Handout 3: The Crisis Interview

Interviewing a person who is in crisis requires sensitivity and empathy. The person who is probably experiencing emotional turmoil. Put the person's feelings first - you can't do a good job of assessing somebody if they are too upset to tell their story properly.

The interview needs some structure, such as a series of steps, but not too much as you will need to explore avenues of inquiry as they come to light. It takes a skilled interviewer to adapt their enquiries during the course of the interview to explore the issues they want to know about. Consider carefully in choosing the degree of structure appropriate for your interview - what information must you obtain (for example name, age, prior circumstances). Often some structure is a useful guide as it helps focus the interaction. Be prepared to digress from it if key issues are being disclosed.

The process of exploration contains a wealth of subtleties that if overlooked may result in key pieces of information remaining uncovered. The following format applies to a semi-structured (or even unstructured) interview.

At all times you need to:

- identify and evaluate what is occurring in a non-judgmental way
- make decisions about appropriate words, behaviour, and posture
- use responses that are culturally appropriate
- use active listening
- use paraphrasing
- demonstrate empathy

For an initial or a one-off interview there a number of additional considerations, such as declaring the purpose of the interview, and what consequences may follow if certain types of information are disclosed (for example the requirement to report abuse of children and young people). In an initial interview you may need to do all of the following:

To begin:

- establish rapport
- inform the interviewee of the purpose and format of the interview
- outline confidentiality and its limits
- outline your role and the role of the service

Then, elicit information by using:

- some closed, specific questions (eg. what are your children's names and ages?)
• some open, exploratory questions (eg. tell me about what's happened today)
• probing questions to seek elaboration on certain issues (eg. how did your boyfriend react to that?)
• hypothetical questions that refer to a future or imaginary scenario (eg. if you lived in that suburb how would your children get to school?)
• silence, which allows the interviewee time for reflection and to prepare their response
• clarifying and summarising questions

At this point Problem Solving and Action Planning may be applicable. These approaches are outlined in Handout 4.

Finally, conclude the interview by:

• summarising your understanding of the content of the interview
• thanking the interviewee, and giving encouragement if appropriate
• acknowledge areas of agreement and disagreement
• explaining 'what happens next' - how the interview will be followed up, or the next step in the process