

# Help the Helper

Boundaries and  
Empowerment for  
Peer Support  
Specialists

# Funding Statement

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# Learning Objectives

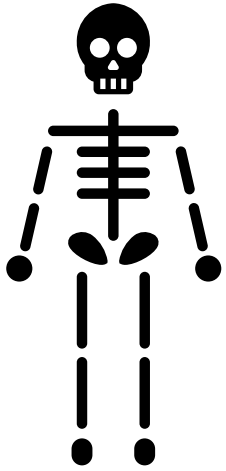
- Describe what your role is and is not as a peer support specialist (PSS)
- Explain one example of setting a boundary as a PSS
- Describe self-advocacy

# Create a Self-care Practice



(Butler et al., 2019)

# Domains of Self-care



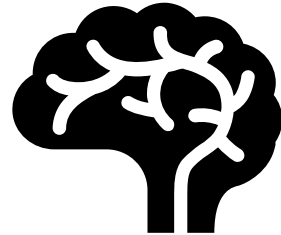
## Physical Self-care

Healthy eating/nutrition  
Exercise  
Sleep  
Maintenance healthcare  
Hygiene



## Emotional Self-care

Develop healthy coping skills  
Set limits/maintain boundaries  
Make time for yourself  
Intentional activity  
Talk to a safe person  
*Use the same tools you offer to your participants*



## Mental Self-care

Self-reflection and self-awareness  
Professional care  
Take time off  
Intentional screen breaks  
Self-expression (art, journaling)  
Following curiosity/daydreaming  
Solving puzzles/playing games

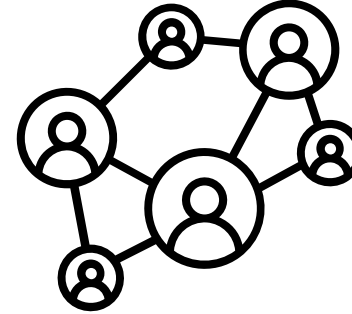
(Butler et al., 2019)

# Domains of Self-care



## Spiritual Self-care

- Spending time in nature
- Meditation
- Prayer
- Creating rituals
- Solitude and/or fellowship
- Volunteering/helping others
- Reflect on meaning/purpose



## Social Self-care

- Make time for healthy relationships
- Self-care/recovery groups
- Healthy venting/sharing with a safe person
- Recreational activities
- Honor boundaries



## Professional Self-care

- Time management
- Task prioritization
- Regular workday breaks
- Vacations
- Workplace boundaries
- Self-advocacy

(Butler et al., 2019)



# BOUNDARIES



# **Boundaries are Self-care!**

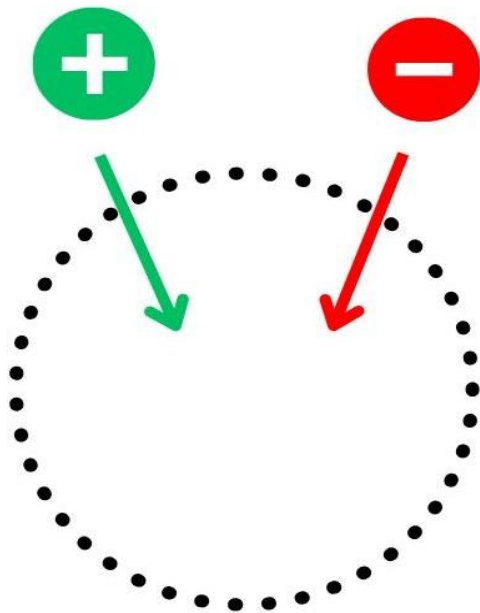
Boundaries are the lines we draw for ourselves to know what is acceptable and unacceptable in alignment with our values, beliefs, and sense of safety.



