



# Professional Boundary Considerations for Nurse-Client Relationships

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## Introduction

Registered Nurses (RN) have a professional accountability to provide safe, competent and ethical care for the well-being of the public (SRNA, 2021). This resource supports the professional practice of registrants of the College of Registered Nurses of Saskatchewan (CRNS) by providing additional considerations for RNs on professional boundaries for therapeutic nurse-client relationships. RNs are responsible for establishing and maintaining professional boundaries with clients in all practice settings (SRNA, 2019).

This resource:

- defines key components and concepts regarding therapeutic nurse-client relationships;
- outlines principles to uphold professional boundaries; and,
- provides strategies for maintaining professional boundaries and therapeutic relationships in the practice setting.

## Regulatory Authority

*The Registered Nurses Act, 1988* (the Act) provides the legislative authority for Registered Nurse practice in Saskatchewan. This resource, related to professional boundaries for nurse-client relationships, draws on the obligations of practicing registrants to adhere and to uphold the current *Registered Nurse Practice Standards, Registered Nurse Entry-Level Competencies* and Canadian Nurses Association (CNA) *Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses*. RNs have the responsibility and obligation to be aware of, to understand and to adhere to registered nursing practice expectations when practicing nursing in any setting in Saskatchewan.

## Nurse-Client Relationships

### Professional Boundaries

Professional boundaries are the spaces between the RN's power and the client's vulnerability and distinguish the parameters of the therapeutic nurse-client relationship. RNs demonstrate accountability by respecting the power imbalance, and by establishing and maintaining professional boundaries that are client-centered and meet the therapeutic needs of the client. RNs consider and discern what behaviors are professional and therapeutic from behaviors that compromise the therapeutic relationship, and are unprofessional and personal in nature (CNA, 2017; National Council of State Boards of Nursing [NCSBN], 2018). In all nurse-client relationships, RNs are responsible for setting professional boundaries.

### Therapeutic Relationships

Therapeutic nurse-client relationships are at the core of nursing practice. RNs have the professional knowledge, skills and abilities to establish and maintain therapeutic nurse-client relationships that contribute to the client's overall health and well-being (College and Association of Registered Nurses of Alberta [CARNA], 2020; NCSBN, 2018). The College of Nurses of Ontario (CNO) (2020), outlines the following five components present in a therapeutic nurse-client relationship:

- Trust: the nurse recognizes the client's vulnerability and does not exploit the client's trust (CNA, 2017).

- **Respect:** the nurse incorporates knowledge that reflects a deep understanding and respect for different ways of knowing which exhibits cultural competence/cultural humility and supports cultural safety (SRNA, 2019).
- **Empathy:** the nurse validates the client's health care experiences through empathy and understanding while maintaining appropriate emotional distance from the client to remain objective and professional in response to the client's needs (CNO, 2020).
- **Professional intimacy:** the nurse maintains therapeutic boundaries as it relates to the physical, psychological, emotional and/or spiritual elements that during nursing care can create professional closeness between nurse and client (CNO, 2020; College of Registered Nurses of Manitoba [CRNM], 2019).
- **Power:** the nurse remains cognizant of the power imbalances of the nurse-client relationship and abstains from misusing this power to prevent abuse (CNO, 2020).

Therapeutic nurse-client relationships are maintained as long as the client needs nursing care (CNO, 2020).

## Defining the Boundaries of Therapeutic Relationships

### Boundary Crossings

Boundary crossings are intentional and brief excursions across the established line of the nurse-client relationship for the purpose of meeting the therapeutic need of the client. Once the client's therapeutic need is met, the nurse-client relationship returns to the established boundary limits. Boundary crossings may be acceptable, but repeated boundary crossings should be avoided (CARNA, 2020).

### Boundary Violations

Boundary violations take place when the nurse prioritizes their own needs above the needs of the client. Boundary violations move the nurse-client relationship from therapeutic and professional to personal—jeopardizing the therapeutic nurse-client relationship and exposing the client to distress (CARNA, 2020).

