.

**6**

Our actions create an expectation of our colleagues.

# maintaining boundaries

---



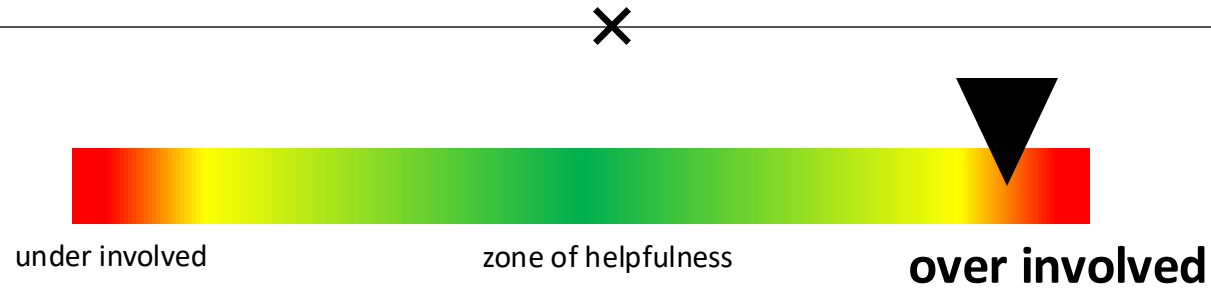
## Try to...

- Try to arrange appointments with students during office hours (9am-5pm weekdays) as this is when most mental health support is available.
- Not see students outside pre-arranged appointments, or beyond an allocated/agreed amount of time.
- Not give out your mobile number or address. If a concern is that urgent, it's likely to have escalated too far.
- Not give students lifts or meet them outside the university.
- Be wary of the power dynamic between you and students.
- Always have an automatic out of office reply so that students know how to find support when you're unavailable (even if this is just a link to a web page).
- Be kind, but keep boundaries to protect yourself, the student, and the University.

**Remember that counter-intuitively, keeping boundaries promotes trust.**



# boundary violations



## boundary violations

potential harm



feels “wrong”

has gone “too far”

easily seen/  
recognised

behaviour that confuses your needs  
with students’ needs

## boundary crossings

blurring of familiar  
with professional

questioned by  
others



favouritism

could be  
missed

brief deviations from typical  
professional behaviour



may be:

- inadvertent

Your student overhears you talking to a colleague about your weekend which includes private matters about your personal life.

(NCSBN, 2018)

- thoughtless

Your student attends a meeting with you about their dissertation. In an attempt to put the student at ease you use a term of endearment that offends the student.

- purposeful

Your student has not been attending lectures and tells you that due to their depression they are rarely leaving the house. You try to help the student, meet them at a café on campus and buy them a coffee.

Generally:

- Less severe
- Not ideal
- Can be a point to re-evaluate and re-establish boundaries



Generally accepted as clear-cut in most severe cases

- Reference consistently made in relation to sexual misconduct

excessive personal disclosure	secrecy	your needs or theirs?
<p>Does the student:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• know more than other students about events in your life outside of uni?</li><li>• get treated more favourably than other students?</li><li>• make reference to details about you which make you feel uncomfortable?</li><li>• speak as though you are friends?</li></ul>	<p>Do you:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• agree to keep a student's secrets ("told in confidence")?</li><li>• hold information to protect a student?</li><li>• worry that someone else will find out your actions?</li><li>• feel uncomfortable holding information that others don't know about?</li></ul>	<p>Do you feel as though:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• nobody else understands the student?</li><li>• you need to check on follow-up actions after someone else takes over their care/support?</li><li>• the student needs you?</li><li>• you need to check on the student between planned appointments?</li></ul>



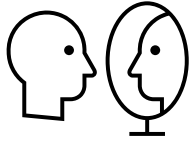
“The boundary violation typically starts small and become incrementally problematic and the dyad starts sliding down the slope. This is known as Slippery Slope Concept.”



# repairing boundaries



## Reflect

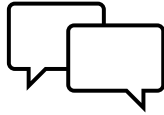


Reflect on your relationship with the student and examine your actions and intentions.

Has something been misunderstood?

What could you have done differently?

## Discuss

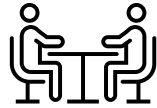


Talk to a colleague about the situation and the concerns you have.

Ask for feedback and their views.

Do you have access to your own supervision?

