



3 Principles for Effective Social Work Case Management

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



As an individual working in social work case management, you strive to have a positive impact on the community around you. You serve as a catalyst to better lifestyles for each of your clients. However, your job isn't easy.

You oversee multiple elements of a client's wellness. As such, you are responsible for a wide array of tasks during the time between initial assessment and final discharge. At times, client relationship can become secondary to the frenzy of service coordination, documentation, communication among providers, burdensome technology, and other aspects of such an unpredictable field. This wide spectrum of responsibility can make it difficult to maintain focus, which can hinder you from effectively facilitating transformation in your clients' lives.

This is why it's helpful to understand three basic principles that will enable you to be more effective at social work case management. These principles are tried and true, based on the experiences of human services professionals using Clarity Human Services case management software, as well as the expertise of Clarity Human Services staff.

Taking practical steps to apply these principles to your day-to-day work will help you stay on track, and see better results in your job.

The purpose of this white paper is to present three principles for effective social work case management:

- 1. Evidence-based practice*
- 2. Trusting relationships*
- 3. Client empowerment*

For each principle, we'll look at the philosophy behind it, some practical steps you can implement, and some examples and resources you can review.

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PRINCIPLE #1

TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS

The therapeutic relationship between practitioner and client plays an integral role in case management.^[1] Developing this kind of relationship with your client enables you to better engage them and develop the appropriate interventions for them.

A large part of this principle is providing a safe environment for your clients to share their story, problems, and feelings. Clients have indicated that the following four personality characteristics are most important to them in a social worker:

- Understanding
- Empathic
- Pleasant
- Ability to put one at ease^[2]

When you embody these characteristics, you communicate that you are genuinely interested in your client and that you are a safe person. Another key part of being a safe person is maintaining confidentiality at all times. It's important that your client knows you are someone they can trust to protect their story.

Practical Steps

CONVEY EMPATHY

Studies have shown that patients with an empathetic therapist tend to progress more in treatment and experience a higher probability of eventual improvement.^{[3][4]}

"[In your ability to convey empathy], you are a confident companion to the person in his/her inner world. By pointing to the possible meanings in the flow of his/her experiencing, you help the person to focus on this useful type of referent, to experience the meanings more fully, and to move forward in the experiencing."^[5]

— Carl R. Rogers, PhD

Keep in mind that empathy is different from sympathy. Sympathy is having a concern for a client's well-being but not necessarily having a deeper understanding of the client's thoughts and feelings. On the other hand, empathy refers to accepting and understanding the client's feelings, helping you become better equipped to help the client help themselves.^[6]

Some practical ways to convey empathy, include:

- Suspending your own judgments and critiques
- Using reflection to clarify what the client is saying
- Keying in to shared human values^[7]

SHOW CONFIDENCE IN YOUR SKILLS

It can be scary, awkward, and challenging to build a relationship with a client who may be going through experiences you can't relate to. And sometimes, you might even have clients who express doubt in your ability to help them. Regardless of extraneous factors, always maintain your confidence.

Sharon Lacay shares this story in *The New Social Worker*:

" ... Two sessions in, my fears were confirmed when one of the women remarked that I looked young and that I may not be able to understand where she and the others were coming from. She continued and voiced her doubts that I may not be able to appreciate their seasoned wisdom about life. In response, I paused for a moment and gathered my confidence. ... I said, "You are right. I'm not an expert on life, or yours. One of the great things about being a part of this group is that we can learn from each other. I'd love if you told me more about yourself, what you think makes you strong, and what you hope to gain from our work together."

"This took her by surprise, and I felt a sigh of relief when she smiled and noticeably let her guard down. **By validating her reluctance and showing that I wasn't there to tell her how to live her life or how to heal, she saw me as an ally.**"^[3]

FOCUS ON THE CLIENT

This is a broad topic, but we want to discuss here the importance of balancing active listening with intake, assessment, and documenting other case notes. Gathering the necessary information to help your client is important, but so is making sure your client feels heard so they continue to share information with you. In addition to practicing the tips mentioned for conveying empathy, be sure to lean forward, make eye contact and nod your head when appropriate.

