Foundations of good practice assessment

In order for us to achieve the foundations of a good assessment, practitioners should have good self-awareness skills. They must understand and be confident in their ability to think critically through reflective practice and must have a good awareness of current evidence based practice. When undertaking any assessments, you should consider the following:

- What do I know about Families/Service Users in this situation?
- Where does my knowledge base come from?
- What are my prejudices (positive & negative) and how does this inform my practice?
- What do I know/expect?
- What might surprise me and why?
- What are the overall goals for my involvement?

Sources of information

A good ‘starter for 10’ for any assessment is in the ability to collate a wealth of information from a variety of sources. This will strengthen the validity of what is being said/assessed and will offer you a good foundation for exploring issues, themes or strengths. Remember, sources of information should be viewed as the descriptive element – the what, when, and where. With this you will be able to expand and find common trends.

Preparation for interview/assessment meeting

Being prepared prior to meeting with the Service User/family is key. Remember, this is the starting point for gathering your information/evidence base. A significant number of ‘unsatisfactory’ assessments I have quality assured were not as a result of their inability to write an assessment. It was their inability to conduct a ‘good’ interview/assessment meeting. Therefore, you must not underestimate its importance.

Top tip: When I first started, I would not bring the assessment document with me – I found this disempowering for Service Users. Rather I completed a ‘Buzz Word Sheet’. This was an A4 page that contained buzz words such as ‘Family Dynamics’, ‘Attachments’ ‘Positive Role Models’ etc. This prompted me to ask relevant questions and stay on track.

Assessment is not description

Again, every ‘unsatisfactory’ assessment I have quality assured were those that contained only a description of the event(s). It offered no analysis or break-down of the findings – the ‘how and why’. My advice here is to view description as the narrative. The main body is the analysis which should identify and highlight your understanding of the perceived situation. Remember, be confident in your ability, professional judgement and capabilities.

Clear theoretical base
Once you have gathered your evidence, you can now begin to assess and identify key themes, patterns, needs and risks (as well as positives). Make sure that you test different ways of understanding so as to offer you a holistic viewpoint on a particular situation. E.g. The impact of maladaptive attachments or secondary socialisation on the Service Users thinking of what is acceptable and what is not.

**Top Tip:** Add a list of all the theories/legislations you are likely to use on your ‘Buzz Word Sheet’.

**Identify disguised compliance**

One of the reason as to why a good assessment will contain a variety of sources of information is to identify and remove potential disguised compliance. Disguised compliance involves a parent or carer giving the appearance of co-operating with child welfare agencies to avoid raising suspicions, to allay professional concerns and ultimately to diffuse professional intervention (Source: [http://www.nspcc.org.uk](http://www.nspcc.org.uk)). This is also applicable to those supporting or caring for older/vulnerable adults.

**Make defensible not defensive decisions**

Given the significant negative media attention that attracts Social Work, we can be forgiven for making defensive rather than defensible decisions – with the starting point often being the assessment process.

What is the difference I hear you say? Well, defensive practice is reactional rather than preventative. It is responding through the need to ‘cover ones back’ rather than what the Service User/family may need. Whereas, defensible practice is where you have used your professional judgement (remember we are taught to think automotously) in highlighting areas of need. This is supported through evidence based practice and is identified within the sources of information.

**Assessments should be SMART**

Often practitioners believe that by writing pages of information will equal a ‘good’ assessment. This is not the case. All assessments should be SMART. They should be **Specific** – identify the reasons for involvement and concerns identified. **Measurable** – How can we or when we will know the circumstances for that Service User/family have changed. **Achievable** – Chunk and Check. Focus on areas of strengths as well as weaknesses that are bite sized. Focus on short term change and identify longer term change. **Realistic** – are the areas of work/intervention realistic? **Timely** – Social Work is an assessment led service. Therefore, we must identify, plan and review timely work.

**Assessment is a fluid process**

It is wrong to think that once an assessment has been completed, that’s it. This is wrong and can land you in hot water. Remember, the assessment process is a fluid and ever changing
process. There is rarely one straight and easy path. Assessments must be reviewed on a regular basis. It must be relevant to the ‘here and now’. For me, a review should take place when ‘circumstances change’ – E.g. heightened or decrease welfare/vulnerability.

**Conclusion must identify outcomes and plan**

A ‘good’ assessment will identify what level of planning and intervention delivery is required within the conclusion element. The assessment should flow from the description, the main body (analysis), to highlighting the overall plan and outcomes needed in order to promote change or safeguard. This should be reviewed and evaluated regularly.

**Top Tip:** APIS – Assessment, Planning, Intervention & Supervision. Also, clearly identify what changes are needed imminently and what are the longer term objectives.

**Use Supervision to discuss findings**

A good manager will offer you a sounding board so as you can discuss your findings or help you reflect on certain aspects of the case under assessment. Obviously, you will not be able to discuss every case, but as a professional, you should be able to identify what needs to be prioritised. For me, the best staff I managed where those that presented an agenda during each supervision session. The resulted in a good reflective flow for both the supervisor and supervisee.

**Use peer support**

Every successful team I worked for had a strong sense of support for one another. During my newly qualified years, I benefitted from working with some fantastic Social Workers. I was able to shadow, observe and reflect in peer support group sessions – formal and informal. I believe this helped fast track my ability as a Social Worker as I was able to see first-hand what I considered as ‘good’ Practice in action.

I hope this has offered some guidance in relation to what factors you must consider when undertaking an assessment. Remember, always evidence your work and information you have gathered. This will strengthen your assessment, but it will also protect you in your decision making.