

DE-ESCALATION

STRATEGIES & SKILLS



FREE NOTES

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This is an extract from the notes for the 1-day workshop DE-ESCALATION STRATEGIES AND SKILLS.

Permission is granted to distribute this copy to **all social workers and social service professionals** free of charge.

It is meant to provide some practical advice that could save a life.

Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	4
IT WILL NEVER HAPPEN TO ME... ..	5
CLIENT VIOLENCE IN SOCIAL WORK.....	6
EFFECTS OF CLIENT VIOLENCE	6
CREATING SAFER ENVIRONMENTS	7
INTERVIEW SAFETY.....	7
Interview room	7
Interview options – least restrictive to most restrictive	7
Communication.....	7
Furniture.....	7
SAFER HOME VISITS	8
Conduct during home visits	9
SOURCES.....	10

INTRODUCTION

Around 50% of advanced degree social workers are concerned about their safety when making home visits to clients. Of these, about 30% experience verbal threats during home visits and almost 50% were physically threatened during a home visit¹. Yet, most social service workers never receive any training focused on predicting and preventing client violence, responding in a crisis or dealing with the aftermath of violence.

Worker safety is an important part of risk management in any organisation; at least, it should be. Social service workers face risks inherent to their work on a daily basis and special measures must therefore be taken to ensure their safety. When social service workers' safety needs are not adequately anticipated and addressed, that may result in financial liabilities for employers, not to mention the negative consequences for the workers which may include injury or death.

The prevention of violence in the workplace is therefore not only about mitigating organisational risk or responding to crises; it is about worker safety which ultimately affects the quality of care and services provided to clients.

Violence against social service workers by their clients is not as rare as we may think. Most instances are not reported. In a survey conducted by the NASW in preparation for a webinar on client violence and social worker safety, 58% of the 1,129 social worker respondents had directly experienced an incident of client violence and more than 63% were aware of a colleague who had been a victim of violence².

Violence against social workers has become an inherent risk³ of the profession that needs to be addressed on a national scope. Social workers are often required to work in dangerous neighbourhoods and situations where police officers only enter if they are armed and with a partner.

¹ Criss (2010). Prevalence and effects of client violence on social workers.

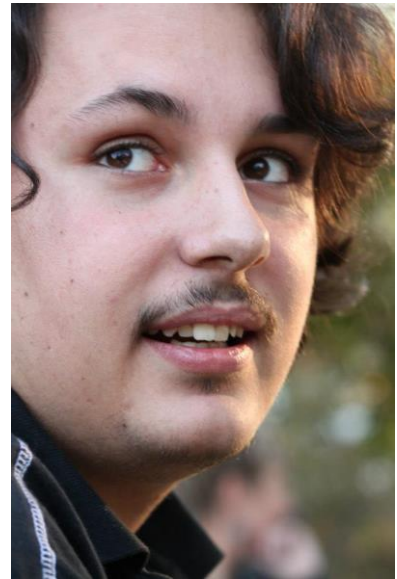
² Saturno, S. Violent crime and social worker safety.

³ Saturno, S. Violent crime and social worker safety.

IT WILL NEVER HAPPEN TO ME...

We all think it will never happen to us. Until it does. Just like it happened to Deon Kondos, a social worker who was shot and killed in December 2013 in front of his office in Potchefstroom by his client while overseeing a child visitation. Deon was only 23 years old at the time of his death and going the extra mile for his clients.

When I recently spoke to Deon's mother, Ronel, she said that she would like every social worker to know what happened to Deon. She says that social workers should know that their career can be dangerous and that things can go wrong. Ronel's wish is that more awareness is created so that every social worker can be safe.



CLIENT VIOLENCE IN SOCIAL WORK

Social workers may be seven and a half times more likely to experience client violence than other workers in the private sector⁴. Between 65% and 86% of social workers may have encountered client violence at some time during their career⁵.

There are various reasons why mental health professionals and social workers are at increased risk for violence by their clients. The generally poor conditions and public hospitals are a contributing factor due to the often long wait to access mental health services and low staff rates which cause staff to work relatively isolated and with less support than ideal⁶.

Social workers are especially at risk. Often social workers work in small offices in rural and remote locations, meaning that little support is available. Handguns and other weapons are also easy available and in gang-ridden areas this creates a significant risk. The increased presence of alcohol and drugs also increase the likelihood of violence due to the often unpredictable effects and increased impulsivity caused⁷.

Social workers experience significant and regular cuts in their service and provisions – both in government and non-profit sector. The social control role of social workers also requires them to work in situations where violence occurs. To add to all of this, social workers generally have a negative image in society in general.

EFFECTS OF CLIENT VIOLENCE

Vicarious exposure to traumatic workplace events may even be more highly associated with trauma effects than direct exposure⁸. When social workers are victims of client violence, they can experience the acute effects of trauma that include becoming timid, withdrawn, frightened, nervous and angry.

Experiences of client violence and threat to safety may be related to social workers' decisions to leave the profession⁹. In many instances, social workers do not want to return to work or may not want to work with a certain kind of client anymore, or want to change jobs¹⁰.

⁴ OSHA (2004), Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2000 in presentation by Criss, P. (2010). Prevalence and Effects of Client Violence on Social Workers

⁵ Beaver, 1999 & Ringstad, 1995 in Criss (2010)

⁶ Criss (2010)

⁷ Criss (2010)

⁸ Horwitz, 2006 in Criss.

