

C5 DIVERSITY, CULTURAL SAFETY AND FAMILY PARTNERSHIP ACTIVITY

Shaping Our Identity

What is a belief?

Beliefs come from real experiences but often we forget that the original experience is not the same as what is happening in life now. Our values and beliefs affect the quality of our work and all our relationships because what you believe is what you experience. We tend to think that our beliefs are based on reality, but it is our beliefs that govern our experiences.

The beliefs that we hold are an important part of our identity. They may be religious, cultural or moral. Beliefs are precious because they reflect who we are and how we live our lives.

Pre-existing beliefs

As a care worker in the community services industry, the pre-existing beliefs you may have could be related to stereotypes that have developed for you around issues like sexuality, alcohol and other drugs, ageing and disabilities, independence, health, the rights of people, your idea of health and what it's like to be older and/or disabled.

These stereotypes could affect the way you interact and work with clients. This is because you have assumptions about what your clients can and can't do for themselves, the way they should think about issues and what is best for them. If you make assumptions as a worker then you are denying clients their rights, respect and dignity. As a worker this would be regarded as a breach in your duty of care towards clients.

The need for older people and people with disabilities to express their sexuality does not necessarily diminish over time. The desire for intimacy can in fact intensify. The development of new relationships may occur as a result of living in a residential care setting or as people's social networks change over time. The right to express sexuality is a quality of life issue and is part of one's self-identity. The way people choose to express their sexuality may change over time in a variety of ways. Intimate relationships enhance a person's quality of life and contribute to their feelings of well being. As a care worker it is important to respect a person's right to express their sexuality in a way which is appropriate for them.

What is an attitude?

The word 'attitude' can refer to a lasting group of feelings, beliefs and behaviour tendencies directed towards specific people, groups, ideas or objects.

An attitude is a belief about something. It usually describes what we think is the 'proper' way of doing something. The attitudes that we feel very strongly about are usually called values. Other attitudes are not so important and are more like opinions. Sometimes our own attitudes can make us blind to other people's values, opinions and needs. Attitudes will always have a positive and negative element and when you hold an attitude you will have a tendency to behave in a certain way toward that person or object.

You will need to be aware of your own personal values, beliefs and attitudes and how they might impact on your work.

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It is important to consider the mapping of your own life – what have been some significant events that have shaped you, what qualities you admire in yourself and others, what beliefs are important to you, what you value and so on. Some examples of these may be personal features such as strength of character, helping people, respect, honesty, wealth, success, health etc.

What we believe are important qualities, or what qualities we admire in ourselves and others, generally reflect our life experiences and the values which we established in our early years through the influence of family, teachers, friends, religion, our culture, our education.

Given that all of us have differences which have been shaped by our life experiences, we can understand that we will all have different sets of values and beliefs. We do not all think about issues in the same way!

To work effectively it is critical to understand your own values and beliefs and to understand the importance of not allowing them to affect the way in which you work with clients. Remember they are your values and may be quite different to the values held by your clients.

In order to remain professional it is necessary to leave your personal values out of the client/worker relationship. This means that it is important that you allow clients to make decisions based on their own values and beliefs rather than decisions that reflect what you think they should do.

When we are carrying out our daily duties at work we rarely think about our attitudes, we are immersed in work itself and often remain unaware of just how different our attitudes could be to others around us.

As previously defined an attitude is simply a belief and describes what we think is the proper way of doing or thinking about something. Attitudes vary in intensity.

When we feel strongly about something attitudes are called values. Attitudes that are less important to us are called opinions. For example we may feel strongly that older people should give up their jobs when they reach a certain age, so that younger people can get work. Strong attitudes are often very emotional and can cloud our judgement in meeting other people's needs. This means that some people or clients may be denied their rights to be allowed to make their own choices and decisions about their life.

The influence of attitudes

Our attitudes develop over time and not only reflect where we have come from i.e. the influence family, friends and experiences have had on our attitudes, but also how we will proceed with our life in the future. Attitudes are therefore a powerful element in our life, are long enduring and hard to change—but not impossible!

The problem with attitudes

One of the problems with our attitudes is we often ignore any information which is not consistent with them—we become selective in the way we perceive and respond to events and issues—and lose our 'objectivity' about the world. By developing insights about our attitudes we reduce the risk of making decisions at work based on our unconscious, pre-existing perceptions, allowing us work more professionally with clients.

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Awareness of personal attitudes

It is good practice to think about your attitudes and beliefs: it helps you to understand yourself better. It is beneficial to reflect on your life, identify some of the significant events that have shaped you, consider what qualities you admire in yourself and others and be mindful of what values and are important to you.

Activity

Your identity has shaped the person you are today!