One of the best ways to balance active listening with data collection is to use a client management software that is easy to use. When you have a client management software that makes it easy to enter data and take notes, you no longer have to focus on the hassles of technology. Instead, you can focus on your client, confident that you gathering the required information while still giving your client full attention.

Examples and Resources

Below are some examples and resources to help you look further into this principle:

- [Empathic: An Unappreciated Way of Being](#)
- [Breaking Boundaries with Empathy: How the Therapeutic Alliance Can Defy Client/Worker Differences](#)
- [Four Techniques for Active Listening](#)
- [How to Conduct a Client Interview](#)

PRINCIPLE #2

EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE

As evidence-based practice (EBP) is increasingly emphasized in social work, it's an important principle for social workers and case managers to remember and apply.

EBP is a process practitioners use to guide and inform the delivery of treatments and services, integrating the following four components:

- Current client needs, situation, and environment
- Best available research evidence
- Client values and preferences
- Clinician's judgment and expertise

Evidence-based practice requires that the practitioner, researcher, and client work together to identify and determine what works, and for whom and in which particular situations.^[8] The EBP approach ensures that the development and implementation of treatment and services produce the most effective outcomes possible.

There is much that can be said about evidence-based practice, but one important aspect worth noting is that each of these components is equally weighted. Many practitioners and other



professionals have mistakenly thought that EBP means evaluating best available evidence, focusing on academic research alone. However, research evidence is only one of four parts in the process; the other three are critical to doing EBP correctly.^[9]

Practical Steps

ANALYZE & ADJUST

Even though the research supports a particular treatment, you may need to take a different route if you're not seeing positive change in your client's life.

Bonnie Spring, PhD, says:

"Suppose you start giving the treatment that had the very best research support. Three months into the treatment, the client is deteriorating, but you're continuing to give the same treatment. I'd say that you're no longer doing evidence-based practice. Part of the evidence-based practice process is that you have to analyze and adjust. You need to measure how you're doing because if you're implementing a best practice but the client is deteriorating, you've got to change course. Just doing what the overall body of research says is only where you start. From there on, you make choices based on what your own client's data show is working."^[10]

COLLECT & EVALUATE QUALITY DATA

In order to use the evidence-based practice model, you must take the time to collect and evaluate precise data. In doing so, you are able to clearly see what works and what doesn't work, allowing you to confidently incorporate this data into the EBP process.

One way to ensure quality data collection and evaluation is the proper utilization of case management software. When you have a client

management software that complies with industry data standards, facilitates streamlined intake and assessment, and allows for seamless generation of reports, you can rest assured that you are gathering the information necessary to best inform your practice.

USE GIS TO BETTER UNDERSTAND ENVIRONMENT

GIS (geographic or geospatial information systems) is a significant but often overlooked tool that can be used to foster better service planning and delivery to people in need.^[11]

Social and environmental factors vary for each community, making it important to study the specific neighborhood in which your client lives.^[12] Geographical location can help you understand the barriers your client may be facing, such as health problems present in the neighborhood, lack of quality public education and/or affordable housing, high crime rates, etc.

There are several different ways to access data from geographic information systems, or to collect the data yourself. One option is to use a case management software that has a built-in GIS tool, combining map data visualization with powerful analytics. Using an integrated system like this makes it easy to conduct data entry, reporting and GIS techniques all in a single interface. [Other options are listed here.](#)

Examples and Resources

Below are some examples and resources to help you look further into this principle:

- [Evidence-Based Practice](#)
- [Social Work: Evidence-Based Practice Resources](#)
- [Bridging Evidence-Based Practice with Social Work](#)

PRINCIPLE #3

CLIENT EMPOWER- MENT



Dating back to the late 19th century, early social work case managers viewed themselves as benevolent helpers. However, caseworkers today now recognize their relationship with clients as a partnership instead.^[13]

As you recognize the dignity, worth, and rights that belong to each of your clients, you can instill a sense of self-determination in each of your clients as you guide them. This will empower them to reach higher levels of life satisfaction. This will also leave them with the confidence to make healthy choices.

