

Chapter 8: Intake and Engagement

Several social work educators and authors (Cormier et al., 2005; Cormier & Cormier, 2011; Egan, 2014; Kortler, 2000) offer building blocks for creating a strong foundation for your professional therapeutic relationships with your clients:

- **Be warm, authentic, genuine, down to earth, and engaging—Be approachable and friendly (smile).** Be spontaneous. Let your humanness come through. Explore the client's expectations of the process and determine if it is realistic. Avoid social worker defensiveness and stay open and responsive to your client.
- **Strength and confidence—Appear to be knowledgeable and capable even if you don't always feel that way.** Clients want to believe that there is hope. It is through the safety of the relationship that the client is most likely to take risks. Always be mindful of the power differential in the relationship. Serve as a partner and collaborator. Form a working alliance with your client. Making an appropriate referral to a more experienced professional and/or consultation with your supervisor may be necessary if you are in too deep or over your head.
- **Be consistent and dependable—Trust is built over time and is easy to break.** For example, if you say you will check into housing options for your client, do it. Otherwise, trust is broken, and the relationship will suffer. Be on time, respect confidentiality, and follow through with promises and commitments.
- **Model honesty, frankness, and integrity—Through your own actions, clients can see and learn to respond similarly.** The helping relationship can serve as a guide throughout the client's life; be frank, respectful, consistent, and considerate. Always follow the NASW Code of Ethics (available on the NASW website) in all professional interactions.
- **Stay with client needs, not your own—Deal with your own issues so they do not cloud or color the relationship or your judgment.** It is important to focus and attend to the needs of the client, putting your own issues and struggles aside during the session. Convey a nonjudgmental attitude and actively seek to understand your client from his or her point of view. Stay objective so that you can give the client a new way of looking at an old problem. Keep your eye on the long view of the problem, remembering that change takes time. Consider which feelings are yours and which feelings are the client's. Go beyond yourself to help a client. Know your agency's policies and procedures on, for example, how and what can be done to assist a client.
- **Focus on the client's nonverbal messages and the immediacy of the interview (what is happening within the session)—Be aware of your own attending behaviors.** Are you fully present? Are you maintaining a relaxed demeanor and intermittent eye contact and mirroring the client's emotional reactions?
- **Go with the flow—Be willing to shift gears from one strategy or intervention to another, mid-session if necessary.** Consider what is and what isn't working between you and the client and adjust accordingly. Remember that relationships do change over time—both through this interaction and during the helping process itself. Be tolerant of ambiguity. View new situations as a challenge rather than a threat. Expect to be surprised and believe that you have the confidence to figure out whatever may come your way.

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- **Stay flexible—As you get to know your client and what makes him or her tick, be careful not to pigeonhole the client based on information about his or her culture, religion, family background, spirituality, socioeconomic status, and so on.** Avoid stereotypes. Be open-minded. This allows you to work with a wide variety or range of clients. Clients often feel that "if the social worker accepts me, then I must be okay."
- **Respond therapeutically—There are many ways to respond, but pick one that is helpful and does no harm to the client.** With enough goodwill between the client and the social worker, regrouping and moving ahead is possible. Put aside your own concerns to fully engage with the client; however, connectedness and shared understanding are critical aspects of the helping relationship. Learn from your mistakes and respond accordingly.
- **Show care and concern—Use all the social work interviewing skills as a way of communicating that you value your client as a human being.** Communicate this concern through the relationship. The best predictor of outcome of the helping process is the relationship between the social worker and the client (Hill & O'Brien, 2014).
- **Offer ongoing support and encouragement—Offering a supportive word may be exactly what is needed.** For example, a client may be unsure how to approach a situation that is new to him or her. A word of encouragement, such as "good job," "keep up the good work," or "you did the right thing," is extremely helpful. Encouragement that is grounded in a job well done is different from false assurance.

Three questions are posed in Box 8.E regarding how you differentiate between a professional relationship and a personal relationship.

Self-Awareness

It is important to elaborate on the necessity of knowing yourself as a person and as a professional. Brill and Levine (2012) describe the process of becoming knowledgeable and disciplined in relationships and the importance of developing a personal objectivity based on qualities such as **self-awareness**. Below is a series of questions to help you begin the self-reflection process:

1. Awareness of self and personal needs, weaknesses, and strengths
 - What factors contributed to your decision to become a social worker?
 - What makes you tick and contributes to who you are?
 - How do you communicate to others regarding your needs, wants, and interests?

Box 8.E Now You Try It . . . Professional Relationships versus Friendship

Define what friendship means to you.
Define what a professional relationship means to you.

How do you differentiate between the two?