⁹ Lyons, La Valle & Grimwood, 1995 in Criss

¹⁰ Newhill & Wexler, 1997 in Criss

Client violence often goes unreported or underreported by social workers due a fear of being viewed as unprofessional or incompetence by their peers or supervisors. However, if the problem is not acknowledged it cannot be addressed.

CREATING SAFER ENVIRONMENTS

Social workers can proactively engineer their work environments to mitigate the risk of client violence.

INTERVIEW SAFETY

Intake

During intake interviews the risk of client violence is often completely overlooked. Assessing specifically for the risk factors and predictors of violence can prepare social workers for such an eventuality and enable them to take preventative measures.

Interview room

Interview rooms should be suitable for their purpose and establish a safe and comfortable atmosphere. The room should be quiet with neutral colours, and not too dim or too bright (a flickering neon light does not exactly help anyone to calm their nerves).¹¹

Interview options – least restrictive to most restrictive

When interviewing clients where there is a known or predicted risk, the social worker can consider having colleagues closeby for support if needed.

Communication

Every office should have a system of communication which allows for easy and early warning of violence or the risk of violence. This might be as simple as a “secret keyword” which can be passed on to colleagues to alert them to the situation without alarming clients.¹²

Furniture

Offices should be neat and tidy with any heavy or sharp objects removed or placed outside of the public view in order to limit the chances of it being used as a weapon. Every office should have an emergency plan.¹³

¹¹ Kaplan & Wheeler, 1987; Newhill, 1996 in Criss

¹² Weinger, 2001, in Criss

¹³ Newhill, 2006; Weinger, 2001 in Criss

SAFER HOME VISITS

Since social service workers often receive little or no training in conducting home visits, they tend to develop their own styles based on their own experiences of trial and error. It is wise to be informed about the risk of violence in order to proactively mitigate the risk and be prepared for the unexpected.

Here are some easy and simple tips for preparing for home visits:

- Gather information before the visit about the potential of violence¹⁴
- Make sure others are aware of your visit times and plans
- Consider a neutral place to meet
- Be sure to have a cell phone, directions and enough fuel in the car
- Leave valuables locked at the office
- Know your client – review the case file and pay attention to predictors of violence and risk factors¹⁵
- Is there anything *today* that might increase the risk of client violence?¹⁶
- Know the environment – find out about potentially dangerous neighbourhoods
- Try to find out who will be at home before the home visit.
- Consider the time of day – avoid visits after hours or in evenings
- Find out if there are dangerous animals¹⁷
- Find out (or be aware of) entrances and exits if possible
- Do advanced preparation – if safety is a concern, rather meet at the office¹⁸
- Consider going with another team member or supervisor if there is a question about safety. Alternatively consider asking for a police escort¹⁹.
- Programme emergency contact numbers into your cellphone²⁰
- Keep car locked²¹
- Lock all valuables in the trunk of the car *before* you get to the house²²
- Plan your route, minimise chances of getting lost²³
- Have a GPS or GPS-enabled cellphone
- Dress appropriately – professional, but not intimidating (avoid wearing expensive clothing)
- Avoid wearing expensive jewelry
- Carry only your ID, keys and items necessary for the assessment/intervention
- Avoid taking laptops or tablets with you, unless it is a work necessity

¹⁴ Allen & Tracy

¹⁵ Newhill, 2006 in Criss

¹⁶ Davies, 1989 in Criss

¹⁷ Scalera, 1995 in Criss

¹⁸ Rey, 1996 in Criss

¹⁹ Newhill & Wexler, 1997; Rey, 1996; Weinger, 2001; in Criss

²⁰ Scalera, 1995 in Criss

²¹ Newhill, 2006 in Criss

²² Newhill, 2006 in Criss

²³ Newhill, 2006 in Criss

- Avoid using your cellphone, especially your private phone for texting, etc.
- If people are loitering outside the home or you feel unsafe for any reason, rather leave and come back later²⁴
- Park where you can get out quickly (e.g. avoid pulling into a driveway when you can be blocked by other cars)
- Plan to be able to communicate with your supervisor if needed – charge your cellphone
- Before you leave the office, make sure they know where you will be and what your planned schedule is

Conduct during home visits

Providing social work services often requires practitioners to visit clients at their homes and is a distinguishing feature of social work. Delivering services in the natural environment of the client may offer several benefits, such as making contact with hard-to-reach clients, ensuring continuity of care, facilitating generalisation of skills to the natural environment and minimising the power imbalance by meeting the client system on their own level. Often, homevisits are inevitable in order to conduct investigations such as when there are concerns regarding the protection and safety of children.

Home visits also often take place in neighbourhoods where the potential for violence is high, and therefore safety needs to be a primary concern for the social service worker and the organisation.

More guidelines for safer home visits

- Clearly identify yourself
- Note exits; sit in the front room and close to the door
- Look confidently – look alert and aware
- Don't interview people in the kitchen and bedrooms
- Don't interview people in rooms where you can be boxed in
- Don't interview people in rooms where you do not have ready access to an exit
- Know when to back off or take a time-out
- Stay aware of people in the vicinity
- Use active listening and do no argue²⁵
- Terminate visits if things seem to be getting out of hand
- Have the confidence and competence to deal with challenging situations²⁶
- Know when to call a supervisor

²⁴ Newhill, 2006; Weinger, 2001 in Criss

²⁵ Allen & Tracy

²⁶ Allen & Tracy. Developing student knowledge and skills for home-based social work practice

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