Casework Assessment

Kickstarter Guides for New Social Workers

Part 1

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COACHING + CONSULTING

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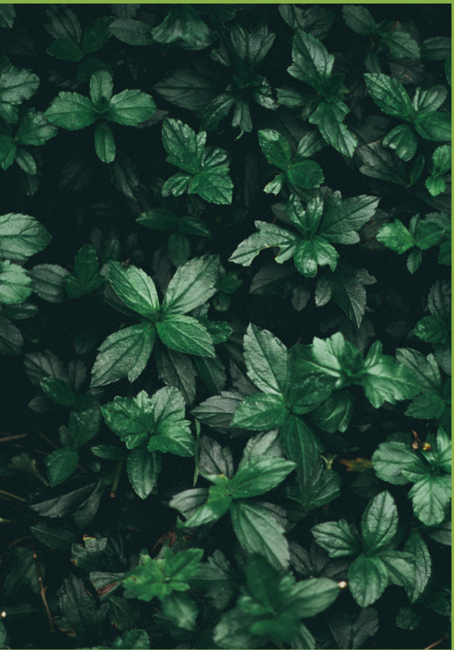

What's Inside?

Casework Assessment is a core function in social work and human services practice. This Kickstarter provides a framework for thinking that will be useful for social workers and others in most casework practice situations where client needs are being assessed. More detailed discussion of assessment can be found in the References and Resources at p.10.

Theory - it matters ...

*Casework Assessment rests on two practical theoretical perspectives - **Trauma Informed Practice** and **Strengths-Based Practice**.*

Trauma-informed Practice
The foundational concepts of trauma-informed practice are trauma awareness, safety, choice and control (noting that this does not require the client to disclose trauma). The relationship between the social worker and the client rests on respectful language, learning and collaboration. In practice this means choosing to build trust and relationship over gathering information; listening more than talking; asking permission to share information; using clear, respectful language; checking understanding and providing the client with choice about services and supports (1). Client autonomy is the primary practice value here. Note that this practice does not require the client to disclose details of the trauma.

Strengths-Based Practice
The foundational values of strengths-based practice are: 1. All persons possess strengths they can use to improve the quality of their lives. 2. We can support clients to increase motivation by consistently emphasising client-defined strengths. 3. Discovering strengths requires joint exploration by clients and helpers. 4. Focusing on strengths turns conversation toward discovering how clients survive rather than judging or blaming. 5. All environments – even the most bleak – contain resources.
In practice, these values translate into questions which focus on survival, support, exceptions and possibilities (3)

Your Role & Responsibility

Where to start ? Be clear about 3 things:

- ***Who is the client?***
- ***What is your role with the client?***
- ***What can you offer?***

Who is the client?
While the answer may seem obvious this question should stay top of mind in assessment. Clients are connected to a context - family, friends, community, services network - and you may, in your assessment process, have some contact points with these contexts. Contact may be direct conversations either jointly with the client or separately; or your contact may be indirect through relayed conversations by your client. **Retaining a focus on the person/people whose opportunities you are there to improve is a necessary precursor to effective assessment.**

What is your role?
Role clarity is essential for establishing a clear and transparent scope of work with your client. You are employed to practice within a scope that is articulated by your profession, in your agency vision/mission and more specifically in your role description. The functions and tasks that you are employed to do should be clearly stated. **Respectful practice which builds trust, supports client choice and facilitates collaboration requires you to be clear with your client about your role and function, including limits to privacy, confidentiality and contact.** This should be included in your initial meeting with the client .

What can you offer?
Be very specific about what you can offer to your client. This will include type of service, frequency of contact, who will provide the service, length of involvement, service review frequency. **The client should be able to make an informed decision about participating in the assessment process before it starts.**

What is, what could be ... and what's between.

