

*A Professional Growth Module:*

# MAINTAINING A PROFESSIONAL DISTANCE

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Developing Top-Notch CNAs, One Inservice at a Time

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### A Professional Growth Module: Maintaining a Professional Distance

## JILL CROSSES THE LINE

It was a typical day for Jill, a nursing assistant at the Hill Top Home for Seniors. Nothing too exciting ever seemed to happen . . . and that's the way Jill liked it!

Then, the new admission arrived. It was Mrs. Hummel from Jill's church. Jill was both happy and sad to see her in the Hill Top Home. Mrs. Hummel had taught Sunday School for years. Jill had been her student almost 30 years ago!

Jill **volunteered** right away to help with the admission, and even though Mrs. Hummel was not being placed on her hall, Jill offered to handle **all** of Mrs. Hummel's care.

Mrs. Hummel was relieved to see Jill, and Jill **promised** to take "the very best" care of her.

As the days went by, Jill's time became more and more stretched. She was spending so much time with Mrs. Hummel that her other residents were beginning to complain.

Jill began asking her co-workers to help with the other residents . . . which put everyone else behind.

Then one day, Jill arrived at work to learn that Mrs. Hummel had passed away during the night. Jill found she was too sad to work and asked her supervisor for the rest of the day off.

**So, was it wrong for Jill to care about Mrs. Hummel?** No. But Jill did not keep a professional distance. The other residents in the Home and Jill's co-workers suffered because of it.

- **To maintain a professional distance, you should always remember that your relationships with your clients are professional, not personal.**

The fact is that doing too much—even if you mean well—may actually do more harm than good. It can also lead to job "burn out." Keep reading to learn more about maintaining a professional distance.



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## WHAT'S NEW?

Grab your favorite highlighter! As you read this inservice, **highlight five things** you learn that you didn't know before. Share this new information with your co-workers!



## DEFINING THE RELATIONSHIP

You have many types of relationships in your life. Some are **personal** and some are **professional**. The key to maintaining professional distance is understanding the *difference* between the purpose, goals and expected outcomes for each type of relationship.

**Here is a comparison of the different types of relationships you have:**

	<b>SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS</b> <i>(personal)</i>	<b>WORK RELATED RELATIONSHIPS</b> <i>(professional)</i>	<b>CLIENT/CAREGIVER RELATIONSHIPS</b> <i>(professional)</i>
<b>PURPOSE</b>	Friendship or intimacy. Meets each person's need for socialization.	Meets each person's need for success and achievement in the workplace.	Meets client's physical and emotional needs.
<b>GOALS</b>	Socialization, companionship, sharing of ideas, emotional connection.	Meeting workplace goals and standards.	Client's needs are identified and a plan is developed and put into action.
<b>WHAT DO YOU TALK ABOUT?</b>	Personal information and giving and receiving of advice is exchanged.	Work related topics, meeting, clients, professional achievements.	Solutions to client's problems are discussed and the plan to meet the client's needs is negotiated.
<b>OUTCOME</b>	The need for socialization is met. There is emotional satisfaction and security.	Mutual respect, trust and a peaceful and productive work environment.	Client's physical and emotional needs are met. Client develops new coping skills. A new level of independence may be achieved by client.

Maintaining a professional distance with your co-workers and supervisor is probably easy . . . especially if you have a satisfying social life outside of work.

Maintaining a professional distance with your clients may be a little harder. It's easy to blur the line between these types of relationships when you spend a great deal of time with your clients and their families. You may learn personal or intimate information and you may be tempted to share personal information about yourself.

**But remember, the goal in professional relationships is to maintain a professional distance!**



## KEY TERMS

- **EMPATHY:** The act of understanding, being aware of, and being sensitive to the feelings, thoughts, and experiences of another.
- **GENUINENESS:** Being open, honest and sincere in your interactions with others.
- **SOCIAL RELATIONSHIP:** A relationship between two or more people that meets each person's need for companionship and emotional connection.
- **THERAPEUTIC RELATIONSHIP:** The relationship between a healthcare professional and a client. It is the means by which the professional hopes to engage with, and affect change in a client.



## WHAT EXCITES YOU?

### HAVING FUN WITH YOUR CLIENTS

Keeping a professional distance DOES NOT mean you can't have fun!