### Continuum of Professional Behavior

Every nurse-client relationship exists on a continuum of professional behavior (see Figure 1). At the centre is the therapeutic nurse-client relationship and at one end under-involvement (e.g., client abandonment and neglect) and at the other over-involvement (e.g., social contact, favoritism, boundary crossings, boundary violations and sexual abuse). The continuum of professional behavior can assist in evaluating whether the nurse's behavior is within the confines of the therapeutic relationship. Nurses must note that there are no distinct lines between what constitutes a therapeutic relationship from an under-involved or over-involved relationship, as the transition is gradual (NCSBN, 2018).

# A Continuum of Professional Behaviour



**Figure 1.** A Continuum of Professional Behavior (NCSBN, 2018).

## Professional Boundary Principles

### Principles of Practice

Professional boundary principles for safe, competent and ethical nursing practice include, but are not limited to:

- practicing in accordance with current CRNS RN practice documents, including:
  - the Act; bylaws; *Registered Nurse Practice Standards*; *Registered Nurse Entry-Level Competencies*; *CNA Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses*; and other CRNS documents as appropriate.
- demonstrating leadership in the establishment, re-establishment and maintenance of therapeutic and culturally-safe relationships that are always for the benefit of the client (CNA, 2017; SRNA, 2019a);
- forming therapeutic relationships to meet the client's health care needs;
- aligning all nurse-client interactions with the nurse's professional expectations of practice;
- professionally terminating the nurse-client relationship once the client's therapeutic needs are met;
- supporting colleagues who reasonably report practice, legal or ethical violations (e.g., boundary violations) by themselves or others to employers and/or the appropriate regulatory body (SRNA, 2019a);
- using evidence-informed communication skills to articulate boundaries and limitations of the nurse-client relationship to build trust (SRNA, 2019);
- abstaining from personal or financial gain in all nurse-client relationships (CNA, 2017);
- safeguarding confidential client information and disclosing this information only when professionally appropriate to do so (e.g., to health care professionals in the circle of care);
- recognizing that nurse-client relationships exist on a continuum of professional behavior; the nurse works within an acceptable range of the therapeutic relationship and assesses the potential implications of boundary crossings; and,
- recognizing and addressing areas for potential conflict by analyzing one's beliefs, values and experiences in relationships with clients (SRNA, 2019a).
  - The RN communicates respectfully and effectively to resolve conflict in favour of the interest of the client receiving care to promote optimal client health outcomes (SRNA, 2019; SRNA, 2019a).

# Considerations for Maintaining Professional Boundaries and Therapeutic Nurse-Client Relationships

Nurses may find the following strategies helpful to manage professional boundaries and direct therapeutic nurse-client relationships:

- review, understand and practice in a manner consistent with professional expectations and standards;
- understand the continuum of a therapeutic relationship and what contributes to maintaining the nurse-client relationship within the zone of helpfulness (i.e., meeting the client's therapeutic needs) (CRNM, 2019);
- build trusting nurse-client relationships by engaging in active listening to understand, empathize and respond to the client's health care experience and health goals (SRNA, 2019);
- utilize relevant technologies to create and maintain professional relationships, share information and foster therapeutic environments (SRNA, 2019);
- effectively communicate professional boundaries expectations and limitations to all clients (including those clients you may have a prior personal relationship with);
- implement reflective practices that look to identify and address behaviors and actions that do not adhere to the establishment and maintenance of a therapeutic relationship, seeking guidance when necessary;
- avoid over-involvement with clients; this includes being aware of professional boundaries when using social media (NCSBN, 2018); and,
- utilize the *Decision-Making Framework for Appropriate Professional Behavior* (see Appendix A) to assist you in determining whether to proceed or abstain with a behavior.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this resource is to support the application of RN standards and competencies for the establishment and maintenance of professional boundaries for therapeutic nurse-client relationships by providing nurses with key components, concepts, principles and strategies to implement in their practice. RNs employ their professional judgment to recognize that each nurse-client relationship is unique and sits on a continuum of professional behavior. RNs are accountable for meeting the therapeutic needs of the client and providing safe, competent and ethical care.

