

## Professional Communications Skills

### Supervisor Workbook

**T**he Topic: APS work is based on interviewing the victim, perpetrator, referral source, collaterals, and family members. The information obtained from those interviews provides the basis for case planning and intervention. The purpose of this training is to give new staff the tools they need to conduct a fact finding interview in a way which supports the dignity and self determination of the victim.

By the end of this training, participants will be able to:

- Demonstrate the interviewing skills listed below:
  - Trust and relationship building
  - Engagement techniques
  - Open-ended questioning
  - Listening/reflection of content and feeling
  - Responding to disclosures
  - Showing empathy/compassion
- Correctly identify 5 questions types (open ended, multiple choice, yes/no, leading/suggestive, and coercive).
- Correctly identify 3 distinct question content levels

(general, focused, disclosure clarification).

- Adjust the interview to the functional level of the victim in order to get accurate information and understanding.

**Supervisor Activities:** The following pages contain a variety of activities that may be used with new workers and processed in individual or group supervision. Please read the Professional Communications Skills Trainer's Manual as it will give you a wealth of didactic material and resources to support these activities

### **Selected Readings:**

Bender Dreher, Barbara.

"Communication Skills for Working with Elders." Springer Publishing Company (New York, 2001).

Ramsey-Klawnsnik, Holly. "Interviewing Suspected Victims" *Victimization of the Elderly and Disabled*, (Civic Research Institute, Sept/Oct. 2004).

Ramsey-Klawnsnik, Holly and Klawnsnik, Lisa. "Interviewing Victims with Barriers to Communication." *Victimization of the Elderly and Disabled* (Civic Research Institute, November/December 2004).

## Discussion Questions: Preparing for the Interview

New workers to APS may have varied backgrounds. Some may have been in the social work field for many years, others may be fresh out of school, others may have come from a completely different field. It is important that they know the APS operation: the type of interview they will be doing as well as who they will be interviewing. Here are some questions you may ask to give them some background and to get an idea of how much they already know:

- Can you explain what the purpose of an APS fact finding interview might be (*to obtain a completed and accurate report from an alleged victim and collateral contacts, to collect information to corroborate or refute the allegation*)
- What do you think some of the issues may be at the first interview? (*client may be fearful, suspicious, confused, angry at the intrusion*)
- Can you explain what we mean by “the use of self” when you are interviewing a victim? (*Being open and friendly, non-threatening and*

*warm, open-minded, objective, unbiased, supportive, empathetic, reassuring, trying to reach a common understanding*)

- What kind of information might be helpful to have in order to prepare for the visit? (*have them make suggestions and then handout the next page (Preparing for the Interview)*). Answer any question or give more examples if you feel necessary. Make sure you clarify the agency policy regarding age, disability, use of translators, time line, involving law enforcement, or any other issues pertinent to the interview process. Also you may let participants know that they can use the internet to research health, mental health, and disability issues since no one can be an expert on every kind of disability or impairment.

Possible examples:

- National Institute on Health at <http://www.nih.gov/>
- Web MD at <http://www.webmd.com/>
- National Institute on Mental Health at <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/>

## Preparing for the Interview

1. **Age:** Does this victim meet your agency's victim age criteria?
2. **Language:** Does the victim speak a language you know? Do you need to bring a translator?
3. **Disability:** Do you have basic information about this victim's disability or do you need to talk to a medical or disability expert to learn more about the condition? None of us know about every disability.



It's helpful to understand what's involved in an individual's care or what communication barriers they may have BEFORE starting the interview. If disability is a victim criterion for your agency, does this victim meet the criteria?

4. **Cognitive Impairment:** It is helpful to know whether a victim has a memory loss or mental illness BEFORE the interview. Although these interviewees can give accurate information (don't prejudge them), you may want to know what other individuals are available to provide corroboration the victim's statements.
5. **Previous History with APS:** Is this the first report that has come to your agency or have there been numerous reports? What were the results of previous investigations? Who was the alleged abuser(s) in the previous case(s)? Is the alleged abuse the same in this case? Is the reporter that same or different? Although you need to treat each report as a new investigation, your investigation should be informed by the victim's previous history. Sometimes numerous inconclusive investigations piled together make a pretty convincing picture of abuse.
6. **Allegations:** What kind of abuse are you investigating? What is the level of immediacy? What is the level of risk to the victim? (For example: Is it a financial abuse case and the allegation is that

the victim is signing over the mortgage today? Is it a domestic violence allegation and she is afraid to go home because her husband is drunk?) Family Dynamics: Based on the abuse report and previous investigations (if applicable) you might want to know who is fighting with whom within the family and how angry they are with each other.

