Maintaining boundaries & managing conversations

Blue Light Programme
mind.org.uk/bluelight
Keeping yourself and others safe: maintaining boundaries and managing conversations as a Blue Light Champion

Establishing and maintaining boundaries

Boundaries exist to protect everyone. Establishing boundaries can help to clarify your role as a Blue Light Champion and the relationship you’ll have with colleagues when in that role. Being clear about what you can and cannot offer as a Blue Light Champion will help you enjoy the role and manage other people’s expectations.

We have put together this document detailing some things you may want to think about when looking to set up clear boundaries, which could help keep you and your colleagues safe.

These are some suggestions of things for you to consider but is not an exhaustive list or a guide to be followed. Our suggestions are not intended to take the place of your organisation’s policies and guidelines, and you should always seek out and be guided by the information your service provides. Remember that the Blue Light Programme team are unable to give advice to Champions on individual services’ policies.

Boundaries that may be important to you in your role as a Blue Light Champion are:

- **Time**: Knowing how much time you can offer to the role and the support you can provide to your colleagues.

- **Abilities**: Being clear about what professional skills, knowledge and abilities you have or do not have to help others.

- **Confidentiality**: Being clear on what you can and cannot keep confidential and the circumstances when things that have been shared with you may need to be shared elsewhere. Look for this information in your service’s data protection and confidentiality policies.
Maintaining clear boundaries starts with understanding your role and keeping it clearly defined

- A Blue Light Champion is an employee or volunteer in the emergency services, who takes action in the workplace to raise awareness of mental health problems and challenge mental health stigma.
- Remember, the Blue Light Champion role is not a 'pastoral' role. It’s important others don’t see you as a counsellor and that you don’t feel that you have to go beyond your abilities and role to provide ongoing emotional support to someone because of your role as a Blue Light Champion.
- As a Blue Light Champion you can offer peer support, an alternative point of contact on an equal basis, grounded in your shared experiences.
- It may be helpful for you to look at the Blue Light Champions role description in the Blue Light Champions toolkit and identify the kind of activities you are already undertaking or want to undertake. This way, you can define what being a Blue Light Champion will mean to you. For example, you may decide that you want to focus on giving presentations at staff events, or using social media, or encouraging and supporting your service to sign the Blue Light Time to Change pledge.
- By being clear about what activities you’ll undertake, you can create and maintain your boundaries, and avoid feeling overburdened or pressured to act outside of what you’re comfortable doing.

Be clear

- Explain your role and its limits to colleagues so you can manage people’s expectations. Be clear about the activities you will be doing as part of your role. For example, you could say “My role as a Blue Light Champion is to share information that promotes awareness of how to keep yourself mentally well.”
- Communicate the reasons for the boundary. If someone is asking for direct advice or help beyond your role, you could say: “Sorry, I am not the best person to advise you on that and do not have the knowledge, skills or experience to help you with this. I am not a mental health professional and stepping outside of my abilities as a champion might be unhelpful to you. But I can suggest other sources of help and support you may wish to access.” The explanation shows that you understand and believe in the reasons for the boundary.
- Don’t make promises you may not be able to stick to. For example don’t tell someone everything they tell you is completely confidential if there is a chance what they may say means you need to alert someone else in your service.
- Keep in mind the remit of your Blue Light Champion role. By all means use any skills you may have gained from training such as TRim Practitioner (Trauma Risk Management – a trauma based peer support system) or ASIST suicide prevention (training to be able to provide suicide first aid), but remember you are acting in the capacity of a Blue Light Champion, not as a counsellor or mental health nurse. It is important to separate your professional role and your role as a Champion. You may be a trained counsellor or mental health professional, however as Blue Light Champion, your role is to listen and signpost, and not to make a professional judgement.
- Signpost individuals to further information and support. It may be helpful to ask the person: “What would you like to happen in this situation?” This will help to empower them and encourage them to take the course of action that seems right to them. Be clear about what you can do, as well as what you can’t.
Identifying when boundaries are not working

- Be mindful of your own wellbeing and take the time to notice any changes that could indicate that you need to take on a little less. Reflecting on your role regularly can help you to identify whether you are taking on too much.
- If you feel others are not respecting or are unclear on your boundaries, speak to them. Own your statement by starting with ‘I’ and going on to describe what you think or feel. For example, you could say: “I don’t feel comfortable continuing this conversation until we’re both clear about what my role is in supporting you.” By using ‘I’ in this way, you take ownership of the statement, which is both powerful and demonstrates that you personally care about the outcome.
- Be kind to yourself if you get it wrong. Identify what happened and how you can do it differently the next time.
- Talk to someone. Just as you may want to encourage conversations about mental health with your colleagues and for them to chat about how they are feeling, make sure you also take time to have these conversations yourself.
- Remember you are not alone, and you can ask for help if you need it. Contact the Blue Light Infoline, us or speak to other Blue Light Champions if you have a situation you are unsure how to deal with.

