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In the Field: A Real-Life Survival Guide for the Social Work Internship

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CHAPTER 4: Staying the Course



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STAYING THE COURSE

A large part of being successful in a field placement has to do with settling in for the long haul and getting comfortable with day-to-day routines of your agency. In truth, you will probably never get as comfortable as the social workers employed at your agency, for several reasons: You're being evaluated by at least two people, your supervisor and the teacher of the course at your school, so you may feel that you are under scrutiny during your entire placement. You're also walking in as "the new kid on the block," and, for a while at least, all eyes will be on you. Once you seem to be fitting in, things will relax a bit, you'll feel more comfortable, and everything will settle down to something of a routine. It may seem that, just as you're getting the hang of everything, your placement will be finished, and you'll be on to the next chapter in your life.

THE TEAM AND AGENCY AS SYSTEMS

In the classroom you have defined and discussed micro, mezzo, and macro theories of practice. You are now experiencing all three at the same time and you may not fully realize the process until it is pointed out to you. Any agency you are assigned to is a system and system issues will be present. Large institutions may make it easier to see the systems issues on all three levels, departments, wards, or specialty units within the institution. A classic example would be a general hospital, but social work placements are in small agencies as well. It may be harder to see the systems issues at all three levels, but they are there. Become aware of the three levels within your agency, and you will understand why things change and why they do not change. Listen intently at team meetings or department meetings, learn the issues, and identify the problems. Remember there are many combinations, so be alert. Here are some possibilities: There is the team (often multidisciplinary), the client group, the social work department, the agency as part of a larger organization. Another combination is you, your supervisor, and your clients. Funding sources are also part of the system; do not ignore them.

If you are called on to identify the micro, mezzo, and macro systems in your placement, one tool that may help you get started is drawing an ecosystem. By placing you, your client, or your agency in the center you can identify the surrounding elements and their impact on the central figure.

MULTICULTURAL INTERVIEW

Before you engage a client in your first interview or an assessment process, you need to have a solid understanding that your client may belong to a different culture than your own. Many agencies involve the staff in cultural diversity training, not to be used for work with clients, but for working with diverse cultural groups among the staff. Their efforts are to increase awareness, sensitivity, and understanding that different cultures may not interpret a situation in the same way. This is not the same as your classroom discussion about understanding cultural diversity and the multicultural interview. You must be aware that the clients you will be helping can and will bring a varied range of cultural differences. Your sensitivity to this is essential in the helping process. You do not want to make interventions that are inappropriate and useless for this individual because you did not take the time to understand the client's culture. Yes, it is true that clients are very forgiving if you make a mistake and will give you a second chance, but that does not excuse you the second time, and really not even the first time if you did your homework.

Always begin with the basics: Treat your client as an individual, with respect and dignity. Do not assume you understand a culture because you have read material about it. Within cultures there are wide ranges of variation. Look at your own culture and see the diversity and similarities you experience with others of the same culture, in terms of behaviors, traditions, values, and attitudes.

- Take time to understand the client's culture.
- Ask clients about their culture when appropriate.
- Ask your supervisor about agency experience with specific cultures.
- Find reading material relevant to the client's ethnicity.
- Learn the cultural taboos.
- Learn the cultural behaviors.
- Be aware there is verbal as well as nonverbal communication.

There are enough pitfalls in building a trusting relationship with a client, and errors concerning cultural differences are avoidable if you take the time to do your homework.

ASSESSMENTS

Assessments are critical tools in social work, and your understanding of them is important. There are many types of assessments, all with the same intent: to gather information on clients. The range is enormous, including developmental history, mental status, family history, vocational history, and medical history, just to name a few. These assessments are known by many different names, often depending on the agency where you are. So the first order of

business is to familiarize yourself with the assessments your placement uses. Ask for copies of blank forms so you can review and look for areas you don't fully understand. You can then discuss these with your supervisor.

Perhaps one of the best ways you can serve your client is to be generally familiar with the bio-psychosocial model of assessment or comprehensive client history. Look for strengths and weakness in your clients. Use this information to build your assessment. Some agencies will be very narrow in their focus, others will not be, so follow the lead of your placement.

The mental status assessment I learned in one agency is of little use to me in my current graduate school placement. My new supervisor concentrates on my assessment of the clients' needs, but is not very interested in the clients' moods, for example. I'm glad I learned that particular assessment, even though it's not valuable to me right now. I'm happy I was able to build a broad base of assessment knowledge that may come in handy later on in my career as I become more specialized.

Assessment skills may be in use, even when they don't appear to be.

I was visiting my mother in the hospital following her surgery and in the next bed was a patient who had just received a lung transplant. One of the hospital's social workers came to meet with this patient to discuss and review insurance coverage for post-hospital care. The bulk of the time was spent discussing what benefits the patient qualified for at this time. Seems narrow in focus, yes, but the role of this social worker was to assist the client with managing financially with life-long medications. That does not mean that, at the same time, the social worker was not assessing the client in terms of acceptance of the new organ and the life changes the client will be making, the impact on family, or the ability to work.

