

Wellbeing for the Bush

LIVING & WORKING REMOTELY

Living and working as a health worker in a remote community can be an extremely rewarding experience. We get to extend our knowledge and experience in our chosen discipline whilst having some of Australia's natural treasures at our doorstep. However, it can also present some challenges, particularly due to the lack of anonymity which we may be accustomed to from living or working in larger regional centres or cities.

Identifying some of those challenges and providing suggestions on how to navigate these issues will help you make the most of living and working in rural and remote communities.

Navigating personal and professional relationships

- There will always be a power differential between the professional's authority and the client's vulnerability. Professional boundaries are there to support the relationship through trust, compassion, mutual respect and empathy.
- Contact or dual relationships with patients/clients are common in rural and remote communities and are often unavoidable due to geographical and social structures (e.g. at the shops, sporting teams, social functions etc). This is commonly known as the "fishbowl" effect.
- There may also be an expectation to answer questions about yourself or behave in a more informal manner than a 'professional' manner of engagement.
- It is important to establish the distinction between personal and professional relationships through good communication with the patient/client and establishing these boundaries together, e.g. where you may see them, what you can (and cannot) talk about in certain spaces.
- Self-disclosure with clients/patients should only occur for therapeutic or clinical needs.
- Maintaining confidentiality is particularly critical as this is often a barrier to people seeking help in small communities.
- Being "emotionally guarded" and opting not to engage in activities where you may come across clients has been used as an effective strategy by some. However, you must ensure you do not become socially isolated.
- Health professionals must reflect on their own behaviour, anticipate conflicts, and proactively maintain boundaries where possible.
- Supervision and consultation with peers in similar situations will help maintain objectivity and address any ethical issues that may arise.
- Take regular breaks out of town and away from seeing clients in community.



Avoiding social isolation

- Professional and personal isolation are common issues when living and working remotely and can contribute to burnout.
- Look for opportunities to engage and collaborate with other services and organisations, both professionally and socially.
- Actively seek out supervision and consultation within and outside of the community.
- Support from others can make you feel more confident and less stressed. This support can be in the form of:
 - Instrumental support, e.g. adequate equipment, staff, and funding to complete the work
 - Formal support, e.g. formal supervisor and mentoring, including cultural mentoring
 - Informational support, e.g. colleagues who make time to listen, give reassurance, or share humour
 - Accessing continuing professional development
- Keep connected to family and friends outside of the community.
- Engage in volunteering in the community through community organisations or emergency services.

Ethical considerations

- Sustaining professional distance can be challenging.
- There can be tensions between organisational practices and local expectations. However, these can be negotiated between parties through honest, open communication, local knowledge and networking.
- Always maintain the ethical obligations of your discipline or position, including such things as confidentiality and mandatory reporting.
- Be mindful that there is a risk that your decisions can make you vulnerable to isolation, social pressure or even personal threats so ensure you seek support from peers or supervisors.
- You may feel pressured to undertake tasks outside of your scope of practice due to a lack of services. It's ethically sound to refuse to do so and you should not feel obligated.



Remember

You can't pour from an empty cup. Take care of yourself first.