

Effective limit setting

Setting limits is not about telling someone what to do; it is acknowledging the consumer may not be able to see the consequences of their behaviour and assisting them to find an appropriate way of behaving. Where the consumer is affected by perceptual disturbance or significantly distressed, they may not be able to fully comprehend the consequences of their actions or behaviours. Effective limit setting provides the connections for consumers to help them understand what is happening and what is being offered to them.

Within the inpatient setting it can assist in:

- > maintaining boundaries
- > addressing risk issues
- > maintaining the safety of the unit
- > assisting consumers to feel emotionally and physically safe
- > facilitating a secure therapeutic relationship
- > reducing anxiety
- > providing opportunities for healthy behaviours to develop ⁽¹⁾.

Limit Setting

Limits are powerful tools for teaching appropriate behaviour. Their purpose is not to initiate a power struggle, but to give the individuals in your care guidance, respect, and a feeling of security.

- > Clear, effective limit setting is a part of the therapeutic relationship that all staff should develop with consumers in their care (2). Limit setting allows the boundaries of the therapeutic relationship to be established and provides the consumer with a clear understanding of what is and isn't acceptable behaviour and what the consequences of their actions will be. It also allows for consistency across staff interactions with the consumer aiding in reducing agitation and confusion.
- > Limit setting can provide choices to the consumer who is upset and is a useful tool in assisting to reduce anxiety. Those choices should be clear 'either, or' choices as too many options can become confusing, increasing distress and agitation and potentially escalating their behaviour to a more aggressive level.
- > The choices offered need to be accessible within the environment you are in, for example, if you don't have access to provision of a portable music option then offering to let the consumer listen to music may not be a viable choice to be offering.

The Crisis Prevention Institute has a 5 step approach to effective limit setting: ⁽³⁾

Explain which behaviour is inappropriate

Saying "Stop that!" is not respectful behaviour from staff and may not be enough information for the consumer. They may not know if you are objecting to how loudly they are talking or objecting to the language that they are using. Be specific about the behaviour that is not appropriate.

Explain why the behaviour is inappropriate

Again, don't assume that the consumer knows why their behaviour is not acceptable. Are they disturbing others? Being disrespectful? Not doing a task they've been requested to do? Explain this to the consumer.

Give reasonable choices with consequences

Instead of issuing an ultimatum ("Do this or else"), tell the consumer what their choices are, and what the consequences of those choices will be. Ultimatums often lead to power struggles because no one wants to be "forced" to do something. By providing choices with consequences, you are admitting that you cannot force their decision, but you can determine what the consequences for their choices will be.

Allow time

Generally, it's best to allow the consumer a few moments to make their decision. Remember that if they are upset, they may not be thinking clearly. It may take longer for them to think through what you've said or they may have processing issues due to illness.

Be prepared to enforce your consequences

Limit setting is meaningless if there is no consistency; apply the consequences you've set. For that reason, it's important to set consequences that are reasonable and enforceable within your authority, and within the policies and procedures of your facility.

How you interact with the consumer at this time is also an important part of limit setting. Be respectful in your behaviour and voice using the limit setting as an aspect of the therapeutic relationship. The tone, volume and cadence of your voice is important to be maintained and your body language should be consistent with the conversation.

Consider the setting you work in and the clientele you work with. Modify the above steps to fit with younger people, older people, people from a non-English speaking background and those with any communication difficulties.

Effective limit setting is an acquired skill and staff need to learn how to implement limit setting in an effective, respectful manner to ensure it forms a part of a therapeutic relationship aimed at helping to reducing a consumers' level of agitation and distress and improving their sense of care being provided in a safe environment.

References

1. Maguire, T, Effective Limit Setting Strategies, unpublished presentation 2011.
2. Varcropolis, E, Halter, M, Foundations of Psychiatric Mental Health Nursing: A Clinical Approach / Edition 6 Chapter 10 Developing Therapeutic Relationships, Elsevier Health Sciences, 2009.
3. Crisis Prevention Institute, The Art of Setting Limits, 2009.

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