Think of some ways you can have fun with your clients without crossing the line. For example,

- Share funny jokes or stories with your clients. Laughter is good medicine!
- Join in when your client is singing, dancing or exercising.
- Put on some uplifting music and dance around while you work.

***What else can you do to have fun while maintaining your professional distance?***

***Share your ideas with your co-workers and supervisor and find out how they have fun!***

## EMPATHY VS. SYMPATHY

***Maintaining a professional distance does not require you to harden your heart or build walls between your clients and yourself.***

You can care about your clients feelings and understand their suffering or pain. You can even express that caring through actions and words. But it's important to use empathy (not sympathy) in your professional relationships

Having empathy means you understand your client's feelings accurately. You show that understanding to the client and act on it in a helpful way.

Look at it like this:

- **Empathy** is the intellectual and emotional awareness of another person's thoughts and feelings. Empathy focuses on understanding and is useful in client/caregiver relationships.
- **Sympathy** involves sharing another's feelings, especially in sorrow or trouble through imagining what the other person must feel. Sympathy emphasizes sharing and is useful in social and intimate relationships.

## CARING WITH EMPATHY TAKES COURAGE!

As a health care worker, you are in a tough position. It's difficult to provide quality client care without getting emotionally involved in some way. Yet, the more you care about your clients, the more you risk being hurt if a client takes a turn for the worse.

Caring about clients who are dying takes real courage. It may be hard for you to see people who are in physical and/or emotional pain. Perhaps you have memories of a family member who died, so you try not to care when you lose a client.

On the other hand, it takes courage to care about clients as they get better. Think about it. Doesn't it feel good to be needed? When clients start needing you less, you might find yourself pulling away from them.

It also takes courage to care about a client who has an unpleasant personality or who is grumpy. For example, isn't it easier to care about a sweet old man who thanks you for everything you do than it is to care about a grumpy old woman who never seems to be satisfied?

If you're like most nursing assistants, you got into health care to help people and to make a difference in their lives. Your work takes strong muscles, a big heart and *lots* of courage!



# BASIC HUMAN NEEDS

All your clients have at least one thing in common. They have needs that they cannot meet without help. And, even though your clients are all individuals, they have the same basic needs.

A well-known psychologist, Abraham Maslow, developed a useful way to look at basic human needs. He organized them into five levels:



- **LEVEL 1—PHYSICAL NEEDS:** Everyone has physical needs such as food, water, oxygen, sleep, elimination, hygiene and sex. These are the most basic human needs.
- **LEVEL 2—SAFETY & SECURITY NEEDS:** People need to feel safe in their homes and their communities. They need to feel protected from danger and free from fear. Many people also need to feel the security that comes from religious beliefs.
- **LEVEL 3—NEED FOR BELONGING & LOVE:** Human beings need to communicate with each other and feel accepted and loved by family, friends and members of the community.
- **LEVEL 4—SELF ESTEEM NEEDS:** People need to feel good about themselves and need to gain respect, approval and recognition from others.
- **LEVEL 5—NEED FOR SELF-ACTUALIZATION:** Another basic human need is for the satisfaction that comes when people follow their dreams and achieve important goals.

**Generally, the basic needs at level one and two must be satisfied before people can move on to the higher levels.** For example, a person who hasn't slept in several days is more interested in getting some rest than in boosting his self-esteem or feeling loved.

In your daily work, you spend a lot of time helping people meet their most basic needs. But, remember . . . it is possible to help your clients *too* much. Your challenge (and it's a big one) is to balance the care you provide by:

- Giving enough help with basic physical needs so that your clients have the energy to focus on some of their higher needs.
- Allowing your clients to take care of themselves as much as possible—so that they remain independent and feel good about themselves.

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** People with unmet needs tend to be frustrated, angry, helpless and depressed. If your clients seem upset, try figuring out which of their needs are not being met. But remember . . . your relationship with your clients is about their needs, not yours! Instead of assuming that you know what your clients need, try asking them, "What can I do for you today?"



## THE NEXT STEP!

To be the most effective caregiver you can be—you have to be able to meet your own basic human needs!

List two things in each category that YOU do to fulfill your own needs:

### Physical Needs:

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### Safety Needs:

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### Need for Love:

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### Self Esteem Needs:

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### Self Actualization Needs:

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## TALK ABOUT IT!

### WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

Think about how you would handle the following scenarios. Then, ask your co-workers what they would do.

