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Social Work Skills for Beginning Direct Practice: Text, Workbook, and Web Based Case Studies

Cummins Sevel Pedrick Third Edition

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summary. Summarization is used throughout the interview to focus the discussion on relevant issues as well as to make transitions from one topic to another. Generally, a social worker will summarize what has been said when it appears that all of the relevant information has been shared regarding a particular topic. Summarizations are generally delivered as a statement, not a question. Summarizations are also helpful in beginning and ending sessions. Generally, a good way to begin a session is to summarize what was discussed in the last session(s). This technique ensures continuity across sessions. Summarization can also be useful at the end of a session to highlight relevant topics from the session and to set the agenda for the next visit (Hepworth, Rooney, & Larson, 2010). This skill is also useful as a tool to curb clients who have a tendency toward long-winded storytelling. The social worker can recap what was said and then attempt to refocus the interview to more relevant parts of the problem. For some clients, this sprawling explanation is a good way to divert and deflect the interview process by focusing on tangential issues (Hepworth et al., 2010). Assisting the client to get back on track by focusing on the problem rather than a "story" is an appropriate use of this skill (Boyle, Hull, Mather, Smith, & Farley, 2011).

Knowing when to interrupt a client without appearing rude is a technique that can be learned. As you are attempting to get the client to refocus, be clear about the direction of the conversation and the reason for further discussion—for example, saying "You have been talking a lot about your son Barry and his issues with your ex-husband. I can tell this is important to you; however, I would like to find out more about your relationship with your son. Maybe we can gain some insight into your frustrations if we spend some time talking about how you experience your son's behaviors toward you." Box 2 provides some general guidelines for using summarization.

Box 2 Guidelines for Using Summarization

1. Identify key aspects of the client's messages over time; that is, within the session or over the course of several sessions.
2. Use summarization as a way to focus the interview. The social worker takes the lead in setting the agenda (of course, with the client's input).
3. Use summarization to tie messages together and make a coherent whole.
4. Verify with the client that you are on the right track; for example, "There are a few things you said that I want to be sure I have understood. You are thinking about leaving your husband and will make the final decision after you complete your degree. Is that the gist of what you said?"
5. Use summarization to begin a session; switch directions during the session and wrap up.
6. Recap what was said, sometimes using the client's own words; for example, "You just said 'I want the abuse to stop.' That is the first time I have heard you utter those words. Good for you."

Source: Hepworth et al., 2010.

Summarizations are also used to review progress over time. It allows the social worker to reflect back on past sessions and to bring to the fore themes and patterns that have emerged throughout the therapeutic relationship. This is a good technique to use when the social worker is trying to organize thoughts and concerns about the issue under discussion. Clients can also work toward organization of content, as they too attempt to review what was said either in the session or across sessions. Box 3 demonstrates the skill of summarization being utilized by the social worker.

Box 3 Kate—Summarization

Kate is an 18-year-old female who has been living with a foster family since age 8. She is discussing recent events in her life with her social worker, focusing particularly on her relationship with her biological mother.

Kate: Dennis and Julia [foster parents] have taken good care of me. I know that they're proud of my accomplishments, especially me getting accepted at the university.

Social Worker: You've done so well and proven that you can make it. (Paraphrasing)

Kate: Yeah! I want to make something of myself. I want to do better than my Mom did for me. You know, she didn't even show up for my graduation. Dennis and Julia were there, cheering me on.

Social Worker: You sound very hurt and let down that your Mom didn't come and celebrate your special day. (Lead-in response/reflection of feeling)

Kate: I know I should have prepared myself—she's not going to show, but I always hope she will.

Social Worker: You're feeling really frustrated with her right now. (Lead-in response/reflection of feeling) Can you tell me more about your relationship with your Mom? (Open-ended question)

Kate: I don't know. I wish that she wanted to be a part of my life. Sometimes I think she's jealous of Dennis and Julia. Maybe she feels bad about everything that has happened, especially the stuff with her husband. He never wanted me around and maybe that's part of why she stays away too.