Assessments can be carried out in many ways, and the more skilled you become, the less mechanical and obvious the process will be. In your assessment of an individual, you will identify that person's strengths and weaknesses. The terms may be labeled differently, but the concepts remain the same. Remember that a strength can also be a weakness and vice-versa. For example, although a client has an intact family (a strength), there may be constant arguments (a weakness), thus causing a high level of stress for the client. So let's review:

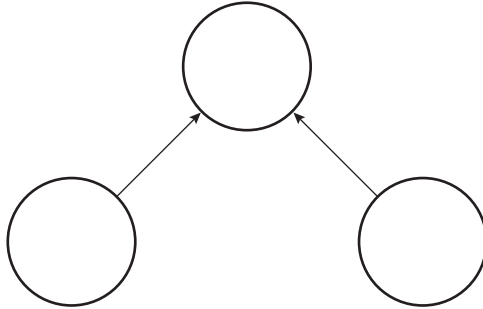
1. Find out what assessment tools your placement uses.
2. Make copies and become familiar with them.
3. Understand that assessments have many names and functions, depending on the agency.
4. Always look for client strengths in doing assessments.
5. Be aware that you may be called on to assess your client for substance abuse, physical or sexual abuse, and dangerousness to self or others. Always look to your supervisor for guidance in this area. If your supervisor is not available, see another professional before your client leaves the agency.

Generalist Practice

There are two basic assessments that you have surely learned along the way, the genogram and an eco-map. Ashman and Hull do a nice job of explaining the two concepts in *Understanding Generalist Practice* (2002), as do Johnson and Yanca in *Social Work Practice* (1998). If your placement agency does not have resource books on assessments that cover many types, an economical book to purchase is Susan Lukas's *Where to Start and What to Ask* (1993).

A word of caution: Use the assessments your field placement agency approves. Always ask your supervisor about using any tool that is not included in agency policy.

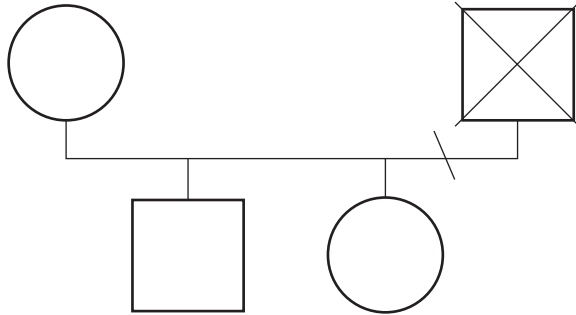
Eco-Map. An eco-map is an excellent tool for looking at the social forces that impact on a person, family, or even a system, but it is not a tool to be used in all situations. If you are not familiar with this tool, the circles in Figure 4.1 are the persons, family members, or agencies, and the arrows are the direction of the forces.



Genogram. A genogram, shown in Figure 4.2, is an excellent tool to get clients involved in the work. Do the drawing with them. As they begin to understand the rules, they will often volunteer information. It is a good tool for relaxing clients and building a relationship with them. The method is simple:

- boxes for males
- circles for females
- an "X" through a box indicates a death
- solid lines indicate a relationship
- dotted lines mean a less formal relationship
- a slash in a line indicates a separation of some type

Label items as needed, such as the date of a death, or an important anniversary date.



This genogram indicates that a couple was divorced and the children are with the mother. Notice the location of the slash. The date can be put on the line. A dotted line, rather than a slash, would indicate a separation. The X through the father means he is deceased. Here, too, a date can be added.

Psychiatric Assessment

It is unlikely you will be called on to do a psychiatric assessment, but I wanted to mention it as a tool for advocating on behalf of a client regarding medication issues. A mental status exam is a snapshot in time of the individual you are working with. Your ability to communicate a client's mental status to the doctor will help him or her determine if the client needs to be evaluated. I am giving you an overview of what is included; speak to your supervisor for more details.

- How is he or she dressed? Is it appropriate for the season and situation?
- What is the client's mood?
- What is the client's affect: Does his or her affect match his or her mood? Is there a full range of expression?
- How is the rate of speech: slow/deliberate/average?
- What is the tone: soft/loud/average?
- How is the content of the speech: appropriate to questions and conversation?
- Are there any symptoms of suicidal thoughts, or a plan to harm him- or herself?
- Are there any symptoms of homicidal thoughts, or a plan to harm someone else?
- What is the client's ability to process ideas?
- How is the client's perception of situations?

- Are there any illusions or hallucinations?
- How good is his or her cognitive ability? Is he or she oriented in three spheres—time, place, and person?
- How good is his or her memory, both recent and remote?

At first you may find the questions difficult to understand. If you are in a placement where psychiatric assessments are done, your supervisor can help you better understand the questions. You can see by the list of questions that these are not the typical social work questions you would be asking. However, an awareness of these questions and how they relate to your client may make you a better advocate on that client's behalf. Additional questions can address the past psychiatric history, history of treatment, and any history of drug or alcohol use/abuse.

A former student called to give me an update on her placement in graduate school. She remarked that her superior was not interested in her ability to do a mental status on her current cases, but she found it a valuable tool nonetheless.