- What would you do if your new assignment included a client who had once fired your mother from her job?
- What would you do if a client gave you a birthday card containing a twenty dollar bill?
- What would you do if you noticed a coworker kissing one of her clients on the lips?
- What would you do if a client told you he was putting you in his will?
- What would you do if your client asked to borrow some money?

## CROSSING THE LINE

***Maintaining a professional distance with clients can be difficult sometimes. You might cross the line and not even be aware you are doing so.***

There are some warning signs that you might not be keeping your professional distance from a client. For example, you may have crossed the line if you:

- Think about a client frequently when you are away from work.
- Plan your work day around the needs of one special client.
- Spend your free time with a client.
- Share personal information or concerns about work with a client.
- Feel responsible if the client doesn't seem to be getting better.
- Give extra care to one client while ignoring others.
- Keep secrets for a client . . . and share secrets of your own.
- Trade assignments with coworkers so that you can work with a certain client.
- Accept gifts or money from a client.
- Give a client your address and home telephone number.
- Complain about your own aches and pains to a client.
- Dress a certain way when you know you will be seeing that client.
- Gossip about your coworkers with a client.
- Visit clients in their homes, as a friend, not as a professional.

***Why is it “unprofessional” to make friends with your clients? What harm could there be in that?***

Here are some of the problems that can develop when you cross the line:

- When clients view you as a friend, their feelings can be hurt if you take another assignment or quit your job.
- If you perform little “extras” for your clients that aren't part of the care plan, clients will expect the same special treatment from your coworkers.
- Your clients may come to depend on you too much, rather than learning to cope on their own.
- You may find it hard to observe changes in a client—because you have gotten too close to the situation.

***If you are in doubt about whether you have crossed the line, ask yourself:***

- Am I acting in my client's best interest?
- Would I feel comfortable telling a coworker about what I am doing?
- Would the client's family approve of what I am doing?
- Am I following the client's care plan?

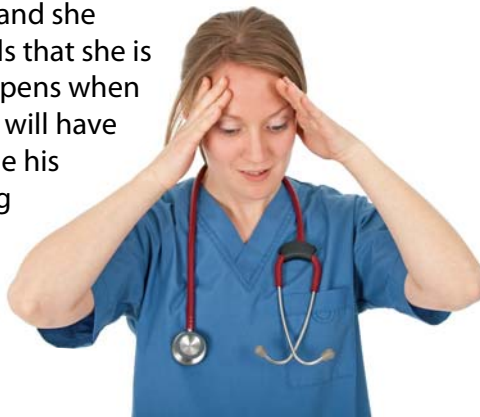
## DOING TOO MUCH FOR YOUR CLIENTS

Many people choose the health care field because they like to “do for others.” This is a good thing, but it’s important not to go overboard! Providing *too much* care is a common mistake made by health care workers. When you do something for your clients that they could have done for themselves:

- Your time and effort is wasted.
- Your clients miss an opportunity to be independent.
- Your clients may begin to lose important self-care skills.

### ***Here are some examples of doing too much, and the harm it can do:***

- Stan works as a nursing assistant in a hospital. One of his patients, Mrs. Randolph, reminds him of his grandmother. Stan comes in on his day off to sit with Mrs. Randolph. He pays close attention to her every need to save her the trouble of getting out of bed. Unfortunately, Stan’s loving care is keeping Mrs. Randolph from doing things for herself. She won’t gain her strength back if Stan keeps doing everything for her.
- Jessie feels so sorry for one of her residents, Mr. Richmond. He never has any visitors and always seems so lonely. At mealtime, instead of just leaving Mr. Richmond’s tray in front of him, Jessie sits down and feeds him. She figures it’s a good way to spend extra time with him (even though Mr. Richmond is capable of feeding himself). While Jessie has good intentions, she is *not* doing Mr. Richmond any favors. He may lose the ability and/or the desire to feed himself.
- Christina is a home health aide. She cares for an elderly client, Mr. Dennis, who has little food, few clothes, a leaky roof, and hardly any money. Christina feels sorry for Mr. Dennis, so she brings him food from home, she gives him some clothes, she gets her brother to come over to fix his roof—and she lends him some money. Christina feels that she is doing her client a favor, but what happens when he is discharged from home care? He will have learned nothing about how to manage his problems. Instead of fixing everything herself, Christina should help Mr. Dennis get in touch with outside resources, like social services. Then, he can continue to have help with his problems when Christina is gone.



