

Five Risk Management Strategies for Mental Health Providers – A very brief overview

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1. **Know the rules.** It is important for practitioners to understand the rules under which they operate. While it is not realistic for providers to memorize every applicable statute and regulation, they should strive to have a general understanding of the statutes, rules, policies, and other guidance that govern their particular field of practice. More importantly, providers should know how to access these governing documents readily so that when an issue comes up in practice, they can easily review the relevant guidance before taking action.
2. **Document thoroughly (and show your work).** A good rule of thumb for mental health practice is “if it isn’t documented, it didn’t happen.” Proper documentation can be a license-saver if a practitioner is faced with a licensure complaint. Even if there is a less-than-desirable outcome in treatment, documentation can help a licensing board or other investigatory body understand the thought process that went into the provision of treatment and may support a licensee’s contention that the work done was within the generally accepted standards of the profession. Although proper documentation should always be a priority, it is especially important when working with high risk clients or in high risk environments.
3. **Obtain truly informed consent.** Informed consent for treatment is an important way to respect the autonomy of clients. People have the right to make informed decisions about treatment and to understand the potential risks and benefits of such treatment. While a standard written informed consent form is an important (and required) first step, truly informed consent is an ongoing process, not a form, and should be revisited often as part of treatment.
4. **Establish and respect boundaries.** One of the most common categories of complaints filed against mental health providers involves dual or multiple relationships. Although there may be times when a minor boundary crossing is acceptable, especially in rural areas or small communities, it is important that providers always consider how their actions may be interpreted by both clients and licensing boards.
5. **Consult, consult, and consult some more.** Mental health providers in Colorado can be sanctioned by the licensing board for “acting or failing to act in a manner that does not meet the generally accepted standards of the discipline.” C.R.S. §12-43-222(1)(g). Outside of guidance provided through professional organizations, one of the best ways to determine what the generally accepted standards are is to ask other providers. Becoming part of a regular consulting group is an excellent practice and allows providers to show that they are actively collaborating with others to ensure compliance with the accepted standards of the profession.