Social Worker: Although you love Dennis and Julia, you wish things had turned out differently with your Mom. You understand her circumstances, but it doesn't change the fact that you feel hurt and disappointed by her time after time. Does that capture how you feel? (Summarization and clarification)

In the example in Box 3, Kate talks about several important issues: 1) her relationship with her foster parents; 2) graduating from high school and going to college; 3) disappointment with her mother, yet understanding her mother's situation; and 4) wanting to do things differently in her own life. The social worker pulls together several issues presented by Kate and develops a concise statement reviewing the important points.

Summarization provides focus throughout the interview, highlights important points, and helps identify themes, patterns, and insights. A summarization is not merely a "list"; rather, it is a composite of the most significant parts of the interview. It can be beneficial to ask the client to summarize at various points throughout the interview. It gives both the social worker and client an appreciation for the client's point of view and can serve as a way to confirm the accuracy and the understanding of the message by both parties. The social worker can also clarify or ask an open-ended question to be certain a full understanding of the situation has been achieved. It is always a good idea to ask the client to confirm the accuracy of your understanding: for example, "You are still feeling hopeful, even after all these disappointments, that you will be able to one day get out of your wheelchair. Do I understand what you just said?" Finally, when providing a summarization, be sure to recap what the client said, not your opinions, values, and judgments. Practice your summarization skill by completing the exercise in Box A.

Summarization provides focus throughout the interview, highlights important points, and helps identify themes, patterns, and insights.

Box A Now you try it...Summarization

A 75-year-old African-American female is living in a nursing home. She wants to go back home, but her children feel strongly that this is her only option.

Social Worker: Eleanor, you've been at the nursing home for the past six months. I know at times you've been very unhappy here. How have you been doing recently?

(continued)

Box A Now you try it…Summarization (continued)

Eleanor: Well, I just hate it here. I absolutely hate it here. My roommate, Emma, cries all the time. There's not a moment's peace. I get hungry, and I can't eat until they come get us for breakfast, lunch, and supper. My kids haven't been here to see me in three months. I'm really lonely. I am miserable.

Social Worker: As time wears on, it's even harder for you to make peace with being here?

Eleanor: Yes, it is just getting worse. I don't see it ever getting better. I hate being here. It's really depressing; and I was happier before I came. I had the fall and broke my hip and, next thing you know, here I am. I have my wits about me. I know who I am and I feel like I can take care of myself. I just don't feel like I belong here.

Social Worker: I know it's been very hard for you, but from talking with your son and daughter, they feel it's not possible for you to go home. There's just no help available.

Eleanor: Well, I just don't think they give me enough credit. I think that I can take care of myself and that I don't need somebody with me 24 hours a day. I don't know why they think that. I just feel like they're throwing me away.

Social Worker: They don't see your strength? That you are capable of managing with some assistance?

Eleanor: I realize that when I first broke my hip, I was incapacitated and was not able to do for myself. But I'm better, and I'm getting around with my walker. And there are many things I can do by myself now.

A. Most important aspects of the client's statement:
   1.
   2.
   3.

B. Your summarization response:

Information Giving

The social worker uses information giving when the client is in need of useful knowledge. Information may include knowledge about available resources in the community, such as a local food pantry or a homeless shelter (Murphy & Dillon, 2011), or it might be information relevant to the client's presenting problem (e.g., informing a client with a substance abuse problem about the progressive nature of an addiction). Information is power. If your client is equipped with knowledge about resources, data, and facts, he or she is more likely to make changes. You can use this skill to convey details and an explanation about the helping process, the role of the social worker, and interventions to be used. Sharing specifics about developmental norms, life transitions, and consequences of behaviors is important, as this information can help the social worker and client sort out what is a fact, a falsehood, or a myth (Gambrill, 1997). For example, it is appropriate to help a client realize that physical abuse is not something every woman experiences. Or after talking with a client about "sexting" and cyber bullying, help her to realize that she has an unrealistic understanding of the multiple risks associated with such behaviors (see Box 4 for guidelines for using information giving).