“The personal empowerment dynamic is similar to a traditional clinical notion of self-determination whereby clients give direction to the helping process, take charge and control of their personal lives, get their ‘heads straight,’ learn new ways to think about their situations, and adopt new behaviors that give them more satisfying and rewarding outcomes. Personal empowerment recognizes the uniqueness of each client.”^[14]

— Charles D. Cowger

While you act as the early support system for your client, it’s important that you help them build their own support systems and make their own decisions, encouraging the client to reach more effective and sustainable outcomes.

Practical Steps

HELP THE CLIENT DEFINE AND OWN THEIR STORY

This is part of being empathic when interacting with your client. The significance of helping the client define their situation—clarifying the reasons they have sought assistance—and helping them evaluate and give meaning to the factors that affect their situations.^[14]

But remember that as you listen and seek to understand

your client's situation, you must be careful to remember it is *their* story, not yours.

In assessment, the client's understanding of their own situation—their view of the situation, the meaning they ascribe to the situation, and their feelings or emotions tied to the situation—surpass facts found in client data, academic research, and your personal or professional interpretation of the client's story. In this, it's important to believe the client.

[14]

"There is no evidence that people needing social work service tell untruths any more than anyone else," Cowger writes. " ... Clients may need help to articulate their problem situations, and 'caring confrontation' by the worker may facilitate that process. However, clients' understandings of reality are no less real than the social constructions of reality of the professionals assisting them."^[14]

The client owns the story, and if they sense that you respect their ownership of their story, they will feel empowered to more fully share it with you.^[14]

RECOGNIZE THE CLIENT'S INDIVIDUALITY

Because every client is different, the treatment and services they receive must be tailored to the client's specific needs. In one regard, this involves asking the client questions such as:

- What do you want and expect from assistance?
- What do you hope to have happen in relation to your current problem situation?
- What do you believe are your strengths?

Asking these questions helps the client consider their own situation and contribute to their own treatment and services plan.

Recognizing the client's individual needs also involves customizing intake forms, creating goal plans and targeted variables, and streamlining the assessment and prioritization process for each individual client. This can be done through a case management software that allows for these customization, measurement, and prioritization capabilities.

AVOID BLAME AND BLAMING

Focusing on blame—whether the client blames others, or assumes blame themselves—hinders the process of finding a solution to the client's problem. If the client blames themselves, it only encourages low self-esteem. If the client blames others, the client may resolve to helplessness, losing motivation to learn how to address the problem. This is the opposite of client empowerment.

It is ineffective to assign blame when most client situations encountered are a combination of countless possible events, including physical and/or mental health, social environments, and other chance happenings.^[14] If the assessment turns to blame, redirect the conversation. Remember that “things happen; people are vulnerable to those happenings, and therefore, they seek assistance” (Cowger).^[14]

Examples and Resources

Below are some examples and resources to help you look further into this principle:

- [Assessing Client Strengths: Clinical Assessment for Client Empowerment](#)
- [Social Work with Homeless Mothers: A Strength-Based Solution-Focused Model](#)

CONCLUSION

Your job is essential to the well-being of your client and their community. While social work case management involves many different roles to fill and moving parts to coordinate, entering your work each day with these three principles in mind can help pull those pieces together.

As you assess your client, providing a safe environment and developing a relationship built on trust encourages the client to open up and work with you in order to best understand their situation. Applying the evidence-based practice process ensures you're continually testing and adjusting the treatment and services that work best for your client.

Finally, throughout your interactions with your client, empowering them to own their story and set goals increases the likelihood of bringing about positive, sustainable outcomes in your client's life.

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