7. **Cultural/gender issues:** Do you have a basic understanding of this victim's cultural background? Is there someone in your office you could ask for cultural advice before seeing the victim? For

example, who is the head of this family and how should you approach them about interviewing the victim? How does this culture view people in authority? Is this family likely to be undocumented and afraid to speak with you?

8. **Possible dangers:** You should always review the report for dangers to both the victim and yourself. Is this a dangerous neighborhood? Are there guns in the home? Are there large dogs in the yard? How about gang activity? Is anyone in the home a convicted felon or drug addict?

## Case Vignettes: Preparing for the Interview

After reviewing the handout, share the vignettes and ask them what they would do to prepare for the interview.

1. Russell is an 82 year old visually impaired African American male diagnosed with early stage dementia. He lives alone in a small shack that has no running water. He has 7 cats which he loves but cannot care for...The house is in disrepair. Russell has rejected help from the Commission for the Blind. His neighbor has referred him to APS before but the case was not substantiated.

*Factors to consider*

- *Diagnosis: how might the visual impairment affect your interview?*
- *Medical history: What is the extent of the visual impairment? Past treatment, doctors, medications*
- *Home conditions: Is this home a health hazard? If so, what might you do to decrease the hazard? What condition are the cats? Should Code Enforcement or animal control be involved?*
- *Previous APS history: read case records, contact the previous worker to find out what he/she tried as engagement strategies?*

2. Minha Patel is a 62 year old woman from South India who was brought to this country 4 years ago by her son Proful and his U.S. born wife to care for their 2 children. Two years ago Minha suffered a stroke which left her paralyzed on one side, making it difficult for her to meet the needs of the family. Her speech is impaired as well. She has been moved to the basement which is very cold and is not eating properly. The daughter in law has cut back work hours because of the child care issues and reportedly is verbally abusive to Minha. Her daughter in law is threatening to put her in a nursing home and her son wants to send her back to India.

*Factors to consider*

- *Age factor: eligible under APS policy?*
- *Cultural issues: feelings around nursing home care, family loyalty*
- *Immigration status and eligibility for services*
- *Does she need a translator? What is the extent of the speech impairment? Who should interpret?*

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- *Timing of visit: When will you make your home visit? Who will let you in if client is in the basement and has mobility impairment?*

## Written Activity: Demonstrate Interviewing Skills

In order for new workers to complete this written activity, the supervisor must spend time sharing the following information with the new worker. If the worker has attended the in-class training, a quick review should be sufficient.

Share Handouts #3 (Reflective Listening) and #4 (Emotional Vocabulary)

Discuss the use of empathy as a way to:

1. establish rapport
2. improve understanding
3. lubricate the communication process
4. keep the focus on the interviewee
5. pave the way for later acceptance of stronger action

Stress that correctly identifying the victim's emotions is important to the communication process.

Another method of developing rapport with victims is summarizing the content of their statements. Summarizing:

- Shows respect
- Demonstrates active listening
- Confirms accuracy of information
- Tracks a mixed/difficult message
- Clarifies perspectives when resolving conflicts and
- Confirms a contract/ sets priorities/ confirms an action plan.

There are three parts to a summary. The lead in: where you let the individual know that you are going to summarize what they said/ felt. The content: where you indicate what you understood them to have said or felt. And the check: where you ask for confirmation that you correctly understood their message or feeling.



The following written activity addresses rapport, emotions/empathy and summarizing. There is a blank one for new staff and an answer sheet for supervisors.



## Activity Answer Sheet for Supervisors

**Building Rapport:** Name at least 5 ways you can make a connection with a victim

1. *Family photos*
2. *Animals, pets*
3. *hobbies*
4. *garden*
5. *books*
6. *home décor*
7. *food*

**Emotions and Empathy:** Identify the victim's emotion(s) and write a statement of empathy you might use so the victim knows you have heard and understood her/him.