Box 4 Guidelines for Information Giving

1. Identify the kind of information that is useful to the client.
2. Identify reliable sources of information, such as the library, telephone book, websites, social service agencies, schools and universities.
3. Determine readiness for information, and whether the client can find it on his or her own.
4. Identify sequencing of information, presenting the most important information first.
5. Present information in a way the client can hear it, but be sure to include facts if they are relevant.
6. Don't overload the client with too much information; sometimes a small dose of information is all the client can handle.

Box 4 Guidelines for Information Giving (continued)

7. Discuss the client's reaction to the information.
8. Ascertain how well the client understands the information, by asking him or her to repeat it.
9. Write down information (or provide a brochure).

Source: Hepworth et al., 2010; Sheafor et al., 2011.

Information should always be presented in a way that is sensitive to the client's culture. For example, in talking to an African-American client about mental illness, it is important to understand that within this minority group sources (or the cause) of mental illnesses are often thought of as organic or inherited. Talking about medication as the first treatment choice may convey that the social worker does not want to work with the client (Paniagua, 1998). Some clients assume that social workers can't be trusted because they are members of the dominant group. In this case, understand the trepidation clients might experience when asking for more traditional social services. It is your responsibility to convey understanding and interest and provide services that are relevant to your client's needs.

In terms of potential language barriers, if you have clients who do not understand English, having written materials available in their native language is important. Providing the client with concrete recommendations or services early on in the helping process is also beneficial (Paniagua, 1998). If you don't speak Spanish, for example, a translator may be required to assist with the interview. Be aware that a translator, whether a family member or a professional, can be seen as intrusive. Certainly, training bilingual social workers to provide services to members of their ethnic or racial group can be an effective way to convey consideration and sensitivity. It is essential that as a helper you understand that external sociopolitical forces have influence and shape the worldview of our clients.

In the example in Box 5, Mandy is expressing concern about her health status, possible pregnancy, as well as her lack of judgment in having unprotected sex. The social worker provides relevant information to Mandy, and then refocuses the interview on her emotional state. In addition, the social

Practice Contexts

Critical Thinking Question: What benefits does using the skill summarization provide to both the client and the social worker?

Box 5 Mandy—Information Giving

Mandy is a 19-year-old female who discloses in the middle of a session that she is very anxious. She recently attended a party where she had unprotected sex with a man she knows only casually. She is concerned about STI (sexually transmitted infections) and being pregnant.

Mandy: I can't believe I did this. I mean, it was really stupid.

Social Worker: Having unprotected sex could have serious consequences, one of which is getting infected with a sexually transmitted infection (information giving) and, of course, pregnancy.

Mandy: I get the pregnant part, but do you mean like AIDS?

Social Worker: Yes. (Information giving)

Mandy: But I feel OK. I don't think I have a disease, and I sure hope that I'm not pregnant.

Social Worker: The only way you'll know whether you're infected will be to get an HIV antibody test in three to six months. (Information giving) I know you must be scared about all this. (Reflection of feeling), including the possibility of getting pregnant.

Mandy: My parents are going to kill me. We are Catholic, and no matter what the circumstances, sex is a sin.

Social Worker: So to make a difficult situation even worse, you are scared and anxious about your parents' reaction. (Reflection of feeling)

Mandy: Yep. If I'm pregnant, an abortion is out of the question. In my family, it would be better to die from AIDS than to be a single mom or a baby killer.

Social Worker: You feel like there are no good choices; but let's talk about one thing at a time. There is no reason right now to panic about the what ifs. Let's take it slowly. Where do you want to start?

worker empowers Mandy by suggesting that she decide what she wants to discuss first. Also note that the social worker does not interject an opinion here. The worker is referring to the facts only. No judgment is attached to the information imparted.

Social workers present information to educate clients about options and help them to make changes, not to dictate choices in a judgmental way.

Social workers present information to educate clients about options and help them to make changes, not to dictate choices in a judgmental way. We provide information as a way to teach or instruct. We can fill in the gaps, as a client may have partial information about a resource, topic, issue, or circumstance. For instance, showing a client how to use the public bus system or develop a budget are examples of information giving. Keeping within the social work ethic of self-determination, information should always be presented in a way that allows the client to accept or reject the information being offered. Specifically, it is important to distinguish between advice and information. Giving "advice" is telling clients what you believe to be in their best interest, while providing information allows clients to make choices based on all the available alternatives (Sheafor et al., 2012).

