CHAPTER 1

Making the Leap from Theory to Real Life

YOUR “MENTAL HEALTH FIRST-AID KIT”

• Structure your time, use a day planner; don’t procrastinate.
• Do process recordings as soon as possible after a client meeting, group, or meeting.
• Build in time-off to do something for yourself.
• Take time to share and vent your feeling to peers.
• When did you laugh last?
• Don’t take your placement home with you (easy to say, hard to do).
• Build some physical exercise into your week (yoga, dancing, walking, health club activities).
• When did you eat last?
• What did you eat?
• Don’t set yourself up to solve all the clients’ issues; be realistic about the short time you are in a placement.
• Learn to be patient and able to hold on to uncomfortable feelings.
• Start a journal and write in it at the end of each day at your placement.
• Supervisors are not perfect; if you think they are, they can only disappoint you.
• Share your day with supportive peers.

Good luck on your journey; may it be filled with rich, wonderful learning experiences. Being a social worker is not an easy profession; agencies have budget concerns and staff shortages and always have more clients than they can handle. But how many professionals can say they have had the opportunity to reach out and touch the lives of others, helping change and growth in individual clients, families, and agency policies?

TIME MANAGEMENT

Before we tackle some more social work practicum issues, we need to focus on the issue of time management. I have seen a wide range of time managers, from the obsessed who block out every second of the day to the worst in time management. Be organized, use an appointment book, and keep it current. Carry around 3 × 5 index cards to jot notes to yourself or keep a steno pad for notes and questions for your supervisor. Be on time for appointments and meetings; even be early. This is not another class where you can be ten minutes late and bring in your breakfast because you did not plan enough
time to eat before the day is to begin at your agency. It does not matter if some of the
paid staff do that; you are a social work student. Part of your practicum is developing
and demonstrating professional behavior. You need to act professional at all times; there
is no downtime.

A student came to my class twenty minutes into an hour-and-fifteen-minute class. He had
an assignment that was due that day. I asked him why he was so late; he informed me he
had overslept. When I raised the issue of time management, he told me he was using time
management. I guess I should have stopped here but I pressed on and asked him to
explain. He told me that the class assignment was first on his list last night. Sounds great,
right? Well, not being able to disengage, I asked him what time he went to bed. Proudly, he
told me as soon as he had completed his assignments—3 AM.

You need to write your process recording sooner rather than later. The longer you wait,
the more information is lost and the less feedback you will get from your supervisor
when you discuss your process recording. This may be a generational issue as scholars
begin to discuss the future of handwriting. Students want to type their process recordings
and therefore wait till they are home with their computers. So much is lost from the time
of the event you are using for your process recording till you get home. I recently had a
student who handwrote her process recording and typed it on her computer when she
got home. This is a great way to capture most of the information and still have a neat,
spell-checked document, but it is time consuming. But remember to never use the client’s
name or any identifying information that could reveal the identity of your client; also, you
may want to discuss this with your supervisor.

SAFETY

One of your first concerns should be your personal safety, as well as the safety of those
around you. Insofar as possible, do advance preparation and ask questions ahead of time.
Be aware of your surroundings. You should know something about the neighborhood
where you’re assigned. Are there safety issues to be aware of, such as night-time activity,
drug-dealing, violence? Ask where you should park, if you drive to the agency, and find
out if you need an escort in or out of the building, particularly after dark. Many agencies
are located in areas that may see a high rate of street crime and violence. Being a social
worker does not protect you from crime in the area being directed at you. Too often, we
hear news about random street violence.

Assess the climate of your placement. Remember that not every person who walks
into your agency is necessarily an innocent person there for help. It is possible that
some may be there to help themselves to your purse or wallet. If you carry a purse or
bag, either keep it with you at all times or ask where it can be securely stored while you
are on duty. The same rule applies to your cell phone or perhaps PDA (personal digital
assistant).

With many agencies, there may be a high risk factor for violence directed toward
you from clients, or even family members of clients. You may feel your client would
never hurt you because you have a good relationship but that does not mean the client’s
family members or friends have warm feelings toward you. In fact, they may perceive you
as a scapegoat, that you have somehow directly or indirectly caused problems for their
family member or friend.

Some clients are voluntary, meaning they come to the agency by their choice;
others may be mandated by court orders, including treatment or jail mandates, to do so.
Still others may have services forced on them by agencies designed to protect the public, like child or adult protective agencies. Persons in these situations may not experience you as a positive presence in their lives.

Recently, a student wrote in her process recording about her client who was involved in the court system for past illegal drug use. That day the client was told she had failed to follow through on her court mandate, which meant she would be going to jail as soon as she went into the court room. She ran from the building and sped away in her car. No one was hurt, but what would have happened if the student had tried to stop her? The student was shaken by the event and her own surprise by not expecting what happened.

There is often a false sense of security in social workers who believe that because they do good in the world they are somehow magically protected from harm from others: how could anyone be angry or violent toward us when we are there to help? In fact, that feeling of being a do-gooder can cause you to be less vigilant, thereby increasing your chances of being a victim of violent actions. You need to recognize we are living in a society that has seen an increase of violence in general and in the workplace in particular.

I recall a group of clients with mental illness on their way to nearby vending machines. I was in the hallway heading that direction to interview another client. As the group of clients passed, a woman took a fisted swing at me, missing me only by an inch. I was lucky. I should have been more alert in assessing that this woman was agitated and that her behavior was likely to spin out of control.

We all want to be seen as the good guy, but the reality is that sometimes social work teams make decisions that are seen as negative or even catastrophic to their clients. Teams sometimes decide to hospitalize people, remove children from a home, and so on, so you may not always be seen as the helper you believe and know yourself to be.

