



Assessment

Behaviors: Collect and organize data, and apply critical thinking to interpret information from clients and constituencies.

Critical Thinking Question: What are some of the most important aspects to consider when completing an intake interview with an 80-year-old male recently placed in your long-term care facility? He has come to your facility by way of a discharge from a local hospital.

their problems through informal means and now seek the assistance of a well-trained and experienced professional who can assist them in dealing with their life problems. The purpose and goals of a professional relationship between a client and a social worker "are conscious and deliberate and come within the overall purpose and value system of the profession" (Compton, Galaway, & Cunniff, 2005). Implicit in this definition is the belief that clients will experience some type of improvement in their lives and will be empowered to make changes as a direct result of working with the social worker. As discussed earlier, the relationship between the social worker and client is a purposeful one that includes the systematic process of beginning, middle, and ending phases.

The relationship between the client and the social worker is unique. Both come into the relationship with a distinctive set of circumstances and life experiences. As social workers, we consider ourselves to be trained helpers and problem solvers. Social workers operate from an established knowledge base and a set of professional values, skills, and techniques. To affect a client's life, we draw on this professional knowledge and use it as the keystone for building the professional relationship between the client and ourselves. During the **engagement** phase, the social worker should focus on building a mutual commitment to the helping process and developing a cohesive relationship. Clients who view themselves and their social workers as engaged are more likely to achieve positive outcomes (Olinick, Romsted, & Willuzzi, 2004).

Clients who participate in the helping relationship may be uncertain about what to expect and what is required of them. It is likely that many of our clients have never interacted with a social worker. At most, they may have seen a news report or an episode on TV depicting a social worker taking children from their home or "losing" children within the state's foster care system. As you know, this characterization is rarely accurate and at best limits the role of the social worker to the child protective worker role. In reality, social workers work across the continuum of human needs with clients of all ages, cultures, and walks of life who often are seeing them for the first time. Sometimes, clients have had previous interaction with a social worker as a result of being court-mandated into treatment and, as such, are involuntary clients. Under this set of circumstances, our job of engaging a client in the helping process can be a very challenging one.

What does it mean to engage a client in the therapeutic helping process? It is important to understand the circumstances under which a client is coming to you for help. Many clients are scared about being "strunk," that the social worker will qualitatively "change them." Although as professional social workers we are sometimes sanctioned to intervene in our clients' lives, we must do so with the utmost respect and care. A challenge that we face, however, is helping our clients to understand the true nature of who we are as professionals and what we do.

Box 8.1 presents a series of reflective questions that can assist in increasing your understanding of the reciprocal nature of the helping relationship.

Now write your responses to the questions in Box 8.C. Pay special attention to those areas of your personal and professional characteristics that are in need of the most attention (and possibly modifying).

Box 8.1 The Reciprocal Nature of a Relationship

The nature of the helping relationship is reciprocal, meaning both parties seek to influence the other. As you develop a greater sense of yourself as a professional, consider the following:

How do you convey to the client that you are competent?

- What is your level of skill, education, specialized trainings, certificates, licenses, and experience and the type of setting where you practice?
- How do you convey being an expert (which means not that you have all of the answers but that if you are unsure how to proceed, you will seek assistance)?
- How do you convey a sense of confidence, even when you may not feel that way?
- How do you convey an appreciation for the influences of your own culture and that of others?
- How do you convey a respect for the diversity of values?
- Are you sensitive to the unique differences arising out of social class, race, gender, and so on?
- How do you manage conflicting feelings and situations?
- Do you derive meaning from work, and is this a passion for you?

What makes you an approachable person?

- Are you friendly and welcoming?
- Are you an honest and sincere person?
- Can you find humor where it is appropriate?
- Do you appear interested in what the client is saying?
- Are you the type of person who seems to be easy going but not a "pushover"?
- Are you willing to share some information about yourself while always being mindful of professional boundaries?
- Do you look for some similarities between you and the client (sports team, hobby, neighborhood where you live)?
- Do you respond to your client in ways that encourage nonverbal behaviors, such as eye contact, body posture, smiling, and head nodding?

How does a client sense that you are trustworthy?

- Do you have a reputation for honesty?
- Are you a person who is not motivated for personal gain?
- Can you maintain confidentiality?
- Is your word your honor? Does your "promise" mean something?
- Do you convey to your client, "I believe what you tell me?"
- Can you understand the client's point of view and suspend judgment?
- Do you convey a sense of "knowing" that the client may be on the threshold of change and it is scary?
- Are you consistent in your verbal and nonverbal messages?

How does the social worker pass the "Can I trust you" test? From the client's point of view, consider the following questions.

- Can I tell you a secret?
- Are you a person with whom I can be honest and vulnerable?
- Will you truly listen to me?
- Can I ask a favor of you and you will assist me, if my request is within reason?
- Can you handle what I am telling you without being shocked, judgmental, or embarrassed?
- If I am requesting information from you or some other type of resource from you, will you follow through?

What characteristics do you have in common with a client? How do these enhance or detract from the relationship?

- Do you believe that each person brings to the helping relationship a history of struggles, challenges, and successes?
- Do you believe that some clients may be more susceptible to the workers' influence based on race, gender, age, beliefs, culture, religion, or disability?
- Do you believe that clients come to the helping relationship with a set of perceptions about the process?
- Do you believe that change is possible?
- Are you open to change?
- Do you and your client share a similar vision for what is possible?