Help your client to articulate:

- ***What Is?***
- ***What Could Be?***
- ***What Will Get Them There?***

What is? – Feelings/Needs/ Information
This is the typical starting point in assessment aka the 'issue' or 'problem'. As you listen it can be helpful to think about what you hear as:
Feelings: Feelings signify that needs are being met (positive feelings) or are not being met (negative feelings). Helping your client to find the words for the emotions and sensations they experience gives you insight into what your client wants and their priorities. (see **Resources** for a helpful list of words describing feelings)
Needs: The outcomes they seek, which may be practical, social and/or emotional to support day-to-day living.
Information: This may include current services they use, reports that have been written or anything else they want you to know.

What could be? – Hopes/Vision
Solutions to problems are most likely to be found when clients are connected to what they truly **want** (4)**.** This may be different from what they, or others, say they **need**. Wanting is about hope and envisioning their best life. By taking the time to explore this in your assessment you let the client know that this is important and that you want to work with them towards achieving as much of this vision as they can. It conveys that you are hopeful and optimistic about what is possible.

The space between – What will get you there?
This is the place where an action plan is co-created. It is essential that you have established trust and connection before planning. If this is not the case – go back to the earlier part of the conversation!

Assessment is a conversation with the client - worker relationship at the centre. Be sure to let your client have the final word in the conversation - any plan must be 100% owned by the client .

Key skills

Listening

Listening is a whole of body activity

Regardless of the model you use as a guide ('OARS', 'SOLER' etc.) the **foundation of powerful listening is being mindfully present in the moment**. Your client will experience this as deeply respectful and it will create safety in which your client is more likely to share their experience, needs and hopes. Some quick tips for mindful listening (6):

- Pause after your client has spoken and before you speak
- Weave the client's words and story into your responses
- Listen for emotion, tone, energy, body language, hesitation and pacing of the client's responses
- Do not interrupt (except where your client wanders completely off track)
- Attend fully to the client and make minimal notes - there are rarely situations in which verbatim notes are required.

Reflection

Perceptive reflections are part of listening

Reflections encourage the client to extend their thinking and then continue talking with you about the topic (6). There are several ways to show that you've heard and understood your client. Some examples

- Simple paraphrasing - these might start with "it sounds as though ..."
- Expressing empathy - "you're feeling XXX because of YYY"
- Acknowledging ambivalence – "you saying XXX and/but you're also thinking about YYY"

Inquiry

Insightful inquiry provokes deep thinking

These form the smallest part of the conversation, however, asking a great question can build connection and help your client to think in new ways – some examples of great questions are below.

Great questions

1 Of your client (1) (2) (4)

- **Survival** – **(<u>What is?</u>)** How have you managed to survive (or thrive) so far, given the things you have had to deal with? How have you been able to rise to the challenges put before you? What was your mind-set as you faced these difficulties?
- **Support** – **(<u>What is?</u>)** What people have given you understanding, support, and guidance? Who are the people on whom you can depend? What is it that these people give you that is exceptional?
- **Exception** – **(<u>What is?</u>)** When things were going well in life, what was different? In the past, when you felt that your life was better what about your world, your relationships, your thinking was special or different?
- **Esteem** – **(<u>What is?</u>)** When people say good things about you, what are they likely to say? What is it about your life, yourself, and your achievements that give you pride? How will you know when things are going well in your life — what will you be doing, who will you be with, how will you be feeling, thinking, and acting? What gives you genuine pleasure in life?
- **Possibility (<u>What could be?</u>) –** What do you want out of life – for yourself and for your children? What are your hopes, visions, and aspirations? What people or personal qualities are helping you move in these directions? What do you like to do? What are your talents and abilities? How can I help you achieve what you want for yourself/your kids/your family?
- **Best life (<u>What could be?</u>)** – When you think about your life at its best what do you see? Where are you? Who is there with you? What are the things you are doing each day? What are you enjoying?
- **Action (<u>What are the steps/tasks?</u>) –** What needs to happen for you to get there? How can I support you to achieve this? Who else can be involved in supporting you? What's the pathway towards what you want? What challenges do you see? How might they be overcome?