Psychosocial Assessment

As social work students you are already familiar with taking the history of a client from your classroom work. I strongly suggest that you role-play asking the questions with a fellow student. Rehearsing will only make you better. Because you are already familiar with a psychosocial history, I will not detail the task, but instead focus on several areas often overlooked: sexual abuse as a victim or abuser, high-risk behavior such as sexual activity, including HIV status, and substance abuse. Questions to ask about sexual behavior:

- Has anyone ever touched you in any way that caused you to feel ashamed or uncomfortable?
- Has this happened more than once and/or with more than one person?
- Have you ever been a victim of a violent crime?
- Did you ever witness a violent crime or suicide attempt?
- If so, was this a traumatic experience, and has it affected your life, either your behavior, feelings, or thoughts?
- Have you ever spoken to someone professionally in relation to the feelings or thoughts?
- When you first became sexually active, was it consensual?
- At what age did you become sexually active?
- Are you currently sexually active?
- Have you used any form of protective barrier during sexual relations, now or in the past?
- Have you ever been tested for HIV?
- What led you to get HIV testing?

Questions to ask related to alcohol/drug use and abuse:

- Do you currently use alcohol or illegal substances?
- What is the substance? How often and how much do you use?
- Do you believe you have ever been impaired physically or psychologically due to use?
- Have you or someone else ever suggested you have a problem with this substance?
- Have you ever been in treatment for substance abuse, including alcohol?

These few questions are the tip of the iceberg. Many agencies have an assessment form you can use for the evaluation of substance use and abuse. If not, ask your supervisor to direct you to appropriate material.

Assessments, when done properly, are time-consuming, but yield a wealth of information. The assessment questions listed here are only a few of the possible assessment questions.

Assessing Potential for Violent Behavior

Your safety and the safety of your client is a critical area of practice experience and needs to be understood thoroughly. There are many assessment tools for assessing the presence and extent of danger to self or others. I review some of the basics to help you begin to develop a frame of reference. Your supervisor is the authority at your placement and matters that relate to this topic need to be thoroughly discussed with him or her.

Some states have laws that specify the actions you will need to take if an individual is assessed as dangerous to self or others. In the area of dangerousness to others, the California ruling is referred to as the Tarasoff ruling, based on a lawsuit wherein one of the parties was Tarasoff. You can access information regarding the Tarasoff ruling by doing a Web search.

Never let a client that you perceive as dangerous to self or others leave the office until you have spoken to your supervisor or another professional at the agency.

Some questions to consider asking to probe for a client's potential for violence:

- The best predictor of behavior is past behavior: Is there a history of violent behavior?
- Is there a history of abuse, physical or sexual?

- Is there history of risky behavior, such as drugs or alcohol?
- Is there a history of unpredictable behavior or impulsiveness?
- Does the person experience paranoia, now or in the past, such as perceiving you or others as wanting to harm him or her?
- Does the person have delusions or hallucinations? (Pay special attention to command hallucinations.)
- Is there a history of suicide attempts?
- When was the last time the client had suicidal feelings and how long has he or she felt this way?
- Are the means to carry out the act available to the client?

An assessment area that is often neglected is physical health. Remember, some psychological disorders are rooted in physical problems. There are many examples, but several classics include appearing drunk but really suffering from diabetes, appearing confused but really having a urinary tract infection (especially in the elderly), or appearing delusional or confused due to the cognitive difficulties associated with head trauma. When it is appropriate, and especially if your agency does not do one or deemphasizes physical issues, take a medical/physical history. You may be surprised by what you find.

GETTING COMFORTABLE WITH YOUR CLIENTS

Deep listening means that you are fully present with your client, that you are concentrating on both the content of what is being said as well as the underlying feelings. Deep listening is a way of listening “with the heart” and with understanding and empathy. You are not rehearsing what you are going to say next, you are simply getting a feel for what your client’s emotional and mental worlds are like. A simple example of a session with a client in which the student felt comfortable in exploring new material follows.

Student feels stupid:

HE SAID/SHE SAID

W: Not to switch subjects, but last week you spoke about your wife, I was wondering what made you get married at a young age, you were 21 and she was 19. (I wanted to get to know him more, more than just about his goals, who he was before his illness.)

C: No I was 19 and she was 21.

SUPERVISORY COMMENTS

You need to close old topic before changing to a new one.

W: Oh, that's right you were younger than her.

(I felt stupid because I forgot he told me)

You are allowed to be human

C: I was smoking a lot of reefer and I met her at her sister's house. I smoked with her.

Her meaning the sister?

W: So you got married because you were on drugs?

Was she using drugs? Did she think he would stop?

C: I can't say that.

W: So it was a common bond between you and her?
(Was that judgmental? I didn't mean to it to be.)

The following process recordings are examples of common situations students get themselves into early in their placement.

Professional student:

HE SAID/SHE SAID

SUPERVISORY COMMENTS

C: When I first come here the doctors said I was schizophrenic. I don't know if that was caused by smoking marijuana. What are you psychologist, psychiatrist?
(Confused on why he got that assessment.)

