How Social Workers Build Relationships with Clients

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Recent social work graduates may be equipped with an social work degree and internship experience ready to apply their newly acquired expertise in real world settings. It is important for new practitioners to understand that in many ways these skills will continue to be re-shaped, adapted, re-worked, and challenged on a day to day basis. Although, there are many tools provided by a formal education, there are some intangibles that must be developed through experience that are necessary to create positive client outcomes. The things social work students learn in schools are only the tip of the iceberg, as the psychosocial issues that clients generally present are very complex.

Social work by nature is a helping profession. One may become well versed in assessing risk factors, identifying client needs, and linking people with the resources necessary to help them become empowered members of society. One must develop rapport with clients in order to have an effective relationship. Furthermore, a social workers assessment will determine the client's official diagnosis and will guide the intervention and the plan of care. Those interested in becoming a social worker will need plenty of tools working in concert in order to address the myriad of emotional, personal, family and/or group problems, in a competent and efficient manner. So what tools may be needed you ask?

Client Assessment Skills:

Your assessment interview is likely the first opportunity you will have to start building a working relationship with your clients. Through the interview process social workers learn about their clients past experiences and coping strategies, their goals for treatment, and then begin to identify their strengths and needs as well as their opportunities for improvement. During the assessment you work to develop the best intervention strategy to meet the client’s unique needs. Assessment begins on initial interaction with the client and continues on an ongoing basis throughout the relationship and until the completion of services.

Supportive Skills:

As a social worker, not only will you work hand in hand with your clients, you will also often act as their early support system. Social workers need to be sensitive and supportive of their clients and this comes in the form of social support, emotional support, and empathy. A social workers worth might be measured by how you help your clients build their own support systems in order to help the client have better and longer lasting outcomes.

Empathy Skills:

The ability to be empathetic is paramount in validating your client's feelings. Empathy helps you to accept your client's plight and lets them know that you are listening and you are genuine. It is important to be mindful of the use of sympathy. Sympathy can sometimes be confused with empathy. The difference between them is that sympathy is having a concern.
empathy means accepting and understanding the client's feelings which may help you become better equipped to help them help themselves. This is definitely a learned skill and an important tenant of social work practice. Experience in this area will come with more exposure to clients and the diversity of issues that you will tackle.

Neutrality Skills:
It is important not to be judgmental of your client's circumstances by keeping an open mind without imposing your own religious, political, and personal views on your clients. You will be working in many different settings with many different clients whose moral or ethical compass may be much different than your own. You might also work with clients whose values and ideas you are able to identify with. In either of these cases you must use your ability to discern in order to limit the occurrence of transference or countertransference, a phenomenon where the client or the counselor mistakenly redirects their personal feelings onto the other person. Regardless of the type of client or population you work with it is important to trust the social work code of ethics to guide your judgment. This skill will be honed in due time with emphasis on the fact that you must also learn to adequately address your own value system and be in touch with your bias before you can find your middle ground and truly meet the client where they are.

Rapport Building Skills:
Being able to build a trusting relationship with your clients is an art. There can be many variables that can diminish a client's acceptance of new person in their life. When you are able to support your client, help them identify other support systems, accurately assess their needs, empathize with their unique situation in a non-judgmental and value neutral way, then you can begin to build a strong therapeutic relationship with your client.

It is important that you develop these core social work skills in order to be effective. Your social work toolbox will be filled with valuable skills as you begin working with different communities, individuals, and groups across different jobs. If you are able to master these skills you could have a great foundation for working in the diverse and rewarding field of social work.

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