



**College of  
Occupational Therapists  
of British Columbia**

**COTBC Practice Standards for  
Professional Boundaries, 2017**

**Risk Assessment and Management**

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## Practice Standards for Professional Boundaries

### Risk Assessment and Management



Risk management is “nothing more than a careful examination of what, in your work, could cause harm to people, so that you can weigh up whether you have taken enough precautions or should do more to prevent harm” (Health and Safety Executive, 1999, p. 1).

The occupational therapist can benefit from using a risk management approach to assist him or her in recognizing, preventing, and managing boundary violations.

# Practice Standards for Professional Boundaries

## Risk Assessment and Management, continued



### Step One: Identify Potential Risk Factors

Boundary violations are not always easy to identify. Reflecting on risk factors can be helpful. Risk factors are circumstances or facts that influence the probability of the risk occurring and the impact.

#### Client's Presentation and Vulnerability

- Highly complex and/or unstable client condition (e.g., physical, mental, emotional, or social).
- Client's varying capability to direct care and give informed consent.
- Discussions of a sensitive, highly personal, or intimate nature (e.g., self-care or sexual activity).
- Cultural and lifestyle values and beliefs regarding personal privacy and unconditional compliance to authority.
- Dual relationships.

#### Therapeutic Relationship

- Power imbalance and occupational therapist's ability to influence course of treatment or services.
- Client-centred approach and disclosure of occupational therapist's personal information.
- Mentoring or coaching approaches that may not be interpreted as therapy.

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# Practice Standards for Professional Boundaries

## Risk Assessment and Management, continued



### Step One: Identify Potential Risk Factors, continued

#### Practice Setting and Environmental Conditions

- Lack of accessibility of other occupational therapists to provide alternative care (e.g., rural practice environment).
- Lack of availability of other occupational therapists to discuss issues or receive input and feedback.
- Existing social norms that may tolerate professional boundary crossings.
- Occupational therapy treatment delivered outside traditional health centre environments.
- Lack of privacy in treatment or service area.
- Lack of workplace policies and procedures.

#### Occupational Therapist's Skills and Knowledge

- Difficulty identifying whether client may have impaired capacity.
- Lack of knowledge of current, relevant legislation.
- Lack of clinical knowledge.
- Difficulty communicating with client, client representative, or other stakeholders.
- Lack of familiarity with workplace policies and procedures.
- Lack of knowledge of various cultural or social norms related to therapeutic relationships and professional relationships.
- Challenges establishing and maintaining professional boundaries.
- Difficulty recognizing signs and symptoms of potential professional boundary issues or accepting or incorporating feedback.
- Limited experience with documentation procedures.

# Practice Standards for Professional Boundaries



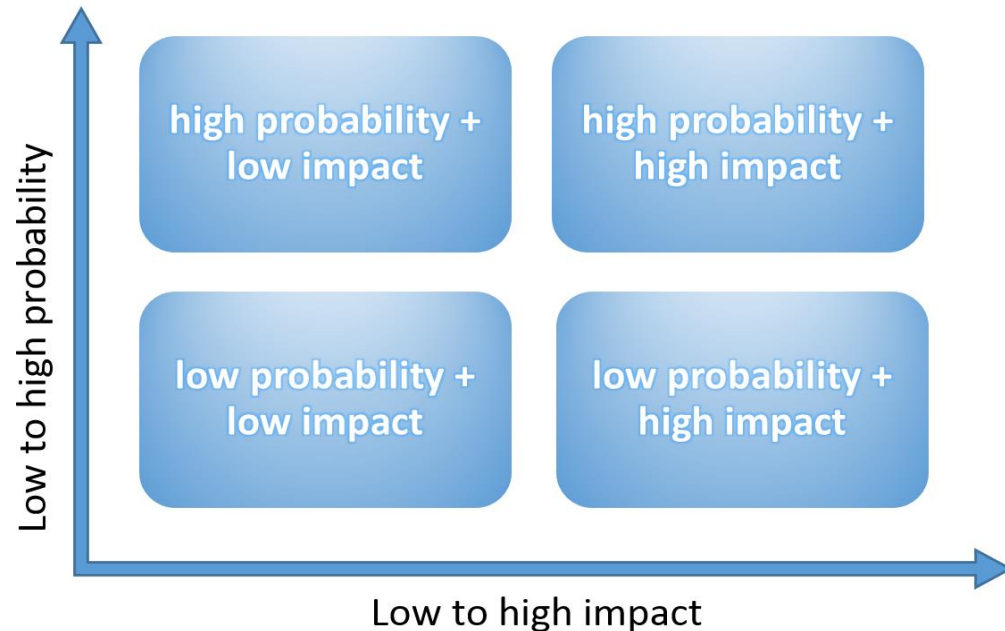
## Risk Assessment and Management, continued

### Step Two: Consider the Probability and Severity of Impact

Once the factors are identified, the occupational therapist assesses

1. the probability of each risk (i.e., how likely is it); and
2. the negative impact (i.e., what degree of harm could the risk cause the client).

The risks can be classified from low probability and low impact to high probability and high impact.



# Practice Standards for Professional Boundaries

## Risk Assessment and Management, continued



### Step Three: Take Action

Boundary violations are often the result of an accumulation of boundary crossings over time. The goal in this third step is to choose actions or precautions that help minimize the risks as much as possible.

**In the case of fostering therapeutic relationships, and recognizing, preventing, and managing professional boundary issues, actions could include but are not limited to the following:**

- Reviewing informed consent and discussing available options.
- Inviting the client to bring a family member or partner to occupational therapy sessions.
- Learning about various cultural and lifestyle values and strategizing acceptable professional actions.
- Discussing appropriate professional boundaries with the client.
- Avoiding dual relationships and conflict of interest situations.
- Establishing a professional network for seeking credible advice, feedback, and support.
- Referring a client or potential client to an alternative occupational therapist and/or service when there is concern about the ability to maintain professional boundaries.
- Creating private professional spaces for delivering occupational therapy services.
- Becoming familiar with relevant legislation and statutes (e.g., *Health Professions Act*).
- Reviewing existing workplace policies and procedures and participating in their development where they are absent or insufficient.

## Practice Standards for Professional Boundaries

### Risk Assessment and Management, continued



#### Step Four: Record Your Actions

The risk management process is dynamic and ongoing throughout the care continuum.

It is important to record the risk management actions taken, to demonstrate that precautions were taken to protect the client from harm and minimize risk.