W: No, I'm a social work student but I can tell you what schizophrenia is.
(He is looking interested. Nervous, I didn't want to mess up.)

C: OK

W: Schizophrenia is a disorder of the brain, the symptoms include . . .

Sounds very professional, put in layman's terms.

Don't get stuck in professional jargon. Don't talk down to your clients or above their heads. If in doubt, you can ask your clients if they understand and ask them to explain concepts in their own words.

Born leader:

HE SAID/SHE SAID	SUPERVISORY COMMENTS
W: It must be frustrating for you.	Leading
C: Yes, I was just talking about that to a friend of mine. I should be working or something now.	He got you hook, line, and sinker
W: It sounds like you are a little down.	
C: Sometimes I am, but I am working hard to change that.	
W: You are working hard at change.	Leading
(Felt sad for him. Felt like I wanted to fix everything for him. I was trying to tune into him.)	There is a difference—asking a feeling question to get validation

Trust your feelings: If you sense a client is feeling a certain way, ask! Don't fill in the blank for the client: you could be wrong. If you find your client is struggling for a word, you can make suggestions and give choices: "Are you feeling sad or blue or something else?"

Anxious student:

HE SAID/SHE SAID	SUPERVISORY COMMENTS
W: Before we stop and you make your call home, I want to ask you something.	Feeling unsure as to how things are going?
C: OK. After that I can make my phone call.	He will say anything to use the phone at this moment.
W: Yes, I want to ask, did you like the session that you and I had?	
C: Yes.	
W: Are there . . . topics that you would like to focus on?	This is where you begin the session.

How do you acquire good judgment? Good judgment comes only with experience. How do you get experience? Experience comes from making mistakes. Learn that your mistakes will help you mature in your skills as a social worker.

Looking beneath the Surface

We all carry “norms” in our minds that specify what is “normal” and what is not. Your norms have been shaped by your family, school, and the larger society around you. When you first look at the “outer picture” of a client, one of the questions you will ask yourself is whether or not the person seems “normal” to you. If the person is out of the ordinary, you might ask, “Is this person bizarre?” If so, what does the uniqueness mean? When you look at or listen to a client and “red flags” pop up in your mind, check your perceptions with others and discuss your feelings about what is happening with that particular person.

One of our clients needed to be hospitalized from time to time. One of the first indicators that she was having difficulty coping was that she would begin to wear extreme, brightly colored makeup caked in layers on her face and arms. The first time I saw her in one of these phases, her appearance was so striking that, instantly, my inner radar sprang to life and the warning buzzers were set off in my head.

Look for the opposite beneath the behavior that sticks out. Rule of thumb: When someone’s behavior, manner, or appearance is so extreme that it catches your attention, you might expect to find the opposite under the obvious behavior.

Student survives surprise:

HE SAID/SHE SAID

SUPERVISORY COMMENTS

W: You were in . . . hospital? How did you get to this hospital? Were you agitated with someone?

Very confrontational start!!!

(I read his chart and it said he was acting in a bizarre manner and irritated. Started to yell and point at me. He turned his chair around and sat sideways.)

C: You calling me crazy? Do you think I am psycho?

Address behavior

W: I didn’t say you were crazy. (I was a little nervous because I never had a client yell at me. I was trying not to be defensive but I made my point. I didn’t mean to offend him.)

What did he hear you say?

Good, be careful!

C: No, you implied it.

W: How did I imply that?

Continued

HE SAID/SHE SAID**SUPERVISORY COMMENTS**

C: (starts to laugh/stops) I need a beer.

(He has a history of alcohol abuse. I ignored the last topic because it overwhelmed me; my anxieties were up)

W: When was the last time you had a beer?

Good question

Topic change, can tell you were regrouping

Can you imagine what this student must have been feeling at that time? She handled the situation nicely for a first-year intern. However, the importance of the process recording is that you often don't know when a situation will become threatening. Ideally, this client would never have been assigned to the student if there had been any indication this would happen.

If you are endangered, who has the power to help you out of trouble? You may be surprised to learn that, at many agencies, the level of safety has a great deal to do with workers helping one another. For example, a janitor or secretary may have rapport with clients and be able to step in and "rescue" you from a difficult situation. For this reason, take pains to make friends with all the staff, not just the professionals. Chat with them; ask about their families; and don't think you're better than they are just because you've been to college and they haven't. Some workers resent students who give the appearance of acting superior to others. The truth is that often these students don't feel superior at all, but ill-at-ease, shy, or unsure of themselves and often come off as arrogant. Make sure no one gets that impression of you, and when you're in a crunch, you may find help coming from unexpected sources.

Understanding Your Client (Starting Where the Client Is)

If social work were a building and we were to name the cornerstones, one would surely be the phrase, "Start where the client is." This phrase sounds simple, but the process can be very complicated, even for a seasoned professional.

Student's first steps:

HE SAID/SHE SAID**SUPERVISORY COMMENTS**

W: Hi D

H: Hi

W: I'll be your social worker.
I'm a student.

(Feel comfortable speaking to him.)

D: You're not a worker?

W: No, I am a social work intern. I'll be here until May.

