As a Home Visitor, Where Do I End & You, as the Parent, Begin?:
Clarifying Boundaries & Addressing Self-Care
Debbie Losada MA, LMFT, IMH-E®II
April 2016

NMAIMH competencies addressed
Law, Regulation, & Agency Policy
  • Ethical Practice
Reflection
  • Self-awareness
Thinking
  • Exercising sound judgment

At our recent Regional Workshop on Boundaries and Ethics, we had the opportunity to explore different scenarios that prompted us to ask ourselves this very question as the title suggests. When we enter the world of home visiting, we are instantly challenged with thinking about how to maintain clear professional boundaries for the benefit of the families we serve as well as for our own longevity in this work.

You may wonder how do I develop and maintain these clear boundaries and why is it important to do so? Let’s imagine for a moment, that when you begin as a home visitor, you are represented as a heart made of puzzle pieces. Each time, the boundaries blur in your interactions with a parent you work with, a piece of the puzzle is removed. In the same sentiment, each time you overextend yourself, for example, agree to squeeze in another home visit for the day or bring a family diapers, because it is easier for you to do so than for them to go to the grocery store, yet another piece of this heart is removed. Over time, your ability to continue giving is compromised because you are no longer intact with a whole heart.

How might this impact us in our professional and personal lives? In our professional lives, we might develop a sense of overwhelm, or experience feelings of frustration and possibly even resentment. At the extreme, we might develop compassion fatigue, which is defined as an “extreme state of tension and preoccupation with the suffering of those...
being helped.” We might start to say things like, “It would be nice to feel appreciated” or “What’s the point? What I do does not make any difference.” In our personal lives, we might find that we do not have as much energy to spend quality time with our own families.

What could allow us to minimize this from happening? How could we maintain intact hearts and feel good about how we are with families? Being reflective in our work is one component. When we are reflective, we are aware of our thoughts and feelings in the present moment and keep this awareness with every aspect of our lives. When we go into a home visit, we are reflecting upon what comes up for us when we hear parents share stories or observe how they interact with their children. This reflection continues after the home visit, when we think about what happened in that visit and how we might incorporate what a parent divulged, into planning how to best support this family moving forward. Additionally, this creates an opportunity for us to reflect upon how we are affected by these interactions with parents. For example, becoming activated or feeling triggered in a home visit might be indicative of a conflict between our personal and/or professional values and those beliefs held by a parent.

How do we know when our internal compass, otherwise known as our gut or intuition is telling us that something does not feel right? Some people’s internal compasses speak louder than others. How can we follow our intuition as well as rely on others to help guide us in knowing if a boundary has been crossed and/or our self-care is starting to be compromised? Furthermore, how would our bodies communicate with us on these very issues?

When we think about what we would like families to learn as a result of our relationships with them…what would that look like? Do we want families to learn it is okay to give and give without ever setting limits? In thinking about the parallel process, how we are with parents is how we would like them to be with their children. What are the strengths in modeling to parents that not only is it okay to set limits with others, it is essential for self-preservation and family well-being?

Balance is key. When we are with families, we need to think about how we can support them without sacrificing ourselves in the process. What is it that we can do to keep our hearts whole, by maintaining healthy limits and boundaries, all the while implementing self-care? Determining exactly what this looks like will depend from person to person. The greater question is knowing how to get there.

Questions to encourage discussion and reflection…

- How will you know when boundaries are becoming blurred or have been crossed? What thoughts or feelings might you experience? Where do you hold stress in your body? What might be other signs that the way you are with families is taking a toll on your well-being?
- Who can support you in helping to reflect on how this work impacts you?
- What can be done within your program/agency, to support an ongoing awareness of boundaries and ethics, while maintaining self-care?
- What additional supports, like your Mental Health Consultant or your CDD Training/Development Consultant, are available to support you & your program in this endeavor?

**References/Additional Resources**
Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project
[www.compassionfatigue.org](http://www.compassionfatigue.org)