1. I've had so many people into my home already. I don't know what you people want from me. I'm doing just fine. Why don't you leave me alone? I can take care of myself. I always have. I don't need you nosing around my business.

Emotion: *frustration, anger, self-preservation*

My statement of empathy: *It sounds like you are angry and feeling put upon with so many strangers invading your privacy.*

2. I can't believe I fell for this con artist! He was so sincere when he offered to help me fix things around the house. And, then he did absolutely nothing but rip me off.

Emotion: *distressed, humiliated, hurt*

My statement of empathy: *It sounds like this situation has left you feeling distressed and taken advantage of.*

3. My son just can't seem to catch a break. His wife left him and took his kids a long time ago. Then he lost his job. He lives with me now for the last two years, and can't seem to find steady employment. I am supporting him, but I don't mind, he's my son after all. But sometimes it's hard...

Emotion: *frustration, resignation, concern*

My statement of empathy: *It sounds like you are very concerned about your son and have been doing what you can to help him out.*

4. My life is such a mess that nothing is going to make a difference.

Emotion: *depression, despairing,*

My statement of empathy: *It sounds like you are feeling hopeless right now.*

**Summarizing:** Write a 3-part summarizing response to the following statements

5. I don't think I can ask my daughter to move out, she has nowhere to go. And, she'll be really upset. I can't upset her like that. I'll just have to wait until the time is right to discuss it with her.

Lead in: *What I hear you saying is*

Content: *this may not be the best time to ask your daughter to move and you may be a little anxious about her response*

Check: *is that correct?*

6. What should I do now? I can't let my care provider back into my house but I need someone to help me. Who else can I get to cook and go to the store and help me to the bathroom? Good Lord, what am I going to do tonight? I can't get anyone else right away. I can't stay alone.

Lead in: *It sounds like*

Content: *you are feeling very overwhelmed and afraid of being alone right now,*

Check: *am I right?*

7. Are we going to be done soon?

Lead in: *It seems as though*

Content: *you may be tired and eager for me to leave*

Check: *Is that what you are feeling now?*

## Interviewing Skills: Written Activity for New Workers

**Building Rapport:** Name at least 5 ways you can make a connection with a victim

- 1.
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

**Emotions and Empathy:** Identify the victim's emotion(s) and write a statement of empathy you might use so the victim knows you have heard and understood her/him

1. I've had so many people into my home already. I don't know what you people want from me. I'm doing just fine. Why don't you leave me alone? I can take care of myself.

Emotion:

My statement of empathy:

2. I can't believe I fell for this con artist! He was so sincere when he offered to help me fix things around the house. And, then he did absolutely nothing but rip me off.

Emotion:

My statement of empathy

3. My son just can't seem to catch a break. His wife left him and took his kids a long time ago. Then he lost his job. He lives with me now for the last two years, and can't seem to find steady employment. I am supporting him, but I don't mind, he's my son after all. But sometimes it's hard...

Emotion:

My statement of empathy:

4. My life is such a mess that nothing is going to make a difference.

Emotion:

My statement of empathy:

**Summarizing:** Write a 3-part summarizing response to the following statements

5. I don't think I can ask my daughter to move out, she has nowhere to go. And, she'll be really upset. I can't upset her like that. I'll just have to wait until the time is right to discuss it with her.

Lead in:

Content:

Check:

6. What should I do now? I can't let my care provider back into my house but I need someone to help me. Who else can I get to cook and go to the store and help me to the bathroom? Good Lord, what am I going to do tonight? I can't get anyone else right away. I can't stay alone.

Lead in:

Content:

Check:

7. Are we going to be done soon?

Lead in:

Content:

Check:



**On the Job Training:** Identify 5 Question types

Share Handout #7 Questions Style.

**D**iscuss the 3 types of questions below. Ask the worker when would be the most appropriate time to use each type of question. Share handouts #6, #7, and #8 with them. If new workers have attended the in-class training, a quick review should be sufficient.

**Open-ended questions-** designed to present a broad topic and allow client to provide a narrative response.

Open-ended Questions often begin with:

How, What, Please explain, Please share , or Can.