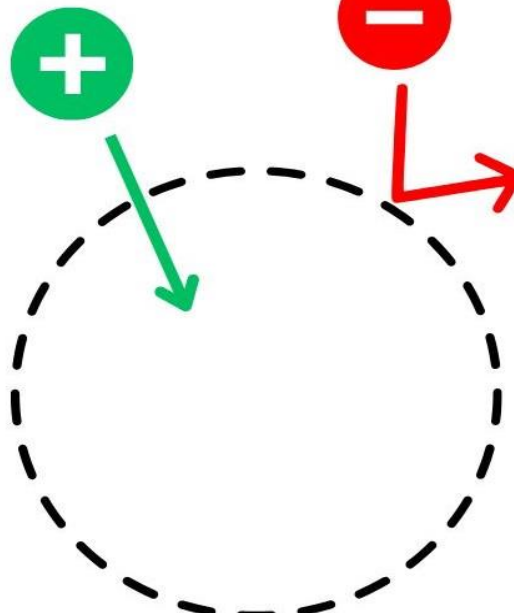
# Boundaries are Self-care!

Boundaries are important for:

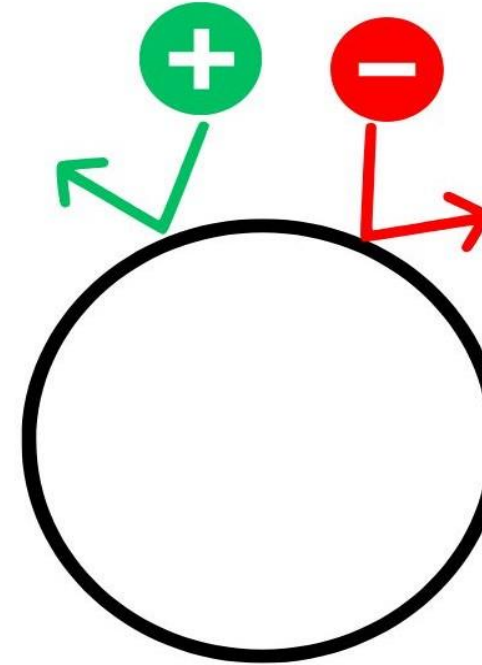
- Self-preservation/safety
- Reducing stress
- Having healthy relationships
- Improve self-esteem (I'm doing what's safest for me)
- Communicate and advocate for needs



**Porous**



**Healthy**



**Rigid**

Can't say no, people-pleasing, avoids conflict by giving in to others, quick to adapt to others' opinions, does not advocate for their values	Able to say no when needed. Stands by personal values but values the opinions of others and can adapt	Often says no, avoids conflict by pushing others away, personal values are inflexible, tends to ignore others' opinions
Passive communication	Assertive communication	Aggressive communication
"I'm always available for my team! I'll do anything to help!"	"I will not respond to work calls on the weekend."	"Don't even think about talking to me outside of the office."

# What Are Boundaries?

## Personal Boundaries

The lines and limits you create between yourself and other people.

- Example: We can text daily, but I do not want to text every hour.
- Example: Do not post pictures of me on social media without my permission.
- Example: We can meet for dinner, but I will drive separately so I can leave when I want.

(White, 2007)



# What Are Boundaries?

## Workplace Boundaries

The lines and limits within a job role and your relationship to the job.

- Example: I will not transport a client because I am not an authorized driver.
- Example: You may have my office phone number, but not my personal phone number.
- Example: You may email or call me, but I will not join the unofficial group chat.

(White, 2007)

# Boundaries for Peer Support Specialists...

## ...are unclear and confusing!

In 2016, a research group (Bassuk et al.) performed a systematic review of peer-delivery recovery support services for addiction across the United States. An excerpt from their findings:

- There was significant inconsistency in the definitions of peer workers and recovery coaches among the studies.
- Most lacked a clear description of their roles and responsibilities in the interventions. Without a clear definition of the nature and role of peer involvement, comparison across studies is difficult and generalizability of findings nearly impossible.
- Arguably, the inconsistency of the definitions of roles and responsibilities of peer workers is a by-product of the lack of a national credentialing body and the proliferation of a wide range of training and certification programs across the United States.

