



Assessment

Behaviors: Develop mutually agreed-on intervention goals and objectives based on the critical assessment of strengths, needs, and challenges within clients and constituencies.

Critical Thinking Question: As a new social worker, you are concerned about how to start your first session with a client. The intake process has been completed, and you are meeting the client tomorrow. You know that the client is 18, pregnant, and living with her mother. She is a senior in high school and works part-time at a local grocery store. The intake form indicates that she is undecided about adoption or raising the child on her own. Plan out your introductory statement and develop a list of items you would like to address in the meeting (of course always understanding that the best laid plans can easily change).

MEETING THE CLIENT

As you reflect on your readiness to work with clients face to face, eventually the time comes to step out of your comfort zone into the world of your clients. All the practicing and role playing you have done in your classes will finally pay off as you put on your professional hat and forge ahead. You are ready and eagerly waiting for the client to arrive at your office or to make that first home visit. You can never undo a first impression, so make it count. Be polite, respectful, and genuine.

Preparing for the First Meeting

Probably one of the scariest things a novice social worker faces is how to prepare for the first visit with a client. As mentioned above, the client is already preparing to meet you, thinking about what to say and how to present himself or herself. As you plan for the first visit, whether a home visit or an office visit, be sure to have reviewed any material about the client that may be available. For example, the client may have completed an intake form, or perhaps information was collected over the telephone about the client's needs. You may have received a formal referral letter from another social worker, a teacher, a physician, or some other helping professional. Generally, some basic data accompany the client as an introduction. Through this introductory information, you may learn how the client came into contact with the agency's services. An important piece of information to know is whether the client is voluntary or involuntary.

Additionally, if you have some background information, such as a completed intake form, it can be helpful to do some preliminary informal and formal research about that particular topic, issue, or circumstance. In keeping with the social worker's obligation to develop multicultural competence, if your client is a member of a group that you have little familiarity with, this is a great opportunity to learn more.

Conversely, you may be working on a 24-hour hotline, and the nature of the calls is unknown. You have very little time to prepare for the interview other than to introduce yourself and ask the client how you may be of assistance. What you do know, however, is that the person is experiencing some type of distress. Mastery of basic interviewing skills and knowledge of resources may be the most beneficial preparation for engaging a client in this situation.

Favorable environmental conditions include a private office or space with comfortable seating. Keep light in your office that is not too glaring or bright. Chairs facing each other, placed within a comfortable distance for you and the client, is preferred. Obviously, few agencies have budgets for office decorating, but think about what you can include in the space to convey who you are as a helper. You can also express a sense of who you are and how you perform as a social worker based on the appearance of your office. A neat and well-ordered office can communicate to the client that you are organized, systematic, prepared, and focused. A messy, cluttered office can send the message that the worker is unprepared, incompetent, scattered, and unfocused. As you set up

your office space, consider what types of artwork, pictures, plants, certificates/diplomas, and furnishings can help the client to see you as human and approachable. Displaying artwork and having magazines that represent the client populations you work with can be an effective way of communicating interest and acceptance. Beware that small objects can be used as a weapon against you. For more details regarding your safety, see Box 8.7.

Box 8.7 Safety Principles and Precautions Inside and Outside of the Agency Setting

- S**ometimes a client may become agitated or hostile. It is important that workers and supervisors discuss how to handle such situations early on so that the social worker is informed of agency policy and a recommended course of action should such an event occur.
1. In an office setting, know how to activate the agency's alarm system or who to contact for help. Keep your desk relatively clutter free.
 2. It is common for social workers in a variety of social service settings to conduct interviews in a client's home. Such visits do expose you to risks. Home visits should be made with the full knowledge of your supervisor, including the client's address and phone number, your cell phone number, time of departure, time of return, other activities while on the trip, and so on.
 3. Workers should not conduct home visits when they feel uncomfortable or threatened in the situation. You should return to the agency and report the situation to your supervisor. Beware of dogs or other household pets that might be a threat. Ask the client to secure any pets if you feel threatened. You should not continue a home visit when alcohol and/or drugs are detected. As a general rule, if possible, go with a coworker. In addition to safety issues, it is helpful to have a second pair of eyes to keep track of the visit, interact with children, and take notes. Finally, a visit with a coworker can provide the opportunity to process what happened during the visit, high points, low points, impressions, and recommendations for future visits.
 4. Know who to call (or page) regarding what steps to take if a vehicle breaks down. Using AAA (American Automobile Association), your agency's roadside emergency card, or On-Star, for example, can keep you safe and get you back on the road quickly. When traveling by car to an agency or a home visit, it is important to know how to reach your destination. Consult a map, use GPS, and/or request directions from a reliable source before driving to unfamiliar areas. If you must stop and ask for directions, a convenience store or gas station is your best option. In general, remember to be alert and to lock doors and close windows.
 5. Mental health and correctional institutions serve client populations whose behavior may be unpredictable. It is important to learn strategies for handling clients whose behavior becomes threatening. Whenever you feel uncomfortable with clients, inform your supervisor. Another staff person may accompany the social worker when serving such clients.
 6. Some social service settings have activities that occur beyond normal office hours. Be aware of the location of these activities, such as the neighborhood, street lighting, open spaces, parking lots, shrubs, and other growth. It is appropriate for workers to ask someone to accompany them to their cars after dark. Do not take risks.
 7. When working with clients, it is important to remember that the treatment process often makes people feel vulnerable and may challenge their usual coping mechanisms. With some clients, this can contribute to problems with impulse control and can raise issues of safety for the client, the social worker, and others.
 8. At times, a social worker will work with clients who have difficulty with being present and lucid, dealing with overwhelming emotions, and controlling their anger. Some of them may be prone to violence and may possess weapons. Other clients may be intoxicated, high on drugs, or in withdrawal and may have other medical or neurological disorders. It is very important that you consult with your supervisor regarding preparation for and handling of specific situations that are potentially difficult or threatening. Never keep information about potentially dangerous clients to yourself, even if you believe you have good relationships with your clients.

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