

Engaging trusting working relationships

[A strong foundation on which to create]

Supportive relationships

With people experiencing more complex sets of needs, it may helpfully take the form of a series of unstructured, informal and shared encounters that take place at the beginning of the process of relationship-building. The reflective practitioner understands that delivering good work starts from the very first brief encounter: **You don't get a second chance to create first impressions.** The need to focus on the tasks of developing the relationship can often arise from the justified mistrust and ambivalence that people hold or experience from previous knowledge or contact with services. As a practitioner new to the person you are unlikely to be fully aware of their feelings or previous experiences. Things to be mindful of include:

- Your professional approach or model of practice will be of little interest to the service user or carer; they have their own views on their needs and how they should be met
- As a service provider you will often be adopting *systems thinking*, involving a broader consideration of your workload and time management; the service user or carer will be focused in the here and now
- First meetings shouldn't *just happen*; they require thought and planning, including ideas about where and when the person may feel more comfortable, how they wish to be addressed, who they want present, ethnicity, gender and cultural factors... gaining as much prior *intelligence* can only help
- Pay attention to the atmosphere emerging during the first meeting; take leads from the person and circumstances as they arise (be situationally and emotionally observant), and apply your basic (or advanced) use of counselling skills
- Be prepared to deal with contradictions (e.g. the need to plan for spontaneity); be as conversational as possible, rather than sticking to a rigid script
- Don't treat failure of the first meeting as necessarily attributable to the person; they have a right to take time to get to know and trust a practitioner
- Accept that you may have to work with fluctuating degrees of engagement, and may have to use more indirect methods of contact such as written means or other people
- Bureaucratic systems deal with numbers and timescales, but as a practitioner you are dealing with a person... these two approaches frequently conflict. ***Painting by numbers will always produce an unsatisfying experience for all, as it can never produce the rich textured picture that has real meaning and impact.***

Therapeutic relationships

When thinking about the whole population of people who consult mental health services, the majority are unlikely to need extended unbroken contact. More focused

therapeutic approaches are required for specific needs, and the implied relationship of trust is more of a given. However, this is not to say that the long-term supportive relationships are not therapeutic. As an approach, these tend to be distinguished by more professionalised characteristics:

- Unilateral, with a focus on solving the problems presented by the service user
- Formal, in its organisation in time and place
- Time-limited, in terms of the duration being defined by the achievement of stated goals and objectives
- Explicit or implicit contracts to guide behaviours within the boundaries of the relationship
- Defined by stated models of professional practice, including claims to the use of counselling skills (e.g. initiative skills, facilitative skills, responsive skills)
- A narrow definition of the relationship, uncluttered by additional roles of friend, partner or parent

The importance of self-awareness

Burnard (1992) reminds us that self-awareness is an essential element of any effective working relationship. It is described as “... *the gradual and continuous process of noticing and exploring aspects of the self, whether behavioural, psychological, or physical, with the intention of developing personal and interpersonal understanding. Such awareness... is intimately bound up with our relationships with others. To become more aware of and to have a deeper understanding of ourselves is to have a sharper and clearer picture of what is happening to others*” (p176).

Reference:

Burnard, P. (1992) *Effective Communication Skills for Health Professionals*. London: Chapman & Hall.