Sharing your story

- Part of the role of a Blue Light Champion is encouraging more open discussion of mental health in the workplace. As a result, you may find that colleagues tell you about their own thoughts, feelings, experiences and concerns, as part of seeking support around their own mental health.
- Think carefully and decide what personal information you feel comfortable sharing with your colleagues about your own mental health experiences, and whether it is helpful to disclose this information in certain situations. For example if someone tells you they think they may have PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), and you have had a similar experience, it may be useful for you to explain how you sought help and what worked for you. However, it may not be helpful to talk at length and in detail about the sensitive details of your own story; while you may have experienced something similar, the circumstances and feelings will not be exactly the same and may be overwhelming for the other person. A good question to ask yourself is, how will this person benefit from hearing about my own experience?
- Remember if you have your own personal experience of mental health problems there is absolutely no requirement to share your story as a Blue Light Champion. We recognise this is a big and very personal decision.
- Coming soon: we will be holding workshops and providing guidance in September/October 2015 on talking about mental health problems in the workplace, including sharing your own personal experience and putting boundaries in place.
- Listening to others experiences that are close to your own may trigger thoughts about your experience of mental health problems or traumatic events you have encountered. Think about how you might look after your own wellbeing as a Blue Light Champion and remember your health comes first. If you do not feel able to continue the role for any reason, you can stop at any time.
Managing conversations about mental wellbeing

As a Blue Light Champion, you may find colleagues start to share their experience of mental health problems with you. Here are some tips for managing these conversations.

Such a situation might be new to you, or you may have lots, or some experience of managing sensitive conversations because of your job role. The suggestions that follow are based on what we’ve learned can work well. Communication is a very personal thing so use what feels right for you based on your experience of managing sensitive conversations.

Our suggestions are not intended to take the place of your organisation’s policies and guidelines, and we urge you to always seek out and be guided by the information and support your service provides before starting conversations about mental wellbeing.

The Blue Light Programme team are unable to give advice to Champions on individual services’ policies.

If someone discloses thoughts about harming themselves or others to you

We recognise that, in your role as a Blue Light Champion, there is a possibility that your colleagues may disclose thoughts about harming themselves or others to you. Before you start your role as a Blue Light Champion, it is important that you find out what policies and guidance your employer has in place in case this happens. It might be useful to discuss this possibility with HR or occupational health so that you clearly understand your organisation’s policies and guidance before your Blue Light Champion role starts. This will help you feel prepared and understand how to respond effectively and within your organisation’s guidelines.

As a Blue Light Champion you are first and foremost an employee or volunteer of your organisation. So, if an individual discloses thoughts of harming themselves or others it’s helpful to understand they are not telling you as an individual, they are telling your organisation. Every organisation has a duty of care to all its employees and volunteers to provide them with information and support. If you are unsure about a situation speak to your manager, a member of HR or another member of staff who supports you.

Unfortunately, it is not appropriate for Mind to provide this guidance. We encourage you to think carefully about how you’ll look after your own wellbeing while participating in the Blue Light Programme and how you can make sure you have appropriate support in place. You might find it helpful to look at our information on managing your mental wellbeing or call the Blue Light Infoline to see what support is available.

Remember, each conversation will be different

Think about the individual situation and person, one person may simply want to tell you their story, whereas someone else may be telling you as a first step to seeking support. Exploring why your colleague is starting the conversation will help shape how you manage it.
Managing conversations about mental wellbeing

- **Find a quiet place** with an informal atmosphere, perhaps in a café or over a coffee – this shouldn’t feel like a formal interview.

- **Actively listen to the person**, by giving them your undivided attention. Try to leave any questions or comments you may have until the person has finished so you don’t interrupt them. Once a person knows they are being given the space and time to talk, they will.
  - Sometimes when someone takes the courage to talk to you it may not be possible for you to give them the time they need there and then. You will be the best judge of this. Remember to always show you recognise that they have taken a positive step by speaking to you, explain why you cannot talk now and arrange a better time to have the conversation. If someone is in urgent need of help always signpost immediately to support, you may want to help them go to the Mind website. Click the yellow button at the top which says ‘I need urgent help’ or call the Samaritans 08457 90 90 90 - Lines are open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

- **Use positive body language**, and encourage the person to continue with small verbal comments like ‘I see’ or ‘what happened next?’. This will let them know that you are paying attention to what they are saying and actively listening to them.