## GET OUT!

### THINK OUTSIDE OF THE BOX!

*Working with clients in the home often requires coming up with creative solutions to uncommon problems.*

- **THE PROBLEM:** You are caring for a 96 year old woman who lives alone. She has three grown children who live far away and rarely ever visit or call.
- One day she tells you she is taking her ungrateful children out of her will and putting you in it.
- **WHAT YOU KNOW:** You agree that her children are ungrateful and you wish they would be more involved in their mother’s life. But, you also know it would be inappropriate to allow your client to add you to her will.
- **GET CREATIVE:** What will you do? Think of three creative solutions to this problem.
- **TALK ABOUT IT:** Share your ideas with your co-workers and supervisor and find out how they would solve this problem.

Don’t let yourself get stuck in the role of “rescuer.” By always rescuing your clients, you teach them to be helpless. After a while, they lose the skills and desire to do for themselves or they fail to learn new skills for coping with their current situation.

**KEY POINT:** *You can never care too much, but you can give too much care!*



## THINK ABOUT IT!

### PROFESSIONAL DISTANCE AND SOCIAL NETWORKING

Websites like Facebook, YouTube and personal blogs raise a whole new set of questions about professional distance.

#### For example:

- Is it ok to be Facebook friends with clients?
- Is it ok to post pictures of clients on Facebook?

#### Is it ok to post:

- Statements about your employer or co-workers?
- Opinions about co-workers?
- Statements about how tired you are @ 2am and still have 5hrs to go?

#### What do your postings say about your

- Professional reputation?
- Employer's reputation?

**Ask your supervisor for your workplace policy on social networking.**

## HELP CLIENTS DO MORE WITHOUT YOU!

Think about your clients. Many of them have people telling them when to sleep, when to wake up and when to eat. Some may not be able to go to the bathroom without help. They have lost control over some of the most basic parts of their lives. Here are some ways to maintain your professional distance . . . and give some power back to your clients:

- **Expect more.** People often live up to the expectations you have for them. For example, if Sarah expects Mrs. Thompson to dress herself every morning, then she probably will. (However, if Mrs. Thompson gets used to Sarah dressing her every morning, she'll probably stop doing it herself.)
- **Simplify things.** Divide complex tasks into small steps. If your clients aren't able to perform the whole task, they might be able to do some of the steps. For example, it's time for Mr. Smith to brush his teeth. Joe knows that Mr. Smith has problems putting toothpaste on his toothbrush, so Joe does that for him. But, Mr. Smith is able to brush his teeth by himself.
- **Encourage your clients to take care of something.** Studies show that people who have responsibility for a plant or a pet live longer and remain more independent.
- **Provide special equipment.** Some clients may be able to do everyday tasks if they have special equipment. For example, Mr. Maxwell can't hold a regular spoon due to severe arthritis. All it takes to make it easy for Mr. Maxwell is some special silverware. This keeps the client independent and boosts his self-esteem.
- **Be patient.** Letting clients do things for themselves can be difficult when you know that you could do the job faster or better. For example, when Sue stands back and allows Mrs. Watson to brush her own hair, it takes twice as long and Mrs. Watson never gets her part straight. However, Mrs. Watson is always proud of doing her own hair.
- **Praise.** People like to feel good about themselves and a bit of praise goes a long way. For example, Mr. Bailey tries to button his own shirt. He manages to get most of the buttons, but Jim has to help him with the last two. Mr. Bailey might feel like a failure for not finishing the job...but Jim helps him feel good by praising him for what he did accomplish.
- **Allow your clients to make decisions.** Making decisions—even little ones—gives people a feeling of control. For example, every day, Mary gives Mrs. Nelson choices. *"Would you like to wear your blue blouse or your pink one?"* and *"Would you like to take a walk before or after lunch?"* NOTE: If you give your clients' choices, be sure you are ready to follow through with their decisions. If you don't, you may lose your clients' trust.





## TALKING ABOUT YOURSELF

As you go through your daily work, it's natural to tell clients a little bit about yourself—especially if they ask you questions about your life. However, you must never forget that your client's needs come first. If you spend too much time talking about yourself, the focus may shift to *your* needs.

**Here's an example:** Mr. Connors asks John if he is married. John says that he *used* to be married, but has recently gone through a nasty divorce. He tells Mr. Connors the whole story about the break up of his marriage. John has definitely lost his professional distance!

