

Now it's your turn! The assessment phase of the helping process includes a number of important skills that will help you obtain the information you need to move through it. This information will provide the foundation for its other phases. In fact, taking the time to thoroughly assess the applicant, the situation, and the needed services contributes to a more effective and efficient experience for all participants.

Exercise 1: The Initial Interview—The Applicant's Perspective

Helpees have a lot to teach us about the helping process. The following accounts relate the experiences of three helpees as they describe their initial interview.

Client 1

I made a (self-referral) telephone appointment to talk with a professional who briefly advised me to bring documentation of current earnings, my most recent tax return, a current receipt and telephone bill, a copy of my separation or divorce decree, and a current bank statement (and other records, ad infinitum) with me to our meeting. The site of our meeting was a day-care center located near several housing projects and homes. This center helps families find in-home child care for residents from all parts of the city. When I arrived for my early morning appointment, the receptionist asked me to take a seat. After waiting one half-hour beyond my scheduled appointment time, the receptionist called my name and escorted me to the office of the professional who would interview me.

She was sitting behind her desk talking on the phone and motioned for me to take a seat. I again waited at length while she completed her telephone conversation. At that point, she acknowledged me with a rather perfunctory, "Sorry to keep you waiting. It's been a crazy morning. Have any problem finding us? Good. Let's get started. Did you bring all the documentation that we'll need? Let's see what we have here"—all in one breath. The desk that separated us served as a physical barrier to any feelings of warmth, caring, interest, acceptance, or respect, which I would have welcomed. In fact, I remember feeling that she was contemptuous of me; but I wonder, in retrospect, whether my own distaste at having to ask for assistance or respect influenced my perceptions. My interviewer immediately delved into evaluating and processing reams of application paperwork. She was not interested in any other aspect of my life. She never asked if I needed any other help, financial or otherwise. She didn't offer information on any other resources that might have been available to me. In fact, she rarely made eye contact, but remained detached and businesslike. The experience felt much more like an interrogation than an interview. She fired questions at me, as she demanded each document that I was required to bring with me: "How much money

do you receive from the child's father each week? Why don't you want to place your child in our day-care program instead of the satellite program? You indicated that you don't own a car— if it's that inconvenient for you to get here, how did you get here today?"

At the conclusion of our meeting, she explained the accounting procedures, indicating that I would pay the agency directly for services rendered by a satellite caregiver. Payment would be based on a sliding scale based upon my income and ability to pay. She then dismissed me, never getting up from her desk, as she advised me that I would hear from her just as soon as my application was reviewed for acceptance by her supervisor. In fact, I did not hear from her at all but received a phone call from the day-care center.

1. List what you learned NOT to do in the initial interview.

2. Rewrite each negative you listed in Item 1 as a positive statement that will guide your behavior as a helping professional in the initial interview.

Client II

I don't think anyone ever told me exactly what their job was. See, I was very subservient to anybody in that area because I was scared. I mean literally scared to death. I had a phobia of failing and having everything jerked out from under me.

Here's what I think a helper should do. Clients are not numbers, so they shouldn't be treated like Client Number 4622 or a Social Security number. When you tell a client that the appointment is at 3:00 P.M., then the appointment is at 3:00 P.M. Nothing should interfere with that. I am going to treat my clients that way.

I think clients are already intimidated before they ever come in. They have a feeling that the help could be taken away at any time. That is something else every caseworker should do, reassure the client that as long as they fulfill their obligations, they can't lose the help they are getting. That was one of my biggest fears, and I was so afraid of it, I would not even ask. I would not even bring the subject up.

3. List what you learned NOT to do in the initial interview.

4. Rewrite each negative you listed in Item 3 as a positive statement that will guide your behavior as a helping professional in the initial interview.

Client III

The very first time I went to a meeting at DHS was to get help for myself, my daughter, and my ex-husband. When I went back the second time to apply for assistance for myself and my daughter, I ended up getting a really wonderful worker. I was walking on eggshells and I didn't know where to go. I didn't know what to do. I had no self-esteem, no self-respect. I was in the gutter and I didn't know where to go. And didn't know which end was up. My worker helped me.

I had another worker though who was awful. I had already started school and my worker changed. I went to this other worker, and she made me feel like dirt: "Here you are getting benefits, and you are not doing anything to help yourself. You are not even trying to find a job." It was just like I was a nobody. She didn't give me anything, and here I was doing everything I could. Her view was, I was on welfare, and I was a welfare mother, and that was all I was ever likely to be. In fact, I did go to her supervisor over that because it did hurt. And by that point I was strong enough to really voice how I felt. Had I had her in the beginning, I don't think I would have been able to do anything about it, but later on when I gained the confidence through going back to school and through support group meetings, and counseling, I was able to see that what she was doing wasn't fair to me. In fact, she ended up being taken off case management in DHS.

5. List what you learned NOT to do in the initial interview.

6. Rewrite each negative you listed in Item 5 as a positive statement that will guide your behavior as a helping professional in the initial interview.