D: OK

W: I want to go over confidentiality, do you know what that means?

Sounds like the client is concerned with your qualifications.

Good comeback

Why did we start here, rather than where the client is.

This process recording has a number of items but let's focus on the topic of knowing what the client's issue is. Here we see a student worried about getting in all the important things she was taught, especially issues of confidentiality. She did not give the client time to say why he was there. The student's qualifications were questioned as well but this was not addressed by the student. These are common mistakes students make early in their placement because they are anxious to do a good job and say all the right things.

Student wants it perfect:

HE SAID/SHE SAID

SUPERVISORY COMMENTS

W: Good morning. Thank you for meeting with me.

C: (almost inaudible) Good morning.

W: I guess I'll start by telling you about my role here.

C: (nod)

(I don't know what to say. I wanted to say the perfect thing to draw her out, knowing that it wasn't possible.)

W: I am a social work student and that basically means that I have more time to meet with you because I have fewer clients. Have you ever worked with a student before?

C: Yes.

(I felt uncomfortable.)

Stop after who you are.

This is true but would she care? What does it mean to her?

Closed question

It is important that the client understand who you are and your role, so you must be clear about your role in the placement. This student demonstrated a clear understanding of her role. The next process recording is a student's first client in week one of the placement.

Student with sweating palms:

HE SAID/SHE SAID	SUPERVISORY COMMENTS
W: What movie are you watching?	
C: It's about Vikings, I don't know much about Vikings	
W: Me neither. So you like movies with war in them?	Assume
C: Yeah.	
(Start slow, maybe he doesn't want to speak.)	Closed question
W: So are you hot?	Closed question
C: No, I'm fine. It's cold outside.	
W: Yeah, it is really gloomy out today. Are you enjoying the MICA Meetings?	Topic change here
(Starting to sweat a little, maybe I should say you're sweating, but I think that would have put him deeper in his shell.)	So many topics: heat, weather, groups. Take a deep breath, slow down. I think your're sweating?

"The Rule of Three" applies to many situations in life. The first third of clients can sit down and express their needs and goals with little difficulty. They may change along the way, but basically they remain constant from start to finish. The second third have difficulty expressing their needs and they may change significantly before the end of treatment. What the first two groups have in common is that they have the capacity to express their needs. As you have already guessed, the last third of clients lack the capacity to identify their own needs and issues. This is where you, as their social worker, need to help your clients to identify their needs.

Client and student on first day:

HE SAID/SHE SAID	SUPERVISORY COMMENTS
W: Hi, I'm going to meet with you every Tuesday at 1:00. Do you remember my name?	We discussed, don't put the client on defense.
C: No.	
W: My name is. . . . Intro (Could've been better, I could have said I'm a student, I'm nervous.)	
C: What are we going to talk about?	

W: Anything you want to talk about, for example how your day is going.	Closed question, look for open-ended questions.
C: Good.	
W: How long have you been coming here?	Closed
C: A while.	
W: Do you enjoy it here?	Closed
C: Yes	

The student found herself with the problem of closed-ended questions. It is much easier to think of open-ended questions in the classroom with your peers than with a client. It takes time to feel relaxed so you can ask better questions. Part of the problem is not the questions, it is the responses. In conversations, we often ask closed-ended questions, but the person we are speaking with gives us more than a “yes” or “no.”

With clients who can't express their needs and issues, you need to do two things: You need to feed them today; then you will be able to teach them to fish tomorrow to fend for themselves for much of their lives.

Whatever situation the client presents must be addressed, even if it truly seems unrelated to the client's goals and needs. So you must start with feeding the client where he or she is, and that may be far from where you think the client should be. But the client cannot move past the current situation until his or her initial concerns—however trivial or senseless they seem to be—are addressed in the session.

At this point, it really does not matter what you think is good for the client, because you don't know what the client's goals are yet. Think of how you can't really think about an upcoming test for Abnormal Psychology until you've eaten lunch. If you're starving, you will be internally distracted until you get your hunger taken care of.

I was having so many problems at home that I could not concentrate on my internship. I was not sleeping well and was stressed all the time. I needed the family problems to get settled before I could really concentrate and hear what my supervisor was trying to teach me. Thank goodness, he understood and helped me by not moving too fast. I guess he was starting with me from where I was.

Now the second part becomes clear. You can begin to work on the issues and goals of the client once you have passed this hurdle, and teach the client to fish.

A supervisor speaks: “I have a client in my private practice who has never made it past the need to be fed. Without going into all the dynamics of the case, this individual comes in always in need of being fed, at which point she does not come back for several weeks, until the next crisis in her life. Because of her style

of dealing with treatment, she has not learned to fish. Perhaps one day she will be able to move past this point, but until then the task of the social worker is to go at the pace the client sets.

Asking Open-Ended Questions

How many times have you been taught to ask open-ended questions instead of questions that can be answered with a one-word answer? Open-ended questions draw out clients and help them feel relaxed with you so they can “think out loud.” Even though you have role-played countless times with your peers, when you begin your field work you may often find yourself in a situation where it feels like “pulling teeth” in order to get any useful information from clients. Thinking on your feet is a lot harder than practice situations, and it takes time to get the hang of it.

