

# leadership ladders:

STEPS TO A GREAT CAREER IN SOCIAL WORK

NOVEMBER 2011



## setting and maintaining professional boundaries

The ability to set and maintain professional boundaries is critical to an effective, sustainable career in social work. Social workers make judgments regarding boundaries on a daily basis, and these decisions affect not only their own well-being but also that of their clients, colleagues, and loved ones. It is not surprising, then, that the topic of boundaries pervades social work education from introductory curricula through advanced professional development workshops.

Not even the most skilled social worker can anticipate every situation in which challenges to professional boundaries may arise. At the same time, every social worker can—and should—examine, in an ongoing way, how her or his professional boundaries enhance or harm the following domains:


- › Relationships with clients
- › Relationships with colleagues
- › Relationships with supervisors and administrators
- › Amount of time devoted to work
- › Amount of time and quality of energy spent on off-the-job activities and relationships
- › Ability to cope with work-related stressors

» **THE FOLLOWING STRATEGIES CAN HELP YOU SET AND MAINTAIN APPROPRIATE PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES.**

- › Examine your motivations for devoting extra time and attention to particular clients. Although some clients require more energy than others, treating one client differently than you do others may be a cue that your boundaries are overextended. In such situations, assess whether your services are congruent with the client's care plan, your job description, your professional scope of practice, and your organization's mission.



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*Recognize  
that exceeding  
your  
professional  
boundaries  
with clients  
sets up your  
colleagues and  
organization  
for failure.*

- › Apply, on a consistent basis, your organization's processes for communicating with clients. Such communication systems can include office email or voicemail, dedicated cell phones or pagers, receptionists or call centers, on-call staff, and off-hours referrals to 911, emergency rooms, or community mental health crisis centers. You may think you're helping clients by deviating from existing procedures—for example, by encouraging them to contact you directly in a crisis, rather than going through appropriate channels. At some point, however, you will be unable to respond to a client in need. When that happens, the client may lose trust in you or be reluctant to seek help in other ways.
- › Recognize that exceeding your professional boundaries with clients sets up your colleagues and organization for failure. Going beyond the parameters of your service system or role creates an unfair expectation that your coworkers do the same. Inconsistent professional boundaries within teams and organizations may confuse clients and erode their confidence in your organization.
- › Be discriminate in your use of social media. Avoid "friending" clients on Facebook, for example, and limit the amount and type of online information you make available to the public—or even to your friends' social networks—to prevent conflicts of interest with clients (Hobdy, 2011). Similarly, don't attempt to access, without informed consent, online information about your clients (Hobdy, 2011). Realize, too, that posting negative information about your workplace may demonstrate a lack of respect for colleagues and violate the NASW Code of Ethics (2008) (Reamer, 2009).
- › Develop strong working relationships with your colleagues. Although your coworkers need not be your friends, friendly workplace alliances can be invaluable in coping with the stresses of social work practice and maintaining your sense of humor. Moreover, trusted colleagues can help you think through boundary-related questions.
- › Use supervision and consultation to help you determine appropriate professional boundaries in challenging situations. Maintain an ongoing dialogue with your supervisor about your workload. Use tangible tools, such as assessment forms and NASW standards of practice, to communicate your clients' needs and the ways in which you spend your time on the job.
- › If systems to address client needs do not exist within your organization—or if clients repeatedly experience difficulty in accessing services—collaborate with your supervisor or administrator to address the problem, rather than trying to fill those gaps singlehandedly.
- › Be attuned to signs of workplace bullying (Whitaker, 2010). You deserve the same respect and dignity in your work environment that you offer to your clients and colleagues.
- › Find ways to nurture yourself throughout your workday and during your commute. Take regular lunch breaks—if possible, away from your desk, outside your car, or otherwise apart from work responsibilities. Find ways to change pace occasionally during the day: stand and stretch occasionally if you sit at a desk; listen to music, an audio book, or an enjoyable radio program while driving to client visits or during your commute; take a brief walk; or simply breathe deeply and consciously for a minute.
- › Take time away from your job to rejuvenate. Strive to maintain a regular work schedule and avoid working overtime on a routine basis. Determine—if appropriate, in collaboration with your supervisor—how much, if at all, you need to be

available off the job, be it overnight, when you're ill, or during vacations. Clear expectations are especially important if you use a "smart phone" or other technology to access work email remotely. Don't confuse professional responsiveness and responsibility with being accessible to your colleagues (let alone your clients) 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

