Handout 7 - Professional Boundaries and Limitations Upon the Case Work Relationship

Caseworkers and clients are better able to work with each other when the client comes to value the working relationship formed with their caseworker as one based on respect and a genuine commitment to their best interest. Establishing trust is therefore a top priority for caseworkers, but this requires a significant degree of openness and awareness of the process of relationship building on the part of the caseworker so that the client experiences the caseworker's efforts as genuine.

What works in the process of building a relationship between a caseworker and client is, unsurprisingly, what works in other settings as people get to know and value each other. Factors usually important in this process include:

- Providing some satisfaction of relevant emotional needs - not necessarily enjoyable, e.g. the service context may be a stressful one for the client, and the client may value a sense of being supported with understanding more than 'having fun'.
- A genuine interest in the client's story
- Actual feelings of empathy with the client's experiences
- Concern for the client's wellbeing, especially where this may be at risk (e.g. in situations where family violence has occurred).
- Availability of other emotional responses in response to and in support of the client's attempts to take charge of their situation
- Noticing, being respectful of and feeding back to the client their strengths, achievements, challenges and dilemmas, opportunities and obstacles, especially where the client has lost sight of these.
- A sharing of relevant experiences - helping the client feel that they are not alone with their particular problem and modelling that life's challenges are common and can be overcome.

Being human beings, caseworkers will often feel moved by the circumstances that their clients may be struggling with, and feel genuine respect for what are often major achievements for clients. As caseworkers usually need to be reasonably emotionally available to clients, these added experiences with some clients can provide additional dimension to the worker's attitudes of warmth and friendliness. Likewise, the worker's feelings towards the client can grow just as they might in relationship building with colleagues or in social settings.

However, the caseworker-client relationship is a professional as well as a human one, with a specific role being allocated to the worker by virtue of the client's needs and the type of service the worker is meant to be providing. Caseworkers must be vigilant in monitoring their feelings and actions in this setting, and putting limits on the ways the relationship evolves. Such 'alert awareness' is obviously what distinguishes professional from social relationships, the latter being freer to evolve in whatever direction either party wants without being consciously 'steered' to a given end.

The following are some areas in which the caseworker can communicate the boundaries of the working relationship while still meeting the client's needs:

- **Warmth** The worker should try to adopt an 'arm's length' feeling when showing warmth towards a client. Rather than appearing to be generally 'fond' of the client, the worker should be polite and respectful, tending to save
obviously warm and caring tones and expressions for times when the client is discussing sensitive information or presenting achievements, emphasising the specific importance of these issues for the client’s circumstances. Being warm indiscriminately can interfere with the client’s acknowledgment of your role as a worker, blurring the boundaries between issues that are part of the work to be done and other issues which may be of secondary importance or even unrelated.

- **Friendship** Remember there is a great difference between being friendly and being someone’s friend. Friends don’t write reports or receive supervision from other people about how they are conducting their friendship. Friends don’t have an agenda to work to, or a need to ensure that the other person has clear goals to be achieved by the friendship. Friendships are mutually negotiated social relationships in which both parties have equal power in the relationship. Friends don’t receive referral forms asking them to provide friendship services to people in need. Friends don’t need qualifications or demonstrated relevant experience, or referees.

If a client has transference issues, attempts to be friends with a client will produce an inequitable relationship that will often lead the client to unrealistic expectations about what the friendship should bring them and what the worker’s obligations should be to the client.

If the worker has responsibilities that may challenge the client in any way, these may become very difficult to act on (e.g. when a parent has the state child protection agency involved because there have been child protection concerns).

- **Self-disclosure** Caseworker self-disclosure can be an important tool in helping clients feel supported and gain insights into the change process. It is also valuable in helping clients see themselves as more than just a ‘file number’ to the worker, and so has a powerful role in trust building.

However, disclosing personal information to clients without being really clear about how the information is intended to help the client can lead to a number of problems:

- The worker may feel uncomfortable if the client doesn’t respond to their disclosure in a way that respects the caseworker’s feelings about the issue.
- The worker may feel disempowered if the nature of the disclosure somehow gives a client a hold over the worker (e.g. a counsellor who admits to having an affair as a way of addressing client guilt over having a relationship with someone who is already married).
- The worker may become vulnerable if the client becomes angry with the worker for some reason (e.g. being reported for child protection concerns, not writing a support letter to a government authority in support of an application by the client) and threatens to pass the information somewhere that may have a negative impact on the worker.
- The client may feel resentful, perceiving that they are being expected to be supportive of the worker.
- The client may feel anxious about the meaning of the disclosure if they have some understanding of professional boundaries, and feel that the worker is overstepping them.

- **Goal focus** Caseworkers who maintain an awareness of the client’s goals and are able to relate most conversations and events back to these goals (sensitively and consistently) will communicate a commitment to staying in
the professional role very clearly. This is not to say that clients shouldn't be able to have open discussions with caseworkers, simply that caseworkers have a responsibility to monitor the extent to which non-goal related talks may be allowing the client to diverge from their responsibilities to be using the service and caseworker time for the reasons intended.

- **Limit-setting** Occasionally, caseworkers may need to take a stand on client behaviour, including comments made by clients during activities with the caseworker. This helps prevent clients from assuming uncritical acceptance or 'permission-giving' around their values, beliefs, choices and actions, especially where these relate to the reasons that the caseworker is working with the client.

- **Professional competence** During the process of getting to know the caseworker, clients may come to value the worker to the extent that they begin to extend the scope of self-exploration and personal disclosure, and come to see the worker as the answer to a whole range of problems. At these times, caseworkers should maintain their awareness of the extent of and limits to their own roles and skills, and support the client instead to access skills and expertise from other, more appropriate service providers. It is a professional strength, not a weakness, to be able to say to a client that you don't have the level of skill required for a particular service, or that it's not part of your role. You are modelling to the client how to evaluate a worker's suitability for meeting specific needs of a client other than an uncritical 'feel good' factor. You could perhaps offer perhaps to accompany the client on a first visit, or to provide handover of relevant information with the client's documented consent, to the other service provider.