Student goes to dental school:

HE SAID/SHE SAID	SUPERVISORY COMMENTS
(Client is waiting to see me, I felt a little excited about today.)	
W: Do you know my name?	What made you ask this question?
C: No.	
W: My name is . . .	
C: Oh. (It's like pulling teeth!)	
W: So, did you have a nice weekend?	What do you know about the housing she lives in?
C: Yes.	
W: What did you do?	Good try, is she going to let you in?
C: Just sit . . . (. . . Searching for a lead-in question.)	
W: Just sit, did you go anywhere?	
C: No, just sit around.	
W: Did other people at the house go somewhere?	
C: No, they sat around.	

Leaving Space

Leaving space means that when you ask a question or make a statement, you leave enough time for the patient to reply to you. Leaving space may mean

that you must learn more patience than you've ever had in your life. Although we are discussing the issue of leaving space here in the beginning phase, you will probably not fully understand the concept until you are well into the middle phase of your placement. Why is it so hard to leave space? Well, remember how anxious you are feeling as a student doing a first interview. There is a lot going on in the room and it takes time to develop these skills. You ask what you think is an open-ended question, and you are eager to hear your client's response. How eager are you? Did you leave time for the client to answer? When I say "enough time," I mean by the client's clock, not yours.

Leaving space allows time for your client to open up to you and respond. It has to do with your being able to tolerate silence and lack of immediate response on the part of your client. It seems so simple, and it looks like such a basic idea that you may think you should be able to leave space right from the beginning of your field work. You should know that leaving space is more difficult than it appears, and it has a great deal to do with your maturing skills. Don't get discouraged if you aren't able to master this skill immediately, because it takes time and experience. With this skill you will suddenly realize you are not as anxious and can concentrate on learning more of the skills and techniques of being with your clients in an effective way. A student who realized she had finally learned how to "leave space" once said, "I did not feel rushed and I was not hurried to ask the next question." She realized that she was able to elicit a response with the same question she asked on day one, but with the difference that now she was able to hear the response more fully and get an answer that led her to ask new questions.

Becoming the Least Motivated Person in the Room

Remember that your clients' goals are more important than your goals for them. You may have a hidden or overt agenda for your client, and believe that person should accomplish a particular result on a particular timetable. You must remember, however, that your world is not your client's world, and what is important is for you to support your client in making healthy choices (even though they may not be in line with your values or expectations). You must realize that clients have their own internal clocks, which may not coincide with your sense of time.

When I was younger, I expected clients to have certain goals. I expected them to be taking orderly and logical steps to achieve them and I expected them to take a minimum amount of time to get there. I wanted them all to have jobs, their own apartments, and good social skills. Imagine my frustration when my clients did not want the same things for themselves that I wanted for them. I was especially baffled when they seemed satisfied with lesser goals or were able to achieve goals by skipping steps I considered essential.

Asking

A very common error students make in the first days of their placement is to assume they know what the client is meaning or feeling. You make these assumptions based on your own set of values, not your client's. You may guess correctly if the client shares your values, but too often you can guess wrongly and then you are not helping your clients achieve their goals. In some ways, you are clueless about what your clients mean in their statements. These assumptions may leave clients feeling that their meeting with you was useless, not helpful, or even destructive. Remember our earlier discussion on cultural diversity when you find yourself assuming things rather than asking questions for clarity.

Learning to Tolerate Ambiguity and Ambivalence

As you are thrown into new situations and environments, you will find your inner world enlarging. At times, you may be overwhelmed or confused about all the contradictory data presented to you. You may find that you see some of your most cherished beliefs in a whole new light in view of what you are learning. You may find that at one point X seems to be true, yet at other times, Y is also equally true even though they are totally opposite. You will find that you do not have all the answers and that you may need to unlearn some of your ideas. As a result, field placement may be a stressful and difficult time as you adjust to seeing the world in new ways.

If you are committed to never opening your mind to new possibilities or to never changing your ideas about something, you may be resisting new ideas. It can be difficult to deal with inner conflicts, but, as you mature, you will learn to be more tolerant of the clash of opposing ideas without trying to oversimplify things so much that there is no more ambiguity.

As you mature as a social worker, you will also become more comfortable with your own ambivalence, as well as ambivalence in your clients' thinking. We can have conflicting feelings about a given issue. You may love someone dearly, yet have feelings of irritation and upset when there are conflicts. As you learn to accept your own divided emotions, you will be better able to tolerate the inner conflicts of the clients in your placement.

One of my clients was in a long-term relationship with an abusive boyfriend. She kept saying she was going to leave him, but at the same time she really loved him and didn't want to live without him. I had worked with her for several weeks, and was beginning to get very frustrated with her because she couldn't make up her mind and take the "right" actions. As I processed my feelings with my supervisor, she explained to me that my client was "sitting in the question," and was working through her ambivalence in her own way and in her own time. She also helped me to understand that my efforts to push her into what I thought she should do were

not helpful. In fact, I began to understand that by pushing in one direction, I was actually drawing out an opposite reaction in my client, and that was counterproductive.