Think about it. Mr. Connors probably brought up the topic of marriage because he was feeling the need to talk about his own.

So, what could John have done differently? He could simply have answered, "No, I'm not currently married." Then, he could have asked Mr. Connors about his life: "How long were you married?", or "How did you meet your wife?" or "What was your wife like?" Remember . . . the focus of a professional relationship is always the client.

Have you ever had a client say that they were *worried* about you? If so, you may have lost your professional distance with that client.

**Look at this example:** Jill's client, Mrs. Peterson, has cancer. To prove that she understands, Jill tells Mrs. Peterson that her mother also has the same cancer. Every day, Jill gives Mrs. Peterson an update about her mother. Unfortunately, Jill's mother is not doing well. Mrs. Peterson grows more and more depressed. She tells the nurse that she knows she's going to die since Jill's mother is dying. Jill meant well, but she ended up *adding* to her client's worries.

Please remember . . . if you can relate to a client's situation because of a personal experience you've had, it's probably best to keep it to yourself.



### REMEMBER...

- Use your best professional judgment about how *much* or how *little* to tell your clients about yourself.
- Don't look to your clients for emotional support. Seek that from other people in your life—outside of work.
- Keep your clients' needs in mind at all times and you probably can't go wrong!



## TIME TO LAUGH!

### CLIENTS CAN CROSS BOUNDARIES TOO!

*(This is a true story from a real ER Nurse.)*

We have all taken care of patients whose sense of humor has made our day. Here's a story from my days in the ER. We were admitting a very confused elderly man for evaluation of chest pain.

As I was transferring him from the stretcher to the bed, his gown rode up revealing his "goodies".

This man, who had previously been completely incoherent said, "Oh...don't look at me down there." I answered, "Don't worry. You don't have anything that I haven't seen before."

He replied, "You haven't seen *THIS* before! I've got a beauty!"

It was the only lucid thing he said all night. I still laugh about it to this day.

~ Written by RNtoJD on [allnurse.com](http://allnurse.com)



## THINK ABOUT IT!

### HOW DO YOU DECLINE A GIFT?

There are times when a gift should be declined. Overly generous gifts from co-workers and clients are the most common reason for refusing gifts.

#### **Other reasons for declining a gift include:**

- The gift is given as a romantic gesture where there is not mutual interest.
- The gift is cash or an expensive item.
- The gift is a pet.

#### **How to Decline a Gift**

- Thank the person for their thoughtfulness.
- Express your regret for declining the gift and explain why you must do so.
- Return the gift to the giver.
- If the person refuses to take the gift back, notify your supervisor.

## TOUCHING CLIENTS

As a health care worker, you already cross some lines with your clients that don't usually get crossed between strangers. For example, you often bathe your clients, help them dress and perhaps even wipe their bottoms after a bowel movement.

You can demonstrate your professional distance by respecting each client's privacy. Make sure that whenever you touch a client, you do so in a gentle, but professional, manner.

Remember that your clients may come from many different cultures. Some people may misunderstand the meaning of a friendly hug or a pat on the back. To them, this type of physical contact may have a sexual meaning.

If a client seems to misinterpret your touch, discuss the issue with your supervisor right away.

## HANDLING GIFTS FROM CLIENTS

It's common for clients to feel so grateful for your help that they want to give you a gift. Your workplace may allow gifts in certain situations where the client would be offended by your refusal. For example, Mrs. Jones gives you a scarf that she knitted. Or, Mr. Taylor gives you some fresh tomatoes grown in his wife's garden. Chances are, you would hurt their feelings if you turn down their gifts. **However, you must always follow your workplace policy in this situation!** When in doubt, ask your supervisor.

In addition, keep in mind that:

- Money should never change hands between health care workers and clients.
- Even if a client puts money in your hands, wanting you to take it, you must refuse. Taking a client's money could be seen as financial abuse and, depending on the circumstances, could be considered a crime.
- Clients should never be made to feel that they will receive better care if they give gifts to their health care workers!
- Remember that "favors" can be seen as a type of gift. For example, it is probably against workplace policy for you to borrow personal items from your clients.
- If you have problems with a patient offering you money or gifts, discuss the situation with your supervisor.



Tim feels very close to his client, Mr. Baldwin. He often calls Mr. Baldwin over the weekend to see how he is doing. Mr. Baldwin treats Tim like a member of his family. One day, Tim mentions that he's having trouble paying bills. Mr. Baldwin offers Tim a loan until payday. Tim takes the money, promising to pay it back. Tim has crossed way over the line, hasn't he?

