

WHY ARE BOUNDARIES SO IMPORTANT FOR VOLUNTEERS?

Boundaries are limits helping to structure how a volunteer should act with a patient and family. As volunteers, we strive to be helpful. If we are under-involved, we can't be helpful. If we are over-involved, we can do damage. Staff and volunteers come into the lives of patients and families during difficult and emotional times. Our help and support are often highly appreciated, and we as helpers can be deeply moved by the stories and situations we witness. It can be hard to remember that we are only with these families for this limited journey, and we will not become a permanent part of their lives.

Healthy Helping Relationships are:

- Limited in scope. We are clear about the purpose of our visits. Why am I here? What is the goal? Whose needs are supposed to be met?
- One-way relationships. Volunteer-patient relationships are not like friendships, where needs of both parties are being addressed. A helper is only there to give support to the one being helped.
- Limited in time. We end the visits when our work is done. The length of the relationship is limited too – when our services are no longer needed, the relationship ends.

Why Might Patients or Families Cross Those Boundaries?

- They truly don't understand where the volunteer role begins and ends (the volunteers have to be the teachers).
- It makes them feel less vulnerable and more "normal" if they can engage with you in a friend or family-type manner.



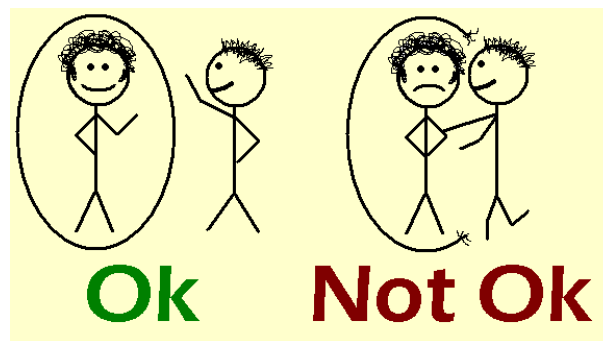
Boundary Problems that VOLUNTEERS Might Demonstrate:

Asking personal questions that are not appropriate.

- Giving out your cell phone and promising always to be available.
- Telling the patient or family what they should do, or what decisions they should make – rather than being in the role of supporter.
- Acting as a "Rescuer" – trying to fix problems that are not ours to fix, and may not be fixable.
- Promising to stay in touch with families after your time as their volunteer is over.
- Giving gifts or loaning something to patients/families.
- Hiring patient family members for personal needs – babysitting, car washing, house painting, etc.
- Dating a patient or family member.

What's Wrong with Crossing Boundaries?

- We end up promising more than we can deliver.
- We end up causing patients and families to feel confused and let down.
- We invade the privacy of patients and families and make them feel exposed.
- Patients and families feel burdened by the personal information that we share with them.
(They start thinking: "That volunteer is having a hard time; I don't want to bother him/her." etc.)
- We get too involved in family conflicts, and they perceive that we are taking sides.
- They end up feeling abandoned when we leave.



Remember...

- Observe the suffering and remain compassionate – but don't lose yourself.
- You are not a miracle worker, a rescuer, a family member, or friend.
- You can't solve problems that are not yours to solve.
- You can say 'no'.
- Your "simple" gifts of respite, transport, time, companionship, errands and emotional support are neither simple nor small.
They are profound acts of kindness for people in a time of need with a patient and family.



Health Care Kogarah

Adapted from Palliative Care of Greensboro (HPCG)