(Bassuk et al., 2016)

# Know Your Resources

- Job description
- Employee Handbook
- Workplace policies and standard operating procedures (SOPs)
- Chain of command
  - Who do you report to? What is the expectation for communication?
    - Documentation
- Legal compliance – HIPAA, 42 CFR Part 2, mandatory reporting
  - Know procedures around confidentiality and required documents
  - If you don't know, ask for help, do not guess.



# Peer Support Role

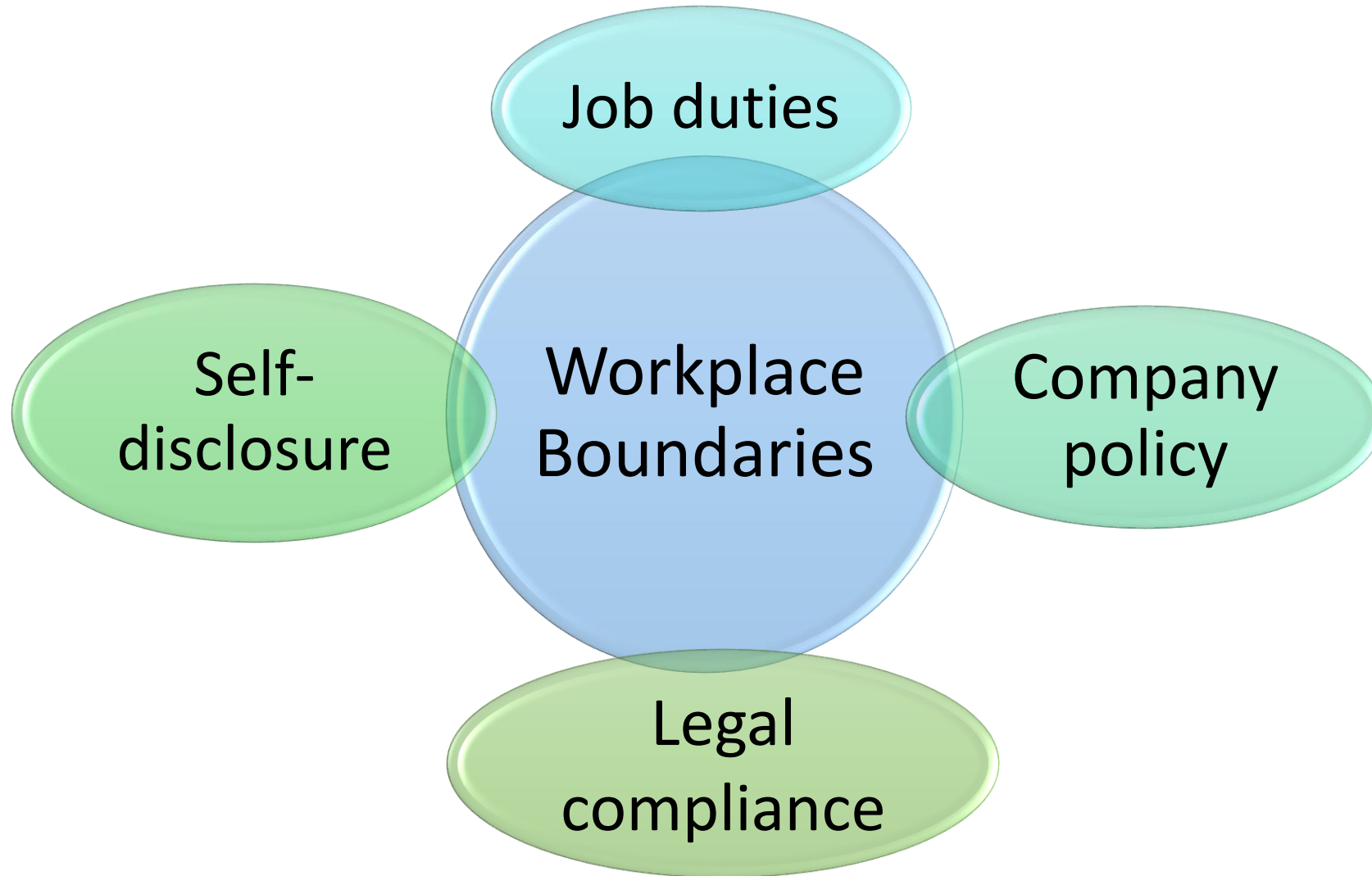
Is/Does	Is Not/Does Not
A person in recovery	A professional
Shares lives experience	Give professional advice
A role model	An expert or authority figure
Sees the person as a whole person in the context of the person's roles, family, community	See the person as a case or diagnosis
Motivates through hope and inspiration	Motivate through fear of negative consequences
Helps to connect the participant to resources	Provide money or a place to live
Helps participant identify goals	Mandate tasks or behaviors
Encourages, supports, praises	Diagnose, assess, or treat
A role model for positive recovery behaviors	Tell the person how to live their life in recovery

