

CareCertify LLC

Substance Use Disorder Training Series

SUD-04

Ethics & Professional Conduct

Participant Guide

Substance Use Disorder Training Series · Audience: Counselors · Technicians · Support Staff · Recovery Peers · CE Hours: 1.0

Support With Boundaries

Substance use treatment runs on trusting relationships with people who are often vulnerable and early in recovery. That makes boundaries and ethics essential — to protect clients from harm and exploitation, and to protect you and your work. Counselors are also held to a professional code under Chapter 148F.

This guide draws the lines: dual relationships, gifts, confidentiality, self-disclosure, and ethical principles. A special note for the many staff who are themselves in recovery: your experience is an asset, and clear boundaries make it a safe one.

Learning Objectives — by the end of this module you will be able to:

- Define professional boundaries and the therapeutic relationship
- Avoid dual relationships and conflicts of interest
- Apply rules on gifts, money, and confidentiality
- Use self-disclosure appropriately, including staff in recovery
- Recognize and address boundary crossings

Section 1: Professional Boundaries and the Therapeutic Relationship

Professional boundaries are the limits that keep the helping relationship focused on the client's treatment and safe for both people. The relationship is genuinely supportive but bounded — it is not a friendship, romance, or business relationship. Clients in early recovery are especially vulnerable, which makes boundaries protective for them and for you.

Section 2: Dual Relationships and Conflicts of Interest

A dual relationship is a second kind of relationship with a client — friend, business partner, romantic partner, or sponsor. These create conflicts of interest and risk exploitation, so avoid them. Romantic or sexual relationships with clients are never acceptable and are a serious ethical and licensing violation. Don't do private side work for clients, and be careful about overlapping recovery communities.

Section 3: Gifts, Money, and Favors

Don't accept money, valuable gifts, tips, or loans from clients, don't lend to or borrow from them, and don't handle their finances. Misusing a vulnerable adult's money or property is reportable maltreatment under the

Vulnerable Adults Act. Follow your agency's policy on small, token gifts, and keep financial boundaries clear from the start.

Section 4: Confidentiality and Social Media

Substance use treatment information is among the most protected health data, under 42 CFR Part 2, HIPAA, and Minnesota law. Keep everything confidential, don't connect with clients on social media or post about them, and don't acknowledge that someone is in treatment without proper consent. The next lesson covers confidentiality in depth.

Section 5: Self-Disclosure and Staff in Recovery

Many people working in substance use treatment are in recovery themselves, and that lived experience is a genuine asset. But self-disclosure should be sparing, brief, and always for the client's benefit, never to meet your own needs or center your story. Keep your personal recovery program separate from your work — don't attend the same meetings as clients in your caseload or become their sponsor. When unsure, check with your supervisor.

Protect your recovery too

If you're in recovery, clear boundaries protect both your client and your own program. Keep them separate, and use supervision.

Section 6: Ethical Principles and Professional Codes

Behind the rules are ethical principles: respect autonomy, do good and avoid harm, be honest, treat clients fairly, and act with integrity. Licensed alcohol and drug counselors are also bound by the professional code of conduct under Chapter 148F. Put the client's welfare first, and when you face an ethical gray area, consult your supervisor — sound ethics is a team practice.

Section 7: Recognizing and Addressing Boundary Crossings

Boundary problems usually start small: keeping secrets with a client, favoritism, contact outside of work, oversharing, or feeling you're the only one who can help. Notice these early and bring them to supervision. Addressing a slip early keeps the relationship therapeutic and protects everyone.

When unsure, ask

If you're not sure whether something crosses a line, that uncertainty is the signal to consult your supervisor before acting.

Section 8: Boundaries, Burnout, and Longevity

Boundaries sustain you, not just the client. Blurred boundaries lead to burnout, over-involvement, and risk to your role or license. Clear boundaries keep the relationship clean and the client safe, model healthy relationships, and let you keep doing this meaningful work — which matters especially in a field that draws people who care deeply.

Key Terms

Term	What it means
Professional boundary	The limit that keeps the helping relationship therapeutic and safe.
Dual relationship	A second role with a client (friend, business, romantic, sponsor) — avoid.
Self-disclosure	Sharing your own experience — sparing, brief, for the client's benefit.
Conflict of interest	When personal interest could compromise professional judgment.
Chapter 148F	Minnesota's licensing and ethics framework for alcohol and drug counselors.
Financial exploitation	Misusing a vulnerable adult's money or property — reportable.

Check Your Understanding

1. How does the therapeutic relationship differ from a friendship?
2. Why avoid dual relationships?
3. What are the rules on gifts and money?
4. How should staff in recovery handle self-disclosure and their own program?
5. Name two warning signs of a boundary crossing.

What's Next

Looking ahead

Next, SUD-05: Client Rights, Confidentiality & 42 CFR Part 2 covers clients' rights and the strict privacy law protecting addiction records.