- **Check your understanding** by paraphrasing what the person has said back to them.

- **Reflect back actual words they have used to them**, as this can encourage them to open up more. For example, a good reflection to ‘I just feel so alone’ could be ‘alone?’.

- **Respond by using empathetic statements** such as: “I appreciate this must be difficult for you…”

- **Avoid clichés**. Comments like ‘Pull yourself together’ or ‘You’re just having a bad day’ are not helpful.

- **Dispel any myths**. Mental health problems are more common than people think and can affect anyone at any time.

- **Try to avoid asking too many questions**, especially questions that only require a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer, or that begin with the word ‘why’. Ask open questions to invite a more detailed response:
  - Tell me how you’re feeling?
  - How do you look after yourself?
  - What support do you have in place?

- **Reassure them that it is positive that they want to talk about their experience**, what’s happening with them, or that they are looking for support (if this is the case).

- **Is the individual aware of sources of support?** Signpost to further information and support. It may be helpful to ask the person: “What would you like to happen in this situation?” This will help to empower them and encourage them to take the course of action that seems right to them. Be clear about what you can do, as well as what you can’t.

- **The important thing is to listen**, rather than give advice, the individual needs to be able to act for themselves. Signpost the individual to sources of support, rather than telling them what you think is best. Take a look at the ‘Managing boundaries’ section above for more information on this.
Closing conversations about mental health

- Sometimes conversations will come to a natural end. However if this does not happen give the person a gentle indication that the conversation needs to come to an end. You could say something like: “It’s been good to talk, we’ve covered a lot and we will have to wrap up soon because I have a meeting.” Or whatever you feel is appropriate.
- Summarise your conversation and anything you have both agreed to do. For example: “You have told me that you are going to speak to your GP about how you are feeling, and I will text you by the end of the day with the details of how to access counselling sessions through our Employee Assistance Programme.”
- Ask practical questions such as ‘Is there going to be someone there when you get home?’ or ‘Is there a friend you can go and see?’
- Remember offering a ‘listening ear’ and showing your acceptance, warmth and regard will go a long way to help someone. It may not be possible to get a clear idea of the next steps the person will take as a result of talking to you. Ending the conversation by inviting them to take some time to reflect on what has been discussed and to consider what they may want to do going forward could be the best way to bring the conversation to a close, especially if you feel that there is nothing more you can say at that time.
- If you feel it would be helpful, and you are able to commit to giving more of your time in this way, you may want to arrange another time to meet up and talk.

The Mind Blue Light Infoline

0300 303 5999

The Blue Light Infoline offers confidential, independent and practical support, advice and signposting around mental health and wellbeing. The Infoline is just for emergency service staff, volunteers and their families, to help keep you or those you care about well for work.

Contact the Infoline

Lines are open 9am to 6pm, Monday to Friday (except for bank holidays).
Telephone: 0300 303 5999 (local rates)
Email: bluelightinfo@mind.org.uk
Text: 84999
Ensuring your mental wellbeing

Being a point of contact to have conversations about mental health with colleagues can be very rewarding, but it can also be time consuming and emotionally overwhelming.

You might also find that discussing subjects or traumatic events close to your own experiences, or that of others close to you, may be triggering - especially if you’re feeling unwell.

We encourage you to think carefully about how you’ll look after your own wellbeing whilst participating in the programme, and make sure you have appropriate support in place. You might find it helpful to look at our information on staying mentally well and dealing with pressure.

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Elefriends - A supportive online community where you can be yourself. We all know what it’s like to struggle sometimes, but now there’s a safe place to listen, share and be heard. Moderated by Mind, Mondays to Fridays, 10am to 5pm. It is monitored once a day on weekends and public holidays.

GP - talk to a health care professional, such as your GP.

It is also likely that your organisation offers independent support to help you manage your wellbeing. Sometimes this is called an ‘Employee Assistance Programme’.

Whilst we are not able to provide individual advice, support or treatment through your contact with the Mind Blue Light team, if you do need support or are in crisis there is help available:

- If you need urgent help please go to the Mind website and click the yellow button at the top which says ‘I need urgent help’.
- Samaritans 08457 90 90 90 - Lines are open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Completely confidential, if there is something troubling you they will help you talk things through.

For more information... Remember, you can contact us at bluelightchampions@mind.org.uk or give us a call on 0208 215 2433.
We're Mind, the mental health charity.

We won’t give up until everyone experiencing a mental health problem gets both support and respect.

mind.org.uk/BlueLight
bluelight@mind.org.uk

@MindCharity #mybluelight

We’re a registered charity in England (no. 219830)