(SAMHSA, 2012)

# Peer Support Specialist is **NOT**

- X Sponsor
- X Therapist/Counselor
- X Nurse/Physician
- X Lawyer
- X Priest/Clergy
- X Family Member

(White, 2007)





# Scenario #1

## Phone Boundaries

Your participant is going through a challenging time and has been calling you after hours on your work phone. You picked up once and they thanked you, saying that they “would have used if you didn’t pick up”. Since then, they continue to call.



# Scenario #1 Discussion

- “Going the extra mile” by taking calls 24/7 blurs professional and personal boundaries and can harm the PSS or the participant.
- Excessive workloads lead to stress and burnout. You “can’t be everything to everyone.”
- This is a good opportunity to link participant to other resources to strengthen their support network and build recovery capital (i.e., sponsor, meetings, support network, 24/7 crisis lines, etc.)

## ***Know Your Role***

*Remember: You are a PSS, not a family member. Your client may need help to understand your role.*

*Remember: Your job has designated work hours. You are not expected to use a personal phone or take after-hours calls.*

(Lofwall, 2023)

## Scenario #2 Social Media Boundaries

You start working with a new participant and realize you know them from the past and were “friends” with them on Facebook prior to working with them.





# Scenario #2 Discussion

- Connecting with clients on social media is controversial. If your agency doesn't have a specific policy, consider:

- What is/was your prior relationship?
- What are the risks and benefits of connecting or disconnecting on social media with them?
- Are there potential safety risks prior to interacting with any client on social media?

*Remember anything that you post, including personal information or pictures, can be visible to anyone who may search for you.*

## **BOUNDARIES BETWEEN WORK AND PERSONAL LIFE**

TIP: Set your account to private, give limited viewing access, or hide your friend list. This is a good standard practice to avoid unwanted contact or invasion of privacy.

TIP: Some agencies have work-related Facebook accounts that you may be able to use to reach out to participants for those with limited ways to communicate.

TIP: Consider setting one standard boundary for all participants (i.e., "I am not friends with any of my participants on social media"). This avoids any of confusion that PSS could be "playing favorites."

# Scenario #3

## Money or Goods Exchange Boundary

You had a great interaction with a client today, and you feel like you are making progress. The client leaves but returns shortly after because they are still waiting on their ride. They catch you on a smoke break and ask if they can have a cigarette.



# Scenario #3 Discussion

- Exchanging of money or goods changes relationships. It changes how people think of one another as well as power dynamics.
- Agreeing to give or lend money or goods to a participant can threaten the integrity of the relationship.

TIP: Do not give money or goods to participants. With some employers, even if small or well-intended, is grounds for disciplinary action.

TIP: Utilize available resources such as barrier relief funds, or on-site free food or coffee intended for clients.



## **Scenario #4**

### **Intimate Relationship Boundaries**

You have been working with a client for the past few months and have developed a strong working relationship. One day, the participant begins to make comments toward you that are sexual in nature.