## CRNS Resources

[RN Practice Standards](#)

[RN Entry-Level Competencies](#)

[CNA Code of Ethics](#)

[CRNS Social Media Resource](#)

## External Resources

[CNPS](#)

[NCSBN: Professional Boundaries](#)

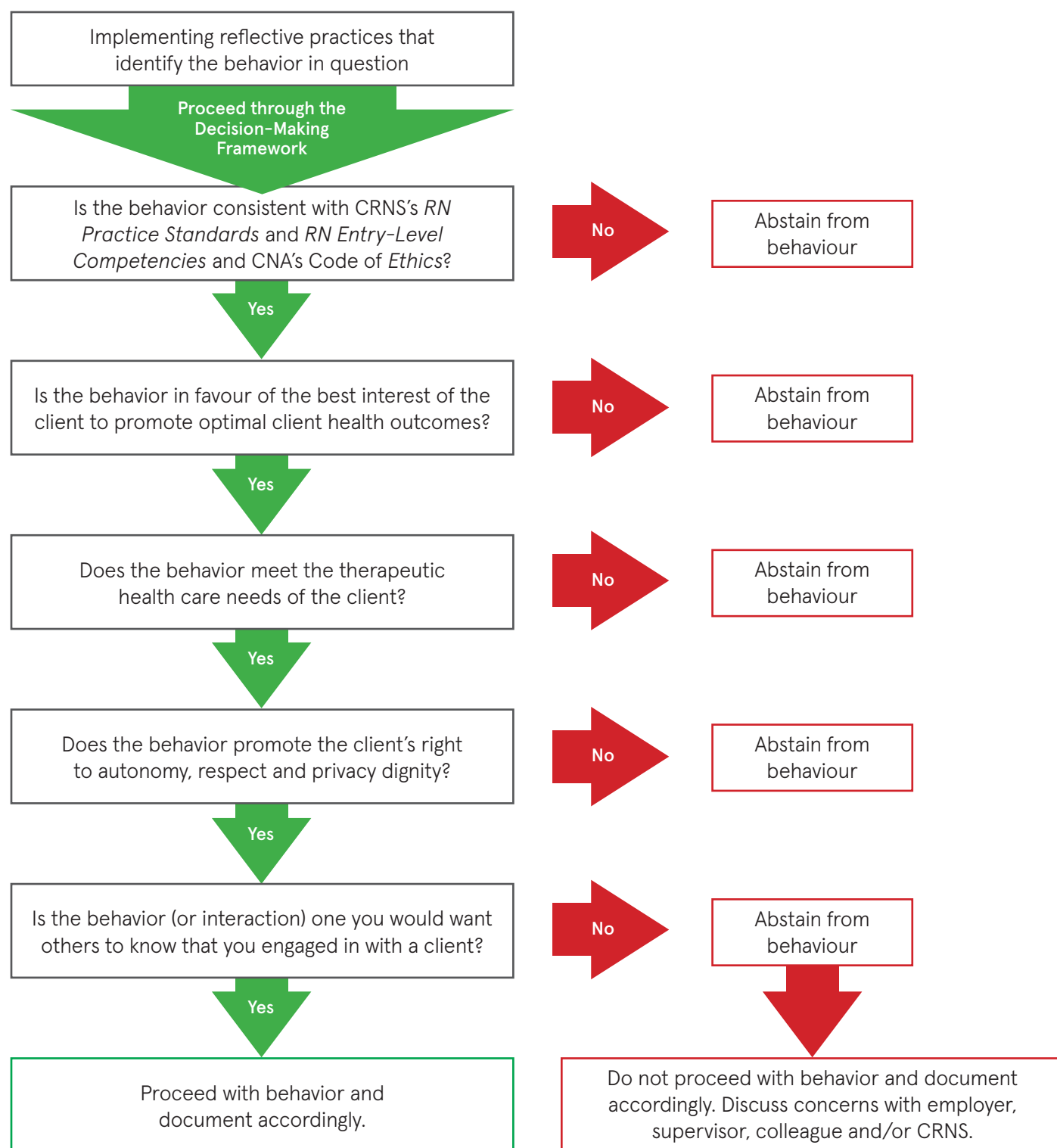
[NCSBN: A Nurse's Guide to Professional Boundaries](#)

[CNO: Professional Versus Social Relationships](#)

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## Appendix A: Decision-Making Framework for Appropriate Professional Behavior



**Figure 2.** Adapted from *Professional Boundaries for Therapeutic Relationships* (CRNM, 2019).