Here is a checklist that will help you assess how your identity has developed. (.doc 25 kB)

The exercise you have just completed will have given you some sense of where your own identity has come from. Think about this as you answer the following questions.

Activity

- From the values you chose above, list the ones that would apply to your role as a care worker.
- Why is it important for community services workers to have a sense of their own identity and where it has come from?
- What issues can you identify for yourself in having to work with people and clients who have grown up differently from you, have a different identity and therefore different beliefs?

Taking into account personal values and beliefs

One of the responsibilities of workers is that we do not impose our own values and beliefs on the people we work with. That is, that we don't provide options and services based on what we feel is right, but that we work with people in relation to what is right for them. We should always remember that it is their life and only they should make decisions about how they should live their life.

If you try to impose your own moral values on clients, you are likely to make them feel judged and to damage their self-worth. Moreover, they are likely to reject you and to reject your values too. If you are able to accept your clients, with whatever values they have, you may well find that as time passes they move closer to you in their beliefs. This is inevitable because we are, whether we like it or not, models for our clients and we have a responsibility to be good models.

Regardless of who the client is, and regardless of his or her behaviour, he or she deserves to be treated as a human being of worth. If you respect your clients, they will, through feeling valued, be given the optimum conditions in which to maximise their potential as individuals.

It is essential that you are aware of your own values and beliefs so that you do not impose them (deliberately or unintentionally) on the people you are working with.

Professional values

In order to leave your personal values out of the client/worker relationship, you need to be aware of the impact they may have when you come across clients that do not behave in ways that you agree with—that is, clients who have different values and beliefs to you.

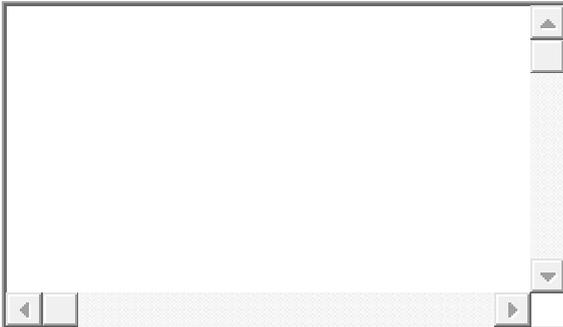
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You may find that with such clients you become judgemental or notice that you are encouraging clients to make a decision that reflects what you think they should do (based on your values and beliefs) rather than working with the client to come up with their own ideas about how to resolve the issue.

That is why it is so important to have ethical standards, so that we are operating by a professional set of guidelines, not what we personally think is right or wrong.

Activity: Professional values

What would you consider to be the values and attitudes that are critical for someone who works in the community services industry?



Feedback

Respecting the beliefs, attitudes and values of others

Everyone is entitled to their own values, attitudes and beliefs. It is important to accept and respect that other people may well have different attitudes, values and beliefs than you. We do not have the right to expect that others change their values, attitudes and beliefs just because they are different to ours.

It is quite possible that you may face situations at work that either challenge or compromise your own values, attitudes or beliefs when working to support people with a disability.

It is not always easy to avoid communicating your beliefs and values to clients, but it is something you need to be very aware of.

It can be very easy to influence clients in subtle ways. Simple things like body language, gestures, the way you say something, or even actions, can give a client the impression you agree or disagree with their values or beliefs.

A disability support worker, Sally, was assisting Harry, a client, to decide what movie he was going to see on the weekend. Harry loved horror films. Sally hated them. During the conversation Sally shook her head every time Harry pointed to a horror film in the paper. In the end Harry decided to go and see a comedy.

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Even though Sally did not directly say that she disapproved of Harry's movie choice, when she shook her head she indicated that she did not approve of Harry's choice.

The support you give to clients should be, as much as possible, in line with their values, attitudes and beliefs, while also in line with your community services organisation and the law.

Impact of values and philosophies on service provision

The way that the above values and philosophies are acted upon in services affects the quality of the service provided to clients. The more these values are promoted and reflected in the way the service operates, the more positive the experience for the client.

Activity

You can choose as many options as you like from each list. Tick the concepts you think apply to you.

1 I am the way I am because of my:

- family
- race
- gender
- culture
- religion
- income
- partner
- occupation
- nationality

2 When I think about myself I think of myself as:

- a woman
- a man
- a father
- a mother
- a daughter
- a son
- a lover
- a partner/wife/husband
- a friend
- a student

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- a worker
- a white person
- a black person
- rich
- having enough to live on
- poor
- someone else

3 I may be a different person if I:

- had a different family
- were a different race
- were a different gender
- were a different culture
- changed religion
- had more or less income
- had a different partner
- changed occupation
- were a different nationality
- lived in a different area
- had different friends.