# Scenario #4 Discussion

- The relationship of a peer support specialist and a participant is not of equal power; participants in recovery are vulnerable.
- Sexual relationships between participant and PSS are damaging, creates the loss of trust in a PSS, a host of other poor recovery outcomes for both participant and PSS, and disciplinary action for the PSS.
- If you have a potential issue with a participant (i.e., conflict of interest, comfortability, boundary crossing, etc.), you should discuss with your supervisor and ask for a different PSS to be assigned to them.
- It is not uncommon for professionals who work closely with clients to develop feelings of attraction, but acting upon them is unethical.



# Scenario #5

## Supervisor Boundary

You have been working at a Suboxone clinic for two weeks when the urine collector technician quits on the spot. Your supervisor asks you to help and collect samples until they can hire a new technician. Three months later, they are not hiring for a replacement technician, and your supervisor says, “I don’t know what I would do without you.”



# Scenario #5 Discussion

## What do you do if your work boundaries are crossed?

- Have a conversation with your supervisor.
  - Follow-up with an email that summarizes the conversation. Include important details. This creates proof of the conversation.
- If you feel unsafe with your supervisor, does your organization have a human resources representative?
- Does your organization have a whistleblower policy?
  - Check the employee handbook to see if there is a system in place for voicing major concerns.

# Self-advocacy

The action of representing oneself or one's views or interests.



# Self-advocacy

## How do I speak up for myself?

### Step 1 – Gain Clarity

- You have identified a problem in the workplace or a difficult emotion within yourself, then:
- Name the problem specifically
  - “The vibes are off at work” versus “I don’t know how to remove myself from office gossip”*
  - “I don’t want to do that” versus “This task is outside of my job description”*
- Know your values, goals, and needs. If you are unclear, you will not be able to communicate clearly.

### Step 2 – Communicate Effectively


- Assertive, respectful communication with the correct person
- Document the conversation
  - Send a follow-up email or the conversation never happened
    - “Thank you for your time today to discuss my concerns about...”*
    - It is my understanding that the next steps are....”*

### Step 3 – Embrace Solutions

- Prepare ideas to solve the problem and/or be willing to collaborate to find solutions
- Prepare yourself to adapt to new circumstances
- Re-evaluate your goals as needed

(Montañez, 2021)

# Communication Styles

	Passive	Passive-Aggressive	Aggressive	Assertive
<b>Goal</b>	The other person's needs are the priority.	Neither person's needs are met.	Your own needs are the priority.	Needs are equal.
<b>Positive Characteristics</b>	Respectful Appropriate Can be safer when conflict may escalate to violence		Honest Direct	Honest Direct Respectful Appropriate
<b>Negative Characteristics</b>	Dishonest Indirect	Disrespectful Inappropriate Dishonest, Indirect	Disrespectful Inappropriate Ignores the rights and ideas of others	May not be effective when someone threatens your safety.
<b>Outcome</b>	Often leads to misunderstanding and built-up anger	Limited consideration for the rights, needs, and feelings of others, manipulative	Often alienates and hurts others	May be misinterpreted as aggressive
<b>Example</b>	"I'm ok with whatever you want to do."	Giving the silent treatment, sarcasm, spreading rumors, sabotaging another person's efforts	"This is what we're doing" or "Get over it" Aggressive body language/posture	"I feel" and "I need" statements, eye contact, relaxed body language gestures

(adapted from Cornell Health, 2019)



# Additional Tips for Self-advocacy



## Develop your confidence.

- This is no easy task and there are no shortcuts
- Get to know yourself through self-reflection
- Be aware of your triggers



## Find your teachers.

- Who can you trust for advice and guidance?
- Willingness to learn from every person and every experience
- Ask for help



## Manage expectations.

- Do you understand your role at work?
- Do you understand what your supervisor expects from you?
- Prepare for pushback and/or feedback
  - Do not expect everything to be perfect after one conversation
  - Do not expect the organization to change to meet your values

(Montañez, 2021)

# Empowerment

**Put the oxygen mask on yourself first.**

**I want you to have the best of me, not the rest of me.**

**Don't set yourself on fire to keep others warm.**

# Empowerment

**Work on the relationship with yourself.**

**It's the longest relationship  
you're going to have.**

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