If the social worker doesn't have the necessary information, he or she should be honest and amenable to gathering the information for the next session or follow-up contact. It is important to remember that social workers don't know all the answers and reaching out to others for resources, information, and referrals on behalf of our clients is a necessary part of our work. Providing a reading list, a brochure, or pamphlet about a service or agency can be very empowering to the client. Be sure your information is up to date. It is a good idea to review and critique any articles, brochures, or informational sheets before giving them to a client. Always consider the reading level of your client. Sometimes you may need to present or adapt the information in a way that addresses the client's cognitive level or limitations.

Before giving information, determine what the client already knows. For instance, you wouldn't want to repeat the steps involved in applying for medical assistance if the client has already completed an application. Check back with clients to ascertain if they understand all the information. This way you can clear up any misunderstandings or gaps in the information shared. Pay attention to the client's verbal and nonverbal reaction to the information, and use either a paraphrase, reflection of feeling, or clarification to make sure you understand his or her point of view. ("You look surprised that there are so many steps to enroll your child in school. It does require lots of paper work, but I do this with parents all the time.") Try using the skill of information giving using the case scenario in Box B.

Box B Now you try it…Information Giving

A 10-year-old girl, talking with the school social worker.

"Last week my parents told us they're getting a divorce. It's been coming for a long time, but I really want them to stay together. My sister says there is no chance of them staying married, but I don't believe that. Please give me some ideas about how I can stop this from happening."

A. Most important pieces of information in the client's message:
   1.
   2.

B. Your information-giving response:

A word of caution about giving information: be careful not to use information as a way of sounding like the expert. Overwhelming your client with the breadth and depth of your knowledge may impress you, but at the same time intimidate the client. The timing of information, in small, understandable, and relevant doses, works best for both you and the client. See Box 6 for a list of reputable websites that can provide valuable information to you and your clients.

Box 6 Sample Internet Websites for Reliable Information

If your client has access to the Internet, providing addresses of reputable websites is another way to get up-to-date information regarding any subject matter.

A few examples of trustworthy sites are:

www.ahrq.gov = Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (preparing for a doctor's appointment by generating a list of questions).

www.mayoclinic.com = Mayo Clinic (medical site offering information about diseases, illness prevention, healthy recipes, and expert blogs by specialists in the field).

www.babycenter.com = (Baby care tips written by a panel of medical experts).

www.nichd.nih.gov = National Institute for Human Development (tracking child development and in-depth information on health issues and conditions).

www.healthcare.gov = (Health care reform, also information about the quality of hospitals and nursing homes in your local area).

To learn about ways to evaluate whether information on the Web is reliable, check out these sites. This information will help you and your client determine what is reputable information or information that may be viewed as untrustworthy, dishonest, or scheming.

John Hopkins University: www.library.jhu.edu/researchhelp/general/evaluating/

American Library Associations: www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/alsc/greatwebsites/greatwebsitesforkids/greatwebsites.cfm

University of California at Berkeley: www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/Evaluate.html

National Association of Social Workers: http://naswdc.org

Confrontation

Confrontation is a skill that a social worker uses to address a discrepancy in the client's message (Hepworth et al., 2010). This discrepancy can take two forms: 1) the client's behavior in contradiction to his or her statement or 2) the client's statements in contradiction to one another. An example of the first type of discrepancy, when the client states one thing yet behaves differently, would be the following scenario: A client says, "I want Claudia back—the agency is keeping her from me. You want to give her to that foster family." The social worker responds by saying, "I know you want Claudia to be with you; but as we have talked about before, if you continue to miss visits with her, it will delay her coming home." It is important to note that the social worker may be confused by this apparent disconnect between the client's verbal and nonverbal messages and may need to explore this further. An example of the second type of discrepancy, when two or more of the client's messages or statements contradict each other, would be a client denying that she is experiencing stress in her relationship with her husband while also reporting in the same session that she hates talking to him. The social worker points out this discrepancy in hopes of providing some insight that could possibly lead to client change. It is best to offer a series of recent examples rather than a distant event the client