

Supporting Others, Sustaining Yourself

4 Tips for Sustainable Client Support and Supervision

Professionals working with refugees and other newcomers are often driven by a strong sense of responsibility, but unrealistic expectations and unclear boundaries can lead to burnout and reduced effectiveness. **Trauma-informed care (TIC) reminds us that client support and staff well-being are deeply interconnected.** The four tips below offer guidance for maintaining empathy and clear professional boundaries—two requirements for longevity in this profession. For a deeper dive into this topic, view [Switchboard's archived webinar](#).

1. Incorporate TIC principles to strengthen your daily work and support healthy boundaries.

Use the six principles of TIC to guide your interactions with clients so they know what to expect and everyone involved feels safe and supported. These principles also help to reinforce realistic **boundaries**, especially when navigating roles, responsibilities, and client needs. Consider the following examples:

- **Promote safety** by removing agitated clients from crowded areas and sitting beside or across from them, rather than standing over them.
- **Build trust and transparency** through consistent, clear communication of your role, and seeking supervisor support when issues fall outside of your responsibilities or scope.
- **Encourage peer support by** leaning on colleagues, offering support, and making referrals when client needs are beyond your scope. Ask: "What would be helpful for you right now?"
- **Collaborate** by working alongside clients, not over them. Ask clients: "Which goal is most important to you right now?" or "Where would you like to start?"
- **Empower clients** to use their voice and actively participate in service planning. Boundaries can help by defining and protecting the opportunities for clients to make choices.
- **Consider cultural and historical context** by being mindful of each client's background and how it may influence their resettlement, while also avoiding assumptions or stereotypes.

For more information on setting better boundaries, review [this tip sheet](#).

2. Know your role: Manage expectations through a client-centered approach.

Service providers often feel pressure or responsibility to "fix" clients or solve complex problems, even though barriers like funding cuts and limited resources are beyond their control. Manage your expectations and recognize your limitations to help prevent **compassion fatigue** and **moral distress**, which can occur when you care deeply but are unable to meet clients' needs. The following **mindset shift** can help you stay grounded in your role:

- *Instead of thinking, "I need to solve this problem," try thinking, "I am doing my best to support the client in navigating available resources."*

Use a **client-centered approach** to build meaningful relationships with your clients through empathy, trust, respect, and honesty. Focus on **clients' strengths**, support their informed decision-

making, and help them access needed services and benefits. Mindset shifts can also be useful in maintaining a client-centered approach. For example:

- *Instead of thinking, “The client is lazy and does not follow through,” try, “The client seems to be having difficulty reaching this goal. Let me ask them what is getting in the way.”*

3. Use self-care techniques to sustain yourself and your established boundaries over time.

Treat self-care as a **daily practice** rather than something you turn to only when you are overwhelmed. Incorporate self-care practices that support your mind, body, and spirit.

- **Mind:** Focus on what you can control, celebrate small wins, and practice gratitude.
- **Body:** Prioritize good nutrition, regular physical activity, and healthy sleep habits.
- **Spirit:** Engage in nourishing activities, such as therapy, time outside, mindfulness, and music, and lean into any religious or spiritual beliefs.

Regularly reflect on what is helping or hindering your ability to sustain yourself in the work, and adjust your self-care practices as your needs and role change.

4. For Supervisors: Engage in supportive supervision.

As a supervisor, you play a critical role in shaping team culture and maintaining a sustainable working environment. When staff feel connected, they build collective resilience, which helps reduce stress and overwhelm.

Supportive supervision includes:

- **Creating a safe, supportive environment** where staff feel comfortable processing difficult client interactions, daily stressors, and asking questions—especially during times of change
- **Providing clear, consistent communication**, including constructive and respectful feedback, role clarity, and transparency around organizational or team changes
- **Balancing task management with intentional time for peer connection and collaboration**, such as case consultations and team-building activities
- **Regularly checking in on staff well-being**; encouraging physical, emotional, and spiritual self-care; and modeling vulnerability by openly discussing self-care practices
- **Monitoring workloads and work patterns**, offering flexibility when possible, and limiting back-to-back meetings by building in time to reflect or debrief

Your presence as a supervisor shapes team culture. Support staff further by encouraging them to participate in a [community of practice](#), individual therapy, paid time off, and wellness initiatives.

You are not expected to carry every client’s hardship alone. Trauma-informed work is sustainable through boundaries, support, and shared responsibility.

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