Learning to Trust and Use Your Feelings

Before you can trust or use your feelings in working with clients, you must first be aware of what your feelings are. It may seem strange to state that you may not know what you are feeling in a particular situation, but if you are honest with yourself, you will admit that there are often levels of emotions that you were not aware of until you took time to delve deeper.

There are several ways to become more sensitive to your own emotions. You may want to write down various thoughts and feelings throughout your field placement. Journaling is one of the most important tools you can use to further your growth as a social worker. Your journal can serve as a log to jog your memory about dates or incidents, a record of the concepts and skills you have learned, and your growing maturity as a human being. The more honest you can be in your journal about your mistakes and shortcomings, the more the journal can teach you about yourself and how you can interact effectively with your clients.

Fortunately, the profession of social work enhances and encourages your ability to become a fully functioning human. As you encounter people who are different from and similar to you, you will be given more and more insight into your own behavior and emotions. You can also learn from the most negative of contacts with others, whether as clients or coworkers.

As you become more aware of your own feelings and insights, you will want to check your perceptions with others to see how accurate those perceptions are. When you “get a feeling” or hunch about something, it will be helpful to see to what extent others share your insights. Just because someone more experienced disagrees with you, however, doesn’t mean that that person is right and you are wrong. You will benefit from an increasing openness in testing your reality with others. Over time, and with experience, you will naturally come to know that your feelings can be trusted.

Paying Attention to Your Body

As you learn to read your own emotions and bodily states, you will find that they are an enormous help in dealing with your clients. Listen to what your “gut” tells you. Does your stomach tighten up around certain people? Do you find you breathe more shallowly in some situations? What happens to your jaw muscles, your shoulders, your back? Where in your body do you tend to experience the emotions elicited in you by others?

For example, you may find yourself consistently getting angry or anxious with a particular client. Or you may find that you are suddenly sleepy and tired when dealing with another. The feelings elicited by clients can be important clues in understanding their behavior. You may want to think about the strong possibility that the client often brings about the same feelings in others in his or her environment. If a client is often making the people in his life angry, then his experience of the world will be different from that of a client who does not elicit anger in others.

I was assigned to work with a policeman at our agency. The problems he was discussing were not anything I hadn't encountered with other clients. Yet, at every meeting, I found myself feeling anxious, and at times it was hard for me to concentrate on what he was saying. Clearly, he did not have the full benefit of my skills. In mentally searching for the reason why I was distracted, I realized he always came in civilian clothes, but he wore an off-duty weapon on his waist, not uncommon for police personnel. Having identified the source of my anxiety, I asked him if he could not wear the weapon to the office. He willingly left his weapon somewhere else, and then I was able to devote my full attention to his issues.

To trust and use your feelings:

- Believe that your feelings can help guide you
- Ask open-ended questions
- Breathe deeply
- Relax
- Start where the client is
- Build on your clients' strengths and support them
- Focus on your own strengths and on what you do well

CARE AND FEEDING OF ON-SITE SUPERVISORS

If you are lucky, your on-site supervisor will fulfill two important roles: He or she will teach you to become a great social worker, and become the kind of person you can look up to both personally and professionally. Ideally, your field work supervisor will also be your mentor. A mentor is often thought of as a more experienced person, a wise and loyal advisor. Mentors use their seniority to act as sponsor, host, guide, and example. Ideally, they serve as a role model, and offer guidance, support, and coaching in order to help students become successful. If you are very fortunate, you will have just such a supervisor. You can also increase the chances of bringing out the best in your on-site supervisor by the way you set the stage for your association.

Make it easy for the supervisor to deal with you. Set an emotional climate in which the supervisor feels comfortable with you and your level of co-

operation. In the first few days, your supervisor will mentally breathe a sigh of relief when it becomes obvious that you're not a "problem student" and that you will be easy to work with.

Ask questions to gain knowledge, not to show off to a supervisor or others.

Let the supervisor know you're teachable and humble. One of the best ways to establish this humility is to admit honestly at the beginning that you're feeling anxious and unsure in your new role. Don't try to cover up your feelings of insecurity with false bravado. Mature students: This is not the time to demonstrate your ability to disguise your anxiousness.

Be a student. Be teachable, no matter how old or experienced you are.

Remember that you are undergoing two inherently regressive experiences: being in field work and being under supervision. That is, you will suddenly be thrust into the role of "newbie," in which you are automatically unsure of yourself and feel smaller and younger than before. That's par for the course. The fact that you have those feelings means that you fully understand what is happening to you. That's all. Feeling weak, small, incompetent, or uncertain is actually a positive step in the learning process, and those feelings (if honestly faced and dealt with) can help you learn, grow, and work well with others.

"In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities. In the expert's mind, there are few." Strive to cultivate beginner's mind so you can keep learning from the situations in which you find yourself.

You may have been taught to see supervisors as wise and all-knowing. For you to see your supervisor falter or do something that would negatively affect you or your performance may be unthinkable. But guess what? Your supervisors are human and they do make mistakes. Are they big enough to admit they made a mistake? That may depend on two factors: (1) the supervisor's maturity level, ability to self-evaluate, and level of psychological security, and (2) your ability to create an atmosphere in which a supervisor feels comfortable enough to say, "I made a mistake."