They can provide a lot of information from the client.

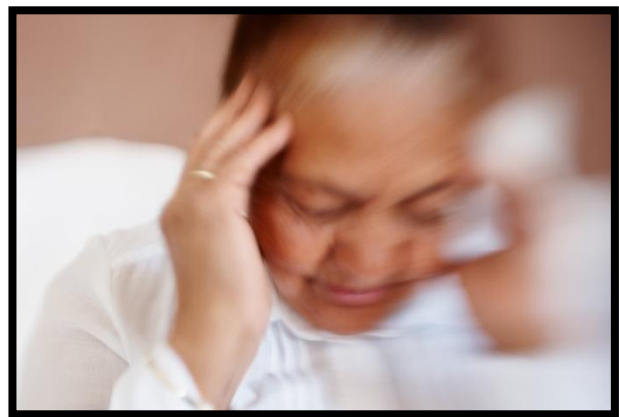
Avoid “Why” questions since they may seem judgmental and make the victim feel defensive and she may either withdraw or attack. Also, “Why” can be embarrassing for many people because they have to face the unsavory motivations of those people who are supposed to care about them. In either case, you will not get useful information. In some cases, the victim may not have a clear understanding of their own motivations because they have a complex relationship with the other person. For example, many people struggle with “why” their marriage failed. It is naiveté on your part to

think the victim can answer that type of question. Research has shown that open-ended questions yield the most accurate information.

**Yes/No questions-** are focused on getting specific information. Client usually answers with yes/no, or a very short response. These questions emphasize factual content. They often start with:

Do, Is, Are, Who, Where and When. These questions reflect the worker’s agenda, but they sometimes turn the client off, it may feel like an interrogation. Then, use open-ended questions to bring variation in your style.

**Multiple Choice Questions-** are problematic for people with cognitive impairments. First, people in general try to be agreeable which means that cognitively impaired individuals tend to answer “yes” to questions they don’t understand, just to be agreeable. They also tend to pick the second option when they don’t understand the question or know the answer. They don’t



understand that they don't have to pick one of the options presented. However, multiple choice questions can be a good option for people who have physical communication impairments if you also include a "none of the above" option.

Assign a new case to the worker and have her/him develop a series of

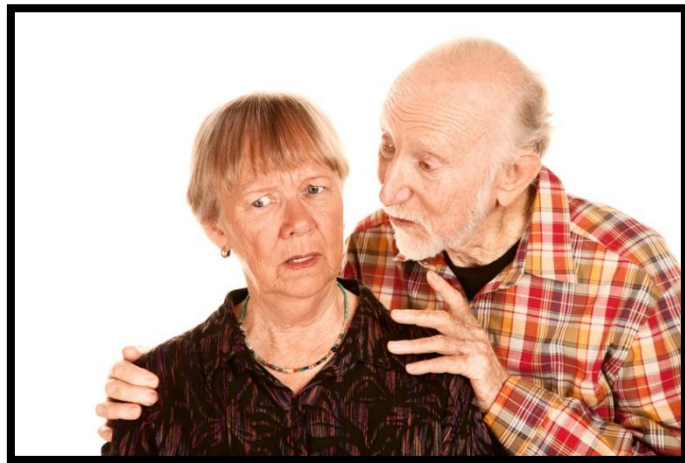
questions which may lead to gaining more information and a deeper understanding of the situation. The worker may use the intake information as well as information obtained from collaterals. After each question, have them identify what type of question it is.

### **Written Activity:** Identify 5 Question types

Discuss leading and coercive questions with new workers.

**L** *Leading Questions:* Leading questions are defined as questions that suggest the answer expected by the interviewer and they can seriously compromise the credibility of the information you receive from the victim. Many leading questions include a tag element such as "didn't you", "wasn't it", etc, at the end of the question. These are the questions that workers want to avoid as much as possible. Emphasize that a direct question that follows up on information provided by the victim is not a leading question. So, for example, if the victim says, "My son can be mean," it is not leading to ask "What does your son do when he is mean" because you are following the victim's statement (the victim is "leading" you.) You can only tell if a question is leading within the context of the interview.