- › Devote time off the job to activities that nurture you. Spending time with family or friends, reading, watching a movie, singing, journaling, meditating, exercising, or other diversions can re-energize you to return to work. Allow time for rest, too.
- › Be attuned to the ways in which you absorb work stresses and take steps to manage that stress. Even social workers with excellent external boundaries (such as a regular work schedule), supportive colleagues, and manageable caseloads often find themselves "taking work home" on an emotional level. This can result in persistent worry about client situations while away from the job or unfounded fears of professional inadequacy. Work-related stress can also result in hypervigilance within a social worker's personal life—for example, fearing the onset of illness, despite the absence of symptoms, because of constant exposure to client illness. Writing about your feelings or talking with someone you trust can help you process the impact of work on your life and maintain clear internal boundaries between your professional and personal lives.
- › If you find yourself struggling consistently to maintain professional boundaries, consider seeking support from a licensed mental health professional to understand your behavior and evaluate the sustainability of your current role or work environment.

## **NASW RESOURCES**

### » **NASW Continuing Educational Portal**

[www.socialworkers.org/ce/search.asp](http://www.socialworkers.org/ce/search.asp)

Extensive listing of conferences, workshops, webinars, teleconferences, and distance learning opportunities

### » **NASW Lunchtime Series**

[www.socialworkers.org/ce/online/lunchtime](http://www.socialworkers.org/ce/online/lunchtime)

Multiple archived teleconferences and webinars (2007–2011) addressing topics such as the workplace environment, social worker safety, managing competing demands, ethics, and risk management

### » **NASW Professional Education and Training Center**

[www.manexa.com/naswdc](http://www.manexa.com/naswdc)

Multiple ethics courses, available to both NASW members and the public

### » **NASW Specialty Practice Sections**

[www.socialworkers.org/sections](http://www.socialworkers.org/sections)

Multiple archived webinars and teleconferences (2007–2011) addressing topics such as professional grief, the ethics of social networking, risk management, and ethical decision making

### » **NASW WebEd courses**

[www.naswwebed.org](http://www.naswwebed.org)

Three online courses addressing ethics and malpractice risk

### » **Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers (2008)**

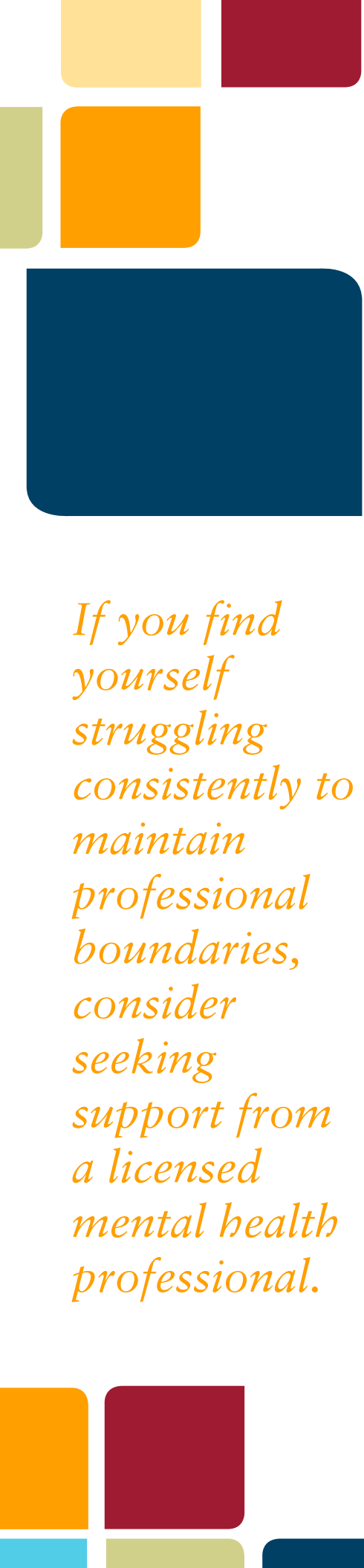
<http://preview.socialworkers.org/pubs/code>

Available in English and Spanish

### » **Encyclopedia of Social Work, 20th ed. (2008)**

[www.naswpress.org/publications/reference/encyclopedia.html](http://www.naswpress.org/publications/reference/encyclopedia.html)

Includes articles addressing professional conduct, professional impairment, and professional liability and malpractice



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- » **NASW standards for social work practice** (*various settings and populations*)  
[www.socialworkers.org/practice](http://www.socialworkers.org/practice)
- » **Social Work Speaks: National Association of Social Workers Policy Statements 2009–2012 (8th ed.)**  
[www.naswpress.org/publications/practice/speaks.html](http://www.naswpress.org/publications/practice/speaks.html)  
Includes policy statements addressing ethics, professional impairment, and professional self-care

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