## Explain

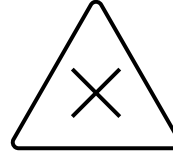


Take steps to re-establish boundaries with the student.

Sensitively address the actions that have led focus away from their needs.

Clarify roles and boundaries going forward.

## Stop



If you can identify the action(s) causing problems/ violations stop them as soon as practicably possible.

## Assess



Re-assess what the students' needs are. Have they changed?

Is it still within your remit to support the student with this?

Is it clear what support the student is requesting?

## Question



If further unrelated topics are raised ask yourself whose needs are you meeting before you respond.

Can you divert back to the agreed topic?

Are you likely to respond based on your own emotion?

## Transfer



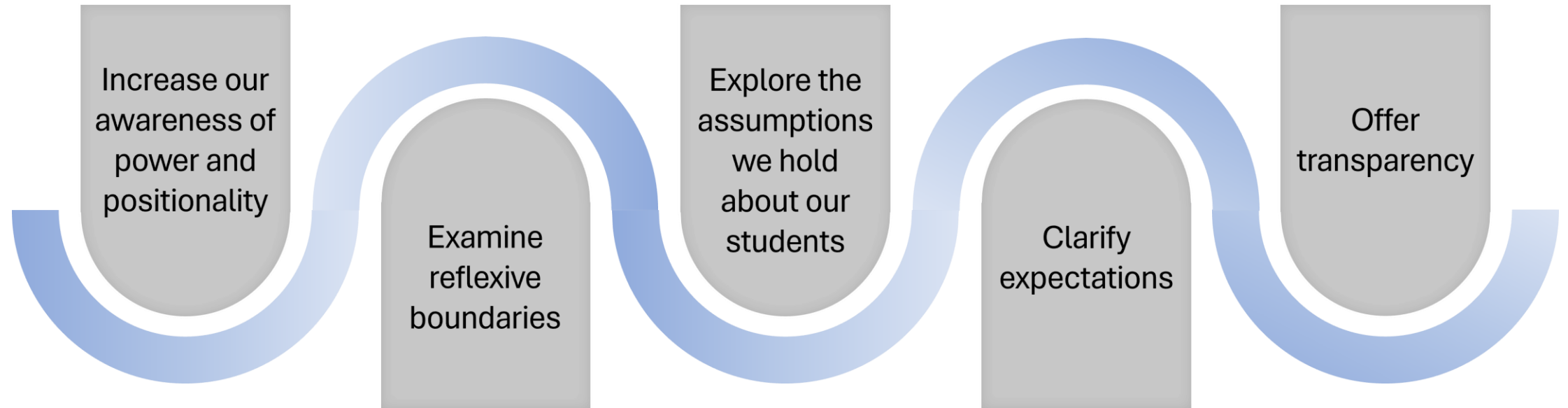
Know your limits.

Recognise when things have gone too far and consider transferring student to another supervisor.

If the students' needs are beyond your role, look to linking them with appropriate support.



# PGR students



# References

Aravind, V. K., Krishnam, V. D., Thasneem, Z. (2012). Boundary crossings and violations in clinical settings. *Indian Journal of Psychological Medicicine*, 34(1): 21-24.  
doi: [10.4103/0253-7176.96151](https://doi.org/10.4103/0253-7176.96151)

British Columbia College of Nurses & midwives (2024). *Boundaries in the Nurse-Client Relationship*. Available at:  
[https://www.bccnm.ca/RPN/learning/boundaries/Pages/boundary\\_crossing\\_violation.aspx](https://www.bccnm.ca/RPN/learning/boundaries/Pages/boundary_crossing_violation.aspx) (accessed: 8<sup>th</sup> September 2024)

NCSBN (2018). *A Nurse's Guide to Professional Boundaries*. Available at: [https://www.ncsbn.org/public-files/ProfessionalBoundaries\\_Complete.pdf](https://www.ncsbn.org/public-files/ProfessionalBoundaries_Complete.pdf) (Accessed: 31st August 2024)

Schwartz, H.L. (2012), Reflection and intention: Interpersonal boundaries in teaching and learning. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 2012: 99-102. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tl.20030>

University of Sussex (2021). *University of Sussex Relationships Policy*. Available at: <https://www.sussex.ac.uk/humanresources/documents/relationships-policy-october-2017.pdf> (Accessed: 29th August 2024)