

Wellbeing for the Bush

LIVING & WORKING REMOTELY

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

- As health workers, we will always be in a position of power and trust. Professional boundaries are there to support the relationship between yourself and the community. Working within your scope of practice and maintaining compassion, respect, and empathy will assist you.
- In rural and remote communities, we often live in what is commonly known as the "fishbowl." We see patients/clients in our everyday lives, for example, at the shops, sporting clubs, and social functions, which is often unavoidable. Maintaining professional boundaries in such situations is tricky but necessary.
- Take your time to get to know people in the community and at work. Sometimes, we can be quick to want to connect, but when working remotely, it is good practice to navigate relationships slowly, as living in a 'fishbowl' can prove challenging to get out of. Share information about yourself that you feel comfortable with and within your professional and personal boundaries.
- It is essential 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 and what you can (and cannot) talk about in certain spaces. For example, you won't discuss test results out in public or even acknowledge them publicly unless they say hello first.
- Self-disclosure with clients/patients should only occur for therapeutic or clinical needs.
- Maintaining confidentiality is always critical. Do not share information you do not have patient/client permission to share or that is outside your professional guidelines. Breaching patient/client confidentiality violates your ethical guidelines and can be a barrier to people coming to you or another professional for help in small communities.
- Self-reflection and some forward-thinking can be really helpful. Anticipating conflicts and proactively maintaining boundaries where possible can prevent adverse outcomes.
- Clinical Reflective Supervision, mentoring and consultation with peers in similar situations will help maintain objectivity and address any ethical issues that may arise. Information about the CRANAplus LINKS Mentoring Program for all health disciplines is available at crana.org.au/LINKS
- Taking regular breaks out of town and away from seeing patients/clients in the community helps to keep your cup filled or your batteries charged.



Avoiding social isolation

- Doing what is 'right' over what is fun can be challenging. Sometimes, choosing not to engage in social activities where you may encounter patients or clients is an effective strategy. However, be mindful that you do not socially isolate yourself. Review your boundaries or organise some social events that you feel are more appropriate.
- Look for opportunities to engage and collaborate professionally and socially with other services and organisations. Networking is great for everyone.



- Maintaining relationships with friends/family/partners outside of the community can be challenging but necessary. Schedule regular times to stay connected, e.g. virtual coffee dates, text messages, or virtual movies.
- Connecting with others can help you feel more confident and less stressed. Some ways of connecting can be through:
 - Formal support, e.g. accessing and providing formal supervision/mentoring, including connecting with a cultural mentor
 - Instrumental support, e.g. adequate equipment, staff, and funding to complete the work
 - Informational support, e.g. colleagues who make the time and space to listen, share humour and give reassurance
 - Professional development can be a helpful way to connect with others.
- Engage in volunteering in the community through community organisations or emergency services.

Ethical considerations

- Sustaining professional distance can be challenging in small communities.
- Tensions between organisational practices and local expectations can exist. 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 confidentiality and mandatory reporting. Remember, maintaining your ethical obligations keeps you registered and employed.
- Be mindful that your decisions may 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 your scope of practice due to a lack of services. It's ethically sound to refuse, and you should not feel obligated. It would be appropriate to say, "Sorry, that is not in my scope of practice", or, "Sorry, I can not do that, but I can do...".