Great questions

2 Of other agencies

Before seeking information or perspectives about your client from anyone other than your client be sure to clearly and unambiguously seek their permission, preferably in writing. This communicates respect and transparency. Client choice and autonomy starts with asking permission and then openly sharing with the client what was discussed. (The only exceptions to this will be where you are in a role that is constrained by regulations or legislation. In this case you can still be transparent within these constraints.)
Some questions here:

- In the time that you have worked with the client what change or growth have you noticed?
- What are/have been X's goals in working with you/your agencies
- What success has X celebrated while working with you?
- What does X see as the most important change for them to make?
- What challenges have you noticed to be the most significant for X in making these changes?
- Who in your agency is X most connected to?
- How did X's relationship with your agency begin/end?
- How can we work together to best support X to achieve their goals?

3 Of yourself

- What are my underlying assumptions about clients and how people recover from trauma and overcome challenges? How might this belief influence my work with others?
- What particular responses or behaviours of those I am assisting might trigger me? How do I know when this is happening? How will I respond?
- How do my cultural background and personal experiences of diversity influence my interactions with others? What am I bringing to the relationship? (1)

Putting it all together

Consider Context

Be sure to understand your client within the broader systems and context. This will include

- Developmental Stage
- Culture
- Gender
- Socio-economic status
- Legal status

Know and Use the Service Network

Use your intra- and inter-agency relationships

As a beginning practitioner it will be helpful for you and your clients if you have a local network of service providers and supportive professionals. As you make connections you will meet people who have similar (and vastly different!) practice perspectives. Understanding what is available and the way in which other services and individuals work will allow you to refer your clients with confidence and provide them with accurate information about what they might reasonably expect from the person or service you are recommending.

Be Prepared to Advocate

Social workers are influential

Advocacy work is part of every social work role whether you work with individuals, groups or communities. Becoming influential and being comfortable using your influence flows from understanding your own professional identity and practice framework. In short – understand why social work matters to you and how you want to practice. What you are prepared to advocate for will flow from this.

A deeper dive ...

*Bringing it back to theory for those who want to explore the concepts more closely ... take a look at the resources below ... **Asking Great Questions** and **Understanding Feelings and Needs***

Creating great questions
It is helpful to dig more deeply into the process of creating questions. This approach helps you to flexibly create and ask questions which will help your client to reflect. The 'Question Cube' is a model which provides a useful framework for this process. It entails consideration of Format (open, closed, ranking, rating, forced choice, closed), Subject (behaviours, feelings, beliefs, meaning, relationships) and Orientation (self, other) and adding time and mood - this approach opens up worlds of possibility - for more read the article *'The Question Cube Reimagined'* in the references (7).

Understanding Feelings and Needs
As your relationship with your client grows and trust and safety are well-established, there will be opportunities to help your client name and express the range of emotions which are part of their experience. A first step in this will be to become articulate comfortable with the vocabulary of emotion yourself. Some great resources have been produced to support this process for practitioners and clients. (see *'Compassionate Communication'* below)

References

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2. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: Practical Guide for Implementing a Trauma-Informed Approach. SAMHSA Administration, 2023. https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/pep23-06-05-005.pdf
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4. May, N, Becker, Frankel, R et al (2011) Appreciative Inquiry in Healthcare - Positive Questions to Bring Out the Best, Crown Publishing, Brunswick, Ohio
5. Egan, G (1998) The Skilled Helper
6. Moore, M, Jackson, E, Tschannen-Moran, B (2016) Coaching Psychology Manual
7. Matthews, S (2023) *'The Question Cube re-imagined – a 5-dimensional model for cultivating coaches' capacity for curious inquiry'* in American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine

Practice Resources

Compassionate Communication (including Feelings and Needs Chart)

Casework Assessment Mind Map

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