

Three Key Principles for Effective Case Management

Principle #1: Building Trusting Relationships

According to the *National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Standards for Social Work Case Management*, the therapeutic relationship between case manager and client plays an integral role in case management process.

Developing this kind of relationship with your client enables you to better engage them and develop the appropriate strategies with them.

A large part of this principle is providing a safe environment for your clients to share their story, problems, and feelings. According to a presentation from *Minnesota State University Moorhead*, clients indicate that the following four personality characteristics are most important to them in a social worker:

- Understanding
- Empathic
- Pleasant
- Ability to put one at ease

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 is important that your client knows you are someone they can trust to protect their story.

Convey Empathy

Studies have shown that clients with an empathetic case manager tend to experience a higher probability of a positive outcome.

Keep in mind that empathy is different from sympathy. *GradSchools.com* reminds us that 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.

***Psychology Today* shares some practical ways to convey empathy, including:**

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

Focus on the Client

This is a broad topic but the importance of balancing active listening with intake, assessment, and documenting other case notes is key. 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.

Principle #2: Using Evidence-Based Practice

As evidence-based practice (EBP) is increasingly emphasized in social work, it is an important principle for social workers and case managers to remember and apply. EBP is a process case managers use to guide and inform the delivery of services, integrating the following four components:

- 1.Current client needs, situation, and environment**
- 2.Best available research evidence**
- 3.Client values and preferences**
- 4.Case manager's judgment and expertise**

According to the *Social Work Policy Institute*, evidence-based practice requires that the case manager and client work together to identify and determine what works, and for whom and in which particular situations. The EBP approach

ensures that the development and implementation of a services plan produces 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.

Analyze and Adjust

Even though the evidence may support a particular approach, you may need to take a different route if you are not seeing positive change in your client's life.

Collect and 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.

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.

Principle #3: Empowering Your Client

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 (according to *NASW*).

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.

Help the Client Define and Own Their Story

This is part of being empathic when interacting with your client. Emphasize 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. 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 is important to believe the client.

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.

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.

Recognize the Client’s Individuality

Because every client is different, the 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 services plan.