

Preventing Client Abuse

Please note: The resources on this page need to be updated to align with the new *Professional Boundaries and Nurse-Client Relationships* practice standard (in effect March 1, 2026).

Introduction

The College of Nurses of Ontario serves the public interest by regulating nurses and providing leadership to the nursing profession. As such, it works to prevent the abuse of clients by nurses.

The College's *Professional Boundaries and Nurse-Client Relationships* practice standard, which all Ontario nurses must follow, gives specific guidelines for what constitutes acceptable and appropriate behaviour in any situation involving a client. Developing an awareness of what is abusive to a client is the first step in preventing abuse.

What is client abuse?

Client abuse is the misuse of power or the betrayal of trust, respect or intimacy in the therapeutic relationship. Abuse can be defined as:

- neglect (e.g., failing to provide the necessities of life);
- physical (e.g., striking a client or causing discomfort);
- verbal/emotional (e.g., shouting at or insulting a client);
- financial (e.g., soliciting gifts from a client); or
- sexual (e.g., inappropriately touching a client).

Abuse can be subtle or overt. Regardless, it interferes with meeting the client's therapeutic needs and can permanently damage the relationship between the client and the nurse. Abuse can also erode the public's confidence in the nursing profession.

Client abuse is a form of professional misconduct. The College's role in addressing abuse includes investigating complaints and reports of abuse. In some cases, an investigation can lead to a disciplinary hearing. Whenever possible, a remedial approach is taken to support the member in reflecting upon the events to understand how the standards of practice apply to similar events with a view to improving future practice.

Preventing or stopping abuse

The College offers a number of initiatives to prevent or stop abuse. Nurses have access to a variety of College resources regarding the application of practice standards, and they can review relevant practice documents on the College's website.

The College also offers a comprehensive educational program, *One Is One Too Many*, which aims to increase nurses' knowledge of client abuse and what to do about it. The program focuses on helping nurses recognize warning signs and informs them of their obligation to speak out about abuse by others.

One Is One Too Many includes three components: a video/DVD, a workshop facilitator's guide and a workbook for nurses.

The video is a docudrama that uses actual nurses and clients, as well as actors, to illustrate cases of abuse. It contains several powerful scenarios and commentary from nurses about their own experiences and best practices.

The program's theme is: *Speak out to stop abuse*. This emerged from research that showed the abuse stops when a nurse intervenes in an incident of client abuse. The objective is to empower nurses to protect clients, their colleagues and themselves.

For more information

For more information about the College's abuse prevention program or other learning resources, or to purchase a copy of *One Is One Too Many*, contact the College of Nurses of Ontario at:

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Toll-free in Ontario: 1 800 387-5526

Fax: 416 928-6507

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