

Challenges to Maintaining Professional Boundaries

There is much discussion about breach of professional boundaries in today's world where all professional bodies are seeking to establish clear guidelines about appropriate professional behaviour. More usually such discussion relates to sexual boundary violation. However, in this world of ever increasing workloads, complexity of problems presenting, resource limitations and professionals frequently coping with significant stressors in their own lives, maintaining professional discretion, impartiality and detachment can be challenging.

Many who are called to the work of 'ministering' have a strong sense of responsibility and a great desire to contribute to the well being of others. These attributes can however, create vulnerability as well as strength. In the face of the many pressures to meet the needs and deal with the crises of others, it is easy to lose perspective, and in the busy lives of clergy with associated demands, care for and awareness of oneself and one's personal needs, can lose priority.

The professional role of Clergy is imbued with authority, and the imperative is to safeguard the trust and confidence placed in Clergy and the Church, by parishioners and fellow workers.

The parishioner, in seeking guidance and support, is expressing confidence in the priest as a person, and in the priest's role as a representative of the Church. There is an unspoken expectation of trust, confidence and belief that the priest will act in their best interests. Kindness, respect, non-judgment and maintaining confidentiality, are prerequisite.

The power inherent in the authority of the role of priest ideally provides reassurance and can reinforce faith and belief for people during deeply troubled times in their lives. Misuse of that power, however, is also a risk. Allowing or pursuing greater relationship intimacy than is appropriate to the role of pastoral care is an obvious (sexual) boundary violation. However, the power of the position can be abused in less obvious ways. Being dismissive, trivialising, misusing personal information shared, are all aspects of breach of the professional relationship.

Maintaining professional boundaries requires self-awareness and consciousness of how one's attitudes and behaviour impacts on others. Factors that contribute to losing necessary perspective include working long hours with intensive workloads, professional isolation, lack of an available and supportive peer /collegiate network, expectation to meet all the demands of the workload, personal stressful life circumstances and 'compassion fatigue' resulting from repeated exposure to difficult life stories of parishioners.

The Benefits of Peer Discussion Groups

The importance of collegiate discussion is emphasised in most studies on professional coping and mental health. It has been consistently demonstrated that the isolated worker has the most difficulty in maintaining perspective and optimism when managing the many demands of heavy workloads. Professionals who regularly discuss their work are more likely to emerge from their work 'enhanced and intact'.

The experience of a range of service providers from therapists dealing with complex human behavioural problems to services dealing with crises and emergencies recommends regular meetings. It is found that encouraging sharing and exploration of reactions to stressful work experiences contributes to reduction in professional isolation, higher morale, maintaining clarity on boundaries and less propensity to burnout and compassion fatigue.

Options for collegial discussion include informal professional exchange with like-minded colleagues, usually maintained by phone discussions or informal meetings, and usually self-initiated. This provides opportunity to discuss work, exchange ideas on particular problems, seek advice and share difficulties and successes.

Forming study groups also provides opportunity for professionals to get together. The specific subject focus facilitates collegiate sharing as well as building knowledge and learning about issues of relevance to their work.

The possibility and potential of peer discussion and mentoring has been the subject of consistent interest and discussion in the 'Professional Boundaries, Sexuality and Professional Self-Care' training sessions conducted to date.

Peer supervision groups are a recommended and cost effective initiative that enables necessary collegiate meeting, discussion and problem sharing. When facilitated and structured well they assist to maintain positive connections with self and colleagues through focussed professional dialogue, exchange of ideas, sharing of work challenges and experience in the context of a safe, supportive environment.

Peer supervision discussion groups sanctioned and supported by the organization are most effective when incorporated as a regular aspect of professional life. These meetings can involve a programme of reading to provide direction and structure. The study and learning focus enables building of knowledge through reading and discussion of ideas. Trust and confidence builds from constructive meeting experience and facilitates the necessary safe environment, which allows for sharing of experience.

The silencing of feeling through a misguided belief about self-reliance or lack of available support is a significant stressor. Often identifying the existence of a problem is the key to its resolution and in discussing a problem with peers one can transmute the problem into a request for help and support allowing for the building of connectedness that reduces personal and professional isolation.

Managing Disclosures of Sexual Abuse

Child sexual abuse is more prevalent in our society than we care to acknowledge, as is inappropriate sexual relations between professionals and their clients, patients or parishioners. What is often not understood is the full extent of the impact on those who are victim to predatory or inappropriate behaviour and the all too often link between abuse in childhood and vulnerability to exploitation in adulthood. Research identifies statistically significant associations between childhood sexual abuse and sexual abuse (or re-victimisation) in adulthood and reports that males who have been sexually abused are five times more likely to be abused or raped in adulthood and females twice as likely.

Lack of understanding of the dynamics of coercion, control and accommodation of threatening and abusive behaviour causes many to question how one can be caught in a situation of exploitation, why a child does not say 'stop' or disclose, why women and men stay in relationships that are destructive for them.

The ability to lure a child into a sexual relationship is based upon the all powerful and dominant position of the adult, which is in sharp contrast to the child's age, dependency and subordinate position. The same dynamic, exploiting vulnerability through the misuse of a position of power, can apply to the sexual exploitation of adults.

Children and adults, when making a disclosure need to feel heard and believed. Victims will usually disclose only a little at a time. They themselves can be in a state of shock and disbelief or dissociation from their experience and in ways are testing their own reality. They need to be reassured that what they are reporting can be heard and believed. A reaction of shock, disbelief or censoring is likely to limit further disclosure.

The impact of violation of our person, sexual in particular, can be profound and can last a lifetime. Acknowledgement is critical. The psychological wellbeing of a child who discloses can significantly influenced by the ability of the family and/or the social system to provide a safe, supportive, nurturing environment for the child in the immediate, post-trauma period.

Child victims of sexual abuse see themselves as damaged and different. The severity of their symptoms is related to their age, duration of the abuse, the nature of the abuse, identity of the abuser, use of force and/or threats and whether there has been appropriate, sensitive intervention. Since most victims see themselves as guilty and damaged, it is important to assist them to assign responsibility appropriately and to reassure them that they are not the cause of the abuse.

In the church context it is reported that 90% of victims, whether adults or children, are seriously harmed. Loss of faith, mistrust of the church, doubt of oneself and one's own sense of reality, humiliation, guilt and shame, problems with intimacy, bondage to the offender and feelings of abandonment are some of legacies of the abuse.

Individually and as a society we frequently have difficulty in believing that an accused person, known to us, is capable of offending behaviour, particularly in relation to children. There are a number of forces, psychodynamic and social that cause our denial and avoidance of the problem. Being confronted with a report of abuse by a person we have respect for can threaten our sense of certainty and meaning. It can challenge one's belief that the world is a safe place and all is in order.

When confronting disclosures of sexual abuse it is incumbent on professionals in positions of responsibility to be aware of the reality, recognise the signs, understand the nature of the problem, and of the harm done. To acknowledge that harm, and not to collude or minimise, is essential in facilitating the healing for all involved.