*Coercive Questioning:* A question is coercive if (1) it promises something, (2) threatens something or (3) can be characterized as badgering. Workers should never use coercive questioning with a victim. Beyond the fact that using your position and authority against a victim is a violation of social work ethics, the



*information you gain is extremely likely to be inaccurate.*

Have the worker complete the Leading Questions Activity Handout #10. There are 2 pages to this Activity. Select one page for them to complete and then discuss the answers with them.

**Role Play:** Identify 3 question levels.

Adjust interview level to functional level of victim.

In this role play, the new worker needs to ask questions to determine whether the abuse occurred. You the supervisor, playing the role of client, may pretend that the abuse did or that the abuse didn't happen. Make sure you emphasize the communication barriers (vision, language).

Give the new worker some time to develop the progression of questions.

If it is possible to have an experienced worker observe the interview, have her look for

- Types of questions asked
- Progression of the questions (general to focused to disclosure clarification, if appropriate)
- How worker addressed the special communications barriers

### **Client information**

Maria is an 85 year old Puerto Rican woman who has severe diabetes, has had one leg amputated, and has vision problems. Her daughter Carmen lives with her, but is rarely home to meet her needs. The client recently fell and was transported to the hospital. The reporting party alleges that Maria is taking the victim's money and using it for personal expenses.



## Role Play

You are going to interview the client Maria Lopez.

**Maria Lopez is an 85 year old Puerto Rican woman who has severe diabetes, has had one leg amputated, and has vision problems. Her daughter Carmen lives with her, but is rarely home to meet her needs. The client recently fell and was transported to the hospital. The reporting party alleges that Maria is taking the victim's money and using it for personal expenses.**

This is the first interview. Your goal is to find out about the allegations, but you must start out with general, rapport building open-ended questions before you begin focusing on the presenting problem. Remember to use as many open-ended questions as possible and to take into account any communication barriers presented in this situation.

Take some time to develop your questions and their progression before you begin the interview.

### On the Job Training: Identify 3 question content levels

Share Handout #9 with new workers and discuss the progression of general questions (building rapport, using invitational prompts and cues, non-threatening, non-defensive, usually open-ended), to focused questions



(focus on a particular topic such as violence in the home. These are still open-ended questions but they are asking for information around a specific topic) to disclosure clarification questions (finding out the “W”s: Who, What, Where, When and How). A question is only a disclosure clarification **AFTER** the victim has confirmed an abusive act

or situation has occurred. Questions asked before the abuse disclosing statement are either general or abused focused questions. Hinting at possible abuse (e.g. “He gets angry sometimes”, “I don’t like being alone”) are not abuse disclosure. So, the follow-up questions (e.g. “What happens when he gets mad?”, “How often are you alone”) are still abuse focused questions rather than disclosure clarification questions. This distinction can be difficult for new workers so it is important to make sure that they understand the difference.

Once you feel they have understood the progression, have them go back to their new case and decide the order of content that they might use in the interview. On their first visit to the client, have them be conscious of those questions and then use disclosure clarification questions depending on what the client discloses to them. After the visit, meet with the worker and ask the following questions:

- How did you establish rapport using general open-ended questions?
- When did you begin to focus your questions?
- What were your challenges (if any) in keeping the questions open?
- Was neglect or abuse confirmed by your client? If so, how did you proceed with disclosure clarification questions?
- Describe your comfort level.... And that of your client.. as you went through this process.

**NOTE:** If your new staff has **NOT** attended the formal training, you may have them complete the professional interview checklist (Handout #12) as an alternative to this exercise.

**Transfer of Learning:** Adjust interview to functional level of victim

**T**his section refers to the communication challenges with different populations. For this activity new workers will research different types of disabilities and identify:

1. what challenges might the client have
2. What behaviors or issues may be the result of those challenges
3. What can the worker do to facilitate the communication process

A grid will be provided where they can record their findings. They can obtain the information from the module content, from the internet, from outreaching agencies or individuals who work with that population. The information they obtain will be a resource to them in their future work with APS.

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Type of Communication Barrier	Challenges to Client	Behaviors as a Result of Challenges	What APS Worker can do to facilitate communication	Resource and contact information
Visual impairment				
Hearing impairment				
Speech impairment				
Cognitive Impairment				

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Language Barrier				
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