

Principles of working together

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As we have seen, multidisciplinary collaboration is an important, if not essential, feature of 'people work'. Many of the duties undertaken in the people professions involve the need to co-operate with staff from other disciplines. It is therefore worth considering some of the elements of good practice in multidisciplinary collaboration.

Avoid stereotypes

One of the pitfalls that can block effective co-operation is a reliance on stereotypes. The bossy nurse, the aloof doctor, the naive social worker, the uncaring manager – these are all distortions of reality that create barriers to good practice. We have to be careful to ensure that our interactions with other professionals relate to real people and not to stereotypes or other false or distorted impressions. Stereotypes are unfortunately all too common, so we have to be quite sensitive and 'tuned in' to how such assumptions can cause problems (see the discussion of reflective practice in Chapter 30).

Understand each other's roles

A basic element of collaboration is an understanding of the roles of other professionals involved. Unless we are attuned to the roles and duties of staff from other disciplines, we will not appreciate the pressures they face, and will therefore not be in the best position to work together. A failure to understand each other's roles can lead to misunderstandings as well as, at times, considerable ill-feeling. It is therefore vitally important that each person in the multi-professional network takes the trouble to find out more about the roles and duties of the other professionals involved.

Be sensitive to different values, priorities, norms and so on

As we noted earlier, different professional groups tend to develop different values, priorities and so on. This touches on a set of complex and thorny issues relating to values, but one point remains clear – we must not allow differences of perspective to undermine the quality of service available. However challenging it may be for professionals with very different outlooks to work effectively together, we owe it to our clients to do the best we can to provide as close to a 'seamless' service as we can get.

Avoid hierarchies

When groups of people work together, there is always the danger that a hierarchy will develop in which some people are seen as more important or influential than others. This can produce a situation in which professional rivalry and power bids detract from the primary tasks of people work. Partnership is very much to be preferred to hierarchies. This means that, for the benefit of maximizing the help we can give people, all professionals involved need to show respect to other professionals and not 'look down' on other groups. Everyone has an important part to play.

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Avoid preciousness

Because people work so often hinges on relationships and 'use of self', we can sometimes feel quite close to the people we work with. However, we must not allow this to develop into a situation in which we feel precious about 'our' client. It is not unusual for a number of professionals to be working with the same client. A precious approach which 'claims ownership' of clients is therefore highly problematic.

Focus on communication

Where professionals are working together, good communication becomes a priority. If communication channels across the disciplines are not effective, there may be significant gaps in the services provided, or, as we noted above, there may be duplications that are wasteful of scarce resources. Also, poor communication can contribute to problems such as the ones outlined above: stereotypes, misunderstandings about roles and expectations, and unhelpful hierarchies.

One further principle that is worth exploring in a little more depth is the need to be 'person centred'. What I mean by this is making sure that our efforts are geared primarily towards the needs and interests of the person (or persons) we are trying to help. In terms of the importance of self-care, we must also take account of our own needs and interests, but it is important to ensure that these do not predominate at the expense of the client's. Similarly, organizations have needs and interests (making the books balance, for example), and it is important that we do not fail in fulfilling our role and duties by allowing ourselves to lose sight of our primary focus on the client.