

DEVELOPING SELF-AWARENESS

The following list outlines some of the factors that can interfere with the formation of a professional helping relationship and client service; use it as an aid in self-examination.

1. *Personal hang-ups and emotional problems.* To a considerable degree, our beliefs and behavior have been shaped by our childhood and early family experiences. Most people carry a certain amount of emotional “baggage” into their adult lives, including unresolved parent-child conflicts, prejudice, after-effects of traumatic events, and so on. Sometimes this “baggage” is carried to the workplace, where it has a negative impact on clients and work performances. For example:
 - Preoccupation with personal problems, resulting in an inability to give one’s full attention to the client.
 - Inability to control one’s reactions or exercise self-discipline when in an emotionally charged situation or when under the ordinary pressure associated with direct social work practice.
 - Inability to demonstrate warmth, empathy, and genuine caring for clients served by the agency.
 - Inability or unwillingness to work cooperatively with persons in positions of authority (e.g., judges, physicians, administrators, supervisors, etc.)
 - Difficulty separating personal experience (e.g., having been a victim of child abuse, growing up with alcoholic parents, etc.) from the concerns and problems presented by clients.
 - Extreme defensiveness that prevents a critical examination of one’s own job performance.
 - Avoiding certain clients or difficult tasks.
 - Personalization of client anger and frustrations (i.e., inability to maintain an appropriate level of objectivity).
 - Imposing one’s values, political beliefs, religious beliefs or life-style on clients.
 - Inability to respect the religious beliefs and cultural values of a client.
 - Alcohol or drug abuse.
 - Misuse or abuse of one’s authority over clients.
 - Extreme level of shyness or non-assertiveness resulting in an inability to express one’s opinion and engage in the give-and-take of client work, peer supervision, and team decision making.

2. *Appearance, clothing and grooming.* To a large extent, people form impressions of others – especially the powerful first impression – on the basis of physical appearance. Thus, the social worker must pay attention to his or her clothing and grooming because it matters to clients and will affect how they respond to the worker and their utilization of agency services. Of course, what is offensive to one client may be acceptable to another, and what is appropriate dress in one agency setting may be inappropriate to another. The staff in a particular setting must make decisions on what is acceptable. Many agencies and most hospitals establish dress codes as a way of providing guidance to staff. When examining your appearance and its possible impact on clients, remember the following:
 - Some choices of clothing, hairstyle, makeup, perfume, or jewelry may offend or distract clients served by the agency.
 - Deficiencies in grooming and personal hygiene may offend clients.
 - Uncovered infections, skin irritations, and similar conditions may distract the client or cause him or her worry and anxiety.

3. *Behaviors that devalue or degrade others.* Social work values dictate that every client should be treated with respect. The social worker must avoid behaviors that are disrespectful, including the following:
 - Using words, phrases, or gestures that are in bad taste or known to offend clients and staff (e.g., cursing, sexual overtones, etc.)
 - Telling sexist, off-color, or ethnic jokes.
 - Telling disrespectful or disparaging stories about clients.
 - Demonstrating prejudice against particular client groups.
 - Making sarcastic, insulting, cruel, or disrespectful comments about clients.

4. *Distracting personal habits.* Most people have some undesirable mannerisms and habits that their friends and families have learned to accept. However, the social worker must be willing to modify habits that annoy clients, including the following:
 - Fidgeting, pencil tapping, knuckle cracking, nail biting, and the like.
 - Scratching, pulling, or twisting hair.
 - Chewing gum or tobacco and smoking.
 - Scowling, frowning, or other facial gesture that seem to express scorn, contempt.
 - Excessive nervous laughter, frequent clearing of throat, or other distracting mannerisms.

5. *Difficulties in cognitive functioning.* A social worker must absorb information quickly and apply complex principles. A capacity for abstract thinking is essential. The following examples illustrate insufficient cognitive functioning.
 - Difficulty processing new information, drawing logical inferences, and solving problems.
 - Lack of reading speed and comprehension needed to understand records and reports, agency policy, and professional books and journals.
 - Cognitive deficits that interfere with attention, memory, and judgment.
 - Inability to explain the assumptions and inferences behind one's professional judgments, conclusions, and decisions.

6. *Difficulties in verbal communication.* The social worker's verbal communication must be understandable to clients and other professional persons. The following problems could hamper work with clients:
 - Mumbling, speaking inaudibly, loud or penetrating voice tones, halting or hesitant speech, rapid speech.
 - Frequent use of slang not understood by or offensive to clients.
 - Errors of grammar or awkward sentence construction that confuse clients.
 - Inability or unwillingness to adjust vocabulary to client's age or educational level.
 - Uncorrected vision or hearing problems.

7. *Problems in written communication.* Because so much of the social worker's service to a client involves the exchange of information with other professionals, the worker must be able to communicate in writing. If letters, reports, and agency records are carelessly written and difficult to understand, those attempting to read them will conclude either that the worker does not care enough to communicate clearly or is incompetent. The worker's effectiveness is seriously damaged if the client or other professional persons form such negative impressions. Serious writing problems that merit correction include the following:
 - Inability to prepare letters, reports, and records that are understandable to clients, agency staff, and other professionals.
 - Problems recognizing and correcting errors of spelling, grammar, and syntax.
 - Difficulty selecting words that adequately express thought.
 - Inability to write at a speed sufficient to manage required paperwork.

8. *Poor work habits.* Poor work habits may have a direct or indirect impact on the clients served by an agency. Some of the commonly observed problems are:
- Being late for client appointments, team meetings, case conferences, and other scheduled events.
 - Missing deadlines for the completion of written reports that are important to clients or other agencies and professionals serving the client.
 - Incomplete or sloppy recordkeeping.
 - Lack of preparation for meetings with clients and other professionals.
 - Not following through on assignments or tasks.
 - Distracting other staff members or keeping them from their work.
 - Unwillingness to seek and utilize direction and guidance from the supervisor.
 - Blaming clients or others for one's own ineffectiveness; inability or unwillingness to acknowledge mistakes or limitations or knowledge and skill.
 - Being more interesting in diagnostic labels and theoretical issues than with the clients as real people.
 - Unwillingness to follow established agency policies and procedures.
 - Behaviors occurring outside work hours that draw negative attention to the social worker and thereby lessen client and public respect for the social agency and/or the worker.
 - Unwillingness to share information and preoccupation with protection of professional or agency turf.

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