# PROFESSIONAL DISTANCE WITH YOUR CO-WORKERS AND SUPERVISOR

Maintaining a professional distance with your co-workers and supervisor is just as important as maintaining a professional distance with your clients.

Unfortunately, nursing is a female dominated career . . . and woman tend to want to be liked and make fiends.

Making matters worse, when woman bond, they tend to share personal information easily and run the risk of giving out "too much information" or, T.M.I. for short!



**Here's an example:** When Stephanie became pregnant with her second child, she learned that her husband was cheating on her, and she was devastated. Stephanie had worked in the same nursing home for many years, and even though she was not close friends with anyone at work, she felt the need to talk and share what was going on at home. Her intention was to get support during this tough time. But, as it turned out, Stephanie's husband was cheating with the cousin of one of her co-workers—and now everyone was discussing the situation behind her back. When Stephanie found out this information, she was ashamed and embarrassed. She ended up quitting a job she really loved.

## Here are some ways to maintain professional distance at work:

- Avoid spending time with co-workers outside of work. For example, it's okay to have a friendly lunch when you and a co-worker have a break together, but it's not a good idea to "go out for drinks" after work.
- Avoid discussing "hot topics" with your co-workers. For example, never discuss your opinions on politics, religion, sex, or money. People tend to be very divided in their opinions on these topics and discussions can quickly turn into arguments.
- Never discuss your personal relationships, or problems you are having at home.
- It's never appropriate to have a romantic relationship with a co-worker or a supervisor. In fact, it may even get you fired!
- Keep the details of your health (or illness) to yourself! Of course, if you need to take time off for a surgery, your supervisor needs to know. But, no one wants to hear the details of your hemorrhoid removal!
- Your co-workers do not need to know that you stayed out all night drinking and dancing in the club. Revealing this type of information will only lead your co-workers to begin to disrespect you.

**KEY POINT:** It's okay to be friendly—and you should be friendly—but, you don't have to be "best friends" with your co-workers. Get your needs for friendship met outside of work.

## FIVE KEY POINTS!

### REVIEW WHAT YOU LEARNED!

1. To maintain a professional distance, you should always remember that your relationships with your clients are professional, not personal.
2. The key to maintaining professional distance is understanding the *difference* between social and professional relationships.
3. Maintaining a professional distance does not require you to harden your heart or build walls between your clients and yourself.
4. Don't look to your clients or co-workers for emotional support. Seek that from other people in your life—outside of work.
5. You are responsible for creating and maintaining the professional relationship with each of your clients and co-workers.



# FINAL THOUGHTS ON PROFESSIONAL DISTANCE

- If you feel yourself growing too attached to a particular client, talk to your supervisor about it. **Remember, if you're feeling funny about a situation, there's probably a good reason for it.**
- Practice your communication skills every day. It takes good communication to develop and maintain professional relationships.
- Remember that romantic or sexual relationships are *never* appropriate with clients, co-workers or your supervisor.
- Keep in mind that it's human nature to feel closer to some clients than others. However, you have a responsibility to give equal time, concern and attention to every client.
- Remember that you are responsible for creating and maintaining the professional relationship with each of your clients and co-workers.

## WHAT I KNOW NOW!

Now that you've read this inservice on professional distance, jot down a couple of things you learned that you didn't know before.

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## SOME FINAL DOS AND DON'TS

### DO:

- Address your client by the name the client prefers.
- Listen to the concerns of the family and act on those concerns when appropriate.
- Encourage your client to participate in his or her own care within the limits of the care plan.
- Help your client understand when requests are beyond the limits of a professional relationship.
- Avoid accepting gifts unless the refusal could harm the relationship. For example, if your client bakes you cookies to express her appreciation for your hard work. Refusing the cookies could insult the client and cause her to withdraw.

### DO NOT:

- Call your client pet names like Sweetie, Sugar or Honey.
- Perform personal services such as giving rides to family members or picking up dry cleaning unless it is outlined in your contract.
- Accept gifts of cash or other expensive items.
- Disclose personal information about your life. This includes your personal or intimate relationships, family troubles, legal problems, and financial problems.
- Discuss your feelings about your employer, co-workers or other clients in the presence of the client or their family members.