"That's not my job," you may say. "It is the job of the supervisor to make me comfortable enough to admit my own mistakes." You are correct. That is

the supervisor's job. However, if you want to make your field placement more pleasant, meaningful, and productive, you will begin to think about the atmosphere you create for everyone around you—clients, staff members, and supervisors alike. A supervisor who feels comfortable with you can then relax and help make you feel relaxed, so it is a circular reaction. When you create that “safe zone” for another, you will be more likely to receive emotional safety in return.

We have all heard stories about students in tears after supervision, about supervisors not available to supervise, and about supervisors leaving mid-year for an assortment of reasons. As just mentioned, supervisory skill can vary and in some situations the supervisor may have been appointed unwillingly. These factors can greatly affect your placement; in these situations get the support of your college field work faculty, for they can guide you.

Field work faculty have years of experience. They are an important resource.

How do you create an atmosphere of safety for your supervisor? Watch how others behave who deal well with your supervisor. Learn when and how to talk with your supervisor. An old saying reminds us that, because we have two ears and only one mouth, we should do more listening than talking. Talking in the context of deep listening is more powerful and more likely to be heard. Learn to “lead into” a topic after warm small talk and “setting the stage” with pleasant conversation instead of barging in and requesting something “cold.” When you're requesting (not demanding) something or need to discuss something difficult, learn the best times to discuss (and not to discuss) uncomfortable subjects.

Not-so-good times to talk with your supervisor are:

- just after either of you have had a difficult encounter with a staff member or client
- during or after a tense meeting
- days that are unusually rushed and filled with tension
- whenever you detect signs of stress in your supervisor
- when you see your supervisor preoccupied with a concern or problem
- the end of the work day when everyone is tired
- just before or after a holiday
- any time you yourself are tired, angry, hungry, upset, or overly emotional

With that list there never seems to be a good time to meet with your supervisor, or so it would seem. Welcome to agency life; any or all of these things can occur in a given day. Learn to wait. Unless you're truly in an emer-

gency situation, whatever you need to discuss with your supervisor will wait for later. Use your structured supervision time, write down the items you want to discuss, prioritize them. You may not get to everything on your agenda. Giving an issue more time and consideration will likely only help the situation. Make immediate notes so you won't forget what needs to be talked about. When you are angry, it is probably best to wait until you have processed the anger on your own, if you can. You might do this through introspection, calming down, journaling, talking to someone in your support group, walking around the block, if need be, or taking other measures to reach greater perspective and insight on your own. Again, your supervisor and field faculty are resources; if you are unable to process your feelings seek their assistance, and try to be open to what you hear.

Sometimes your supervisor may inadvertently give you unclear directions or bad advice. Calling attention to the situation, heckling, or laughing at a supervisor doesn't help. Ideally, the supervisor will realize what happened and will make every effort to correct the situation and acknowledge the mistake. A supervisor speaks:

I was going to be off for the next few days, and I was unhappy with the progress note the student had written on a client. Because I was not going to be available, I asked a fellow social worker to speak to the student to help her understand what should be in the note and what should not be included. What a major blunder I made as a supervisor! The student did what the other social worker asked, but that person did not have a clear understanding of the background of the situation or the issues we were working on. As a result, the advice he gave her was directly contradictory to my supervision and what I had discussed for the last several weeks. No wonder she was confused!

Supervisors vary widely in their availability. Some supervisors are hard to find, have little time to talk, teach, or explain. Others may feel so pressured by various factors in their personal or professional environment that they are unable to give you the time and attention you may want or need.

Supervisors also vary in their ability to teach. You may run into the kind of supervisor who does very little teaching or explaining, and expects you to function on your own and learn from your own mistakes. "Just go out there and wing it, and if you run into problems, come find me and I'll help you out," you might hear. As luck would have it, when you do need that supervisor, he or she may be nowhere to be found, and you are left with a sticky situation that you do not know how to handle on your own. That's a time when you need support from others, whether it's a trusted friend, a school mentor, or a support group of your peers.

To get the most from the time you spend with your supervisor, bring your written agenda to each meeting. Keep the list with you at all times, so when something comes to mind, make a note of it for future reference. At the

meeting, you will be able to keep discussion focused on the issues that are important to you, and you will not walk out of the meeting saying to yourself, "Oh, I forgot to bring up. . . ." This also shows your supervisor that you are prepared for the session. Everything you do is being evaluated, especially your attitude toward the work. Your professionalism is developing through this field placement experience and part of that experience is your behavior and attitude at meetings.

Over the years, I have been exposed to many supervisors, both good and bad. No matter how experienced supervisors are, they can still make mistakes. What I have learned is that even the poor supervisors have taught me lessons I have incorporated into my own style of working with clients..

NOTES TO YOURSELF

Reminders of things to do: _____

Situations that relate to readings: _____

Questions to ask your supervisor: _____

Supervisor's comments: _____
