

Module 7 Lesson 5

Transcript

Hey everyone. Welcome to today's lesson. Today, we're talking boundaries, scope of practice, and sticking with what we know best. As health professionals who work with clients on lifestyle and food, we're going to have clients who give us TMI, and they may expect advice on areas we might not be necessarily qualified to give advice in. This comes up nearly every time I work with clients who struggle with mental health. It takes walking the fine line between being a wellness helper who gives support and advice to improve health behaviors and outcomes, and being a therapist. It's so important to know your role in helping people live their most healthful lives here. In this lesson, I'm going to cover why it's absolutely crucial to stay in your lane as a health professional, how you can redirect a conversation when a client goes out of your realm, and how to assess if a client is ready to make changes.

Okay, so let's get to it. Everyone eats, so everyone has their opinions about food. I'm going to admit it, it's a touchy subject for me when I have a client come in to work with me, and they report that their doctor told them some bit of nutrition advice, like "Don't eat after 7:00 PM." Doctors may barely get one nutrition lecture in all of their years of medical school, but we trust them. So when they tell us what to do, we do it in the name of being a good patient. What am I supposed to say? "Your doctor's wrong. There's no science to support that eating after 7:00 PM is going to help you. That doctor's a quack." Well, everyone has life experiences too, so we all feel like our 2 cents are valid when it comes to giving advice when it comes to food. Unless you studied and earned a degree in title and counseling in some form or another, you need to stick to your professional expertise.

Doctor should diagnose, prescribe, and treat. Coaches should support and guide. Trainers should stick to conditioning their client's muscles and cardiovascular systems. And wellness coaches should stick to advice on behaviors to improve their client's wellness. That means we don't overstep and encourage lengthy conversations about mother-in-laws or give advice on angry bosses, but listen politely and always respectfully redirect the conversation back to what we do best. Whether you know it or not, your clients see you as an authority. An expert. A guru. That is powerful. You're powerful in that way, and making sure you don't innocently or unknowingly abuse that power is super important to practice. Just like the doctor may not be the best person to give food advice, many times we're not the right match for giving emotional advice. No matter what your style is, keep it professional. Stick to your craft, and be able to say when the conversation is going outside of your scope.

I had a client named Erica who had an incredibly complicated life. She was spread too thin and never kept a food journal, making it really difficult to see patterns in her eating or figure out exactly where to hold her accountable. So when she would come in to meet with me, she would often ask what I would do if I were in a certain situation. She would go on long tangents about her private life, her work issues, and caring for her elderly parents. I'd try to gently tell her that I'm really good at the food, exercise, hydration, stress, and sleep, and try to redirect her back to the work we had at hand. But it wasn't easy. I felt like she really needed to talk, so I recommended a few therapists who I've referred to and I've loved. She wasn't offended, but she also was not open to talking to a professional.

I told her that I felt like our work would be so much better and we'd progress so much more if she had a team and didn't just work with me, but I didn't push it because I could tell she was a little resistant. About a month later, nothing changed. She went up a pound, down a pound. I spent our sessions trying to zero in on the food, and she spent all of her time talking about her emotional baggage. I pointed out that I didn't feel our work was moving forward, and she agreed. When she asked what I thought, I told her our sessions weren't as productive as I'd like them to be, because I felt like she needed a team. I use the analogy that if she had thyroid disease or diabetes, I'd need an endocrinologist to follow her. In her case, I felt like she needed a therapist to help her manage her emotional issues so we could focus on what I'm best at.

When she agreed and got to work with a great psychologist, our work really started to just grow in a major way. I have so many more examples that are similar to this, and you may have some of them too. Listen. There's so much gray area here, right? We use words like therapeutic, counseling, and individualized when we speak about the care we give. What is really important is that you know what your expertise is, and what the qualifications are, and that you stick to it. The first rule in medicine is do no harm. Well, we're not medical providers, but I can tell you that first rule is a really good one to start with, so let's adopt that. Start there. Give advice and counseling on what you know. Do absolutely make recommendations and suggestions that cover your spectrum of knowledge base and wisdom. Customizing and individualizing meal plans may be your forte and within your scope of practice.

Great. But of course, there may be a client who has a less than supportive mother-in-law or spouse. In this case, for example, don't give relationship advice. Do not tell your client to tell her mother-in-law to back off, what she eats is none of her business. Work with your client on, "When your mother triggers you, let's plan for you too." More likely than not, you don't know the full picture of the dynamics of the family. Instead of telling her how to handle her mother-in-law, ask

your client what support she thinks she wants, and have your client come up with some of these ideas about how to ask for it. You may want to practice role playing here. Your client may decide she's going to say, "I feel really good about how I'm eating these days," or "I'm saving my indulgence for later. I hear you made delicious mashed potatoes." Since this kind of troubleshooting is coming from your client and not you, you can guide and practice it without treading on territory that is unknown to you.

Know your boundaries. Just like you practice asking a cute or hot guy out on a date, or better yet, just like you practice going over your pricing with a new client, practice what you're going to say when the conversation goes into out of bounds territory. Gentle redirection will not be offensive. You can say, "I just wanted to circle back to getting more fiber in your diet for the weekend, because we've kind of gotten a little off topic." Or if you feel comfortable you can say, "It sounds like there's a lot going on in your life right now. I'm great at the food and exercise and even sleep and stress management, so let's get back to that and if you're open to it, I can refer you to some great therapists that I collaborate with." Build trust and suspend judgment. Honestly, there's still a stigma about speaking to or seeking out help from a therapist.

I'm so heartbroken when a client gets offended or seems twitchy about talking to someone. I feel really strongly and I'll tell anyone who will listen, that we all need a therapist and a nutritionist or health coach in our lives. An unbiased listener who has your best intentions in mind can be a truly helpful thing. We all know that. You do not need a mental illness diagnosis to benefit there, and there's nothing wrong with seeking help when you need it. It's actually a sign of strength. Still, even the best therapist is wasted on your client if the bond isn't there. The same can be said for us as helpers. Really, the most important thing is listening to your client and trying to figure out how you can best bond, so they will respond and do the work you're asking them to do.

Do read up. Intro to psych in college. I'll never forget a researcher named Prochaska. I'm sure many of you remember the research as well. The research is from the 80s, and we're still using it today. Go ahead and read up and learn, refresh yourself a little bit about therapy, and I promise it will help you in your work. Prochaska talks about readiness to change, and I use his model with every client I need. Check out the handout attached to this lesson, and it will be really useful for you. This is such an important topic for any health professional out there, so let's take a moment and review our discussion. It's common for clients to veer off topic, or to seek your opinions in areas you aren't qualified to give advice in, and it's vitally important to stay in your scope of practice. Give advice and counseling on what you know. If a client gets off topic, gentle redirection will not be offensive. Politely bring the conversation back to your area of expertise or if appropriate, compassionately recommend the client talk about their issues with a qualified therapist. Assess how

ready a client is to make changes using the stages of change model. Adjust your approach accordingly, and meet your client where they are, so they know they're understood.

I'm so happy you were here for this lesson, and I cannot wait to see you in the next one.