Surprisingly, there may even be a possibility of violence between coworkers. It is likely that the staff you will work with represent many different ethnic groups, with different levels of education and job responsibilities, from clerks to PhDs and MDs. If there is a conflict, it is your responsibility not to try to stop an argument or a fight but to quietly disappear and bring help. You are not exempt from violence because you are the student.

Many agencies have strict dress code requirements related to safety. Specifically, you may find that high heels and slick-soled shoes are prohibited, along with anything worn around the neck that might make the wearer vulnerable to choking. Also, often discouraged are dangling earrings, attention-getting jewelry, or suggestive clothing, such as scoop neck tops, tight-fitting clothes, and clothing where your underwear show above or through the clothing.

A student recently asked me if her stylish earrings would be an issue at her placement. I answered the question in two ways: first, it is not important what I think but what her agency supervisor thinks about her issue; second, think about the agency population; is it a population that may want to reach out and grab a dangling object? What is important here is simply the fact that the student was thinking about her dress.

Avoid trouble by monitoring your environment and staying out of difficult situations. Prevention is an important policy to follow. If you sense trouble brewing, probably
the best thing you can do is to quietly bring help. Do not attempt to intervene in arguments, fistfights, or in any situation that seems to be heating up.

Another way you can increase your personal safety is to help clients to feel safe with you. Do not aggressively confront, threaten, or otherwise back a client into a corner, either physically or verbally. Always allow clients to keep their self-esteem and self-respect intact. Allow them a way to interpret situations in non-threatening ways. Remember to buy time by temporarily smoothing situations over. You can get to the root of a problem later after consultation with your supervisor. Ask for any kind of help you need and don’t be afraid to apologize or back down in a sticky situation.

My student was at her placement co-facilitating a group for children around the age of twelve. Suddenly, one of the students without warning jumped to his feet and fled the room. A computer and a desk suffered ill fortune as the student fled down the hall.

This real-life event helps to illustrate some issues: Why was the child upset? What triggered the sudden change in behavior? Was he hurt physically by his actions? What impact did this have on the other children in the group? And what triggered the events? How well did the staff handle the situation? And what was it like emotionally for the staff involved? I can tell you the student could not wait to write this process recording.

Safety Rules

Some of this material was mentioned earlier in the Introduction under Home Rules, but your safety may depend on it, so let’s review some of the rules and expand to other topics. I want to remind you about different emergency codes to alert staff to dangerous situations. I was in a meeting recently where it was mentioned that a seasoned employee did not know the emergency codes of the hospital. Do not find yourself in this situation! Ask if there are any code systems; often you will find a color system, such as code blue for a medical emergency. During your orientation to the agency, safety as a topic may be covered. Be sure to pay attention and ask questions when appropriate. Safety refers to many different areas, including fire as well as personal safety. Or you may find the agency uses a code phrase, like “Dr. Redstone, please come to the office...” Other agencies may not have developed systems because of function or size; that does not excuse you from asking your supervisor what to do in an emergency.

Home Visits and Travel

Similarly, what is the agency’s policy on home visits to clients and transporting clients in vehicles? Veteran social workers have found themselves in volatile situations, resulting in policy changes in their agencies. The home visit policy can vary from expecting you to go alone, or making traveling in pairs a must, to even having the police meet you at the home. The policy for transporting clients can also vary from using your own vehicle to using only agency vehicles and requiring that more than one agency staff person accompany the client. The wide range of policies reflects the diversity of agencies. You need to know the policy of your agency; if you have concerns about a situation, discuss it with your supervisor.

A student asked if she could discuss her recent home visit experience. She had been on many home visits by herself and was very comfortable with this model. She went on a routine home visit to one of her clients. When she got there, she found that the client had been drinking, and was hostile and verbally threatening to her. She left immediately, returned to the agency, and reported the matter to her supervisor.
This was an emotionally charged event; even after she had processed it with her supervisor, she still needed to process more. The lesson learned here is that circumstances can change: be prepared to act to protect your safety and the safety of your client. A home visit to a friendly elderly woman can change suddenly because a family member drops by to visit.

A student was asked to do a follow-up home visit. She had been to this home many times to visit the elderly woman who lived with her daughter and son-in-law. The agency had placed the elderly woman in a senior program at her home. It was suspected that the daughter was being abused by her husband and the student was asked to do a home visit when the daughter would be home alone to see if the daughter would address this issue with her.

Do you think the student should be placed in this situation? Or do you see this as a wonderful learning opportunity that does not come along every day?

When the student called the elderly woman’s home to set up the home visit, her daughter’s husband answered the phone and wanted to know the purpose of the visit.

What would you say to him? The home visit did occur and the husband took the day off work to be there. What next, if anything, do you think should be done?

You can find a wide variety of approaches to the issue of safety, from required trainings before you are allowed to start your agency practicum to much less. If your placement agency does not have a formal training program, it is your responsibility to speak to your supervisor about the subject; don’t wait for your supervisor to bring it up.

Some Safety Tips:

- The best predictor of behavior is past behavior. Read your client’s chart and discuss his or her behavioral issues with your supervisor.
- What is the agency’s policy about you being alone in the building?
- Never block your client’s exit route when you are meeting with him or her. Sit in a neutral place, where you both have access to the exit.
- If your client is upset before you begin your meeting, make other staff aware before you begin. You may want to leave the door open.
- If your agency uses any type of device that you carry with you, such as a personal alarm, make sure you have it with you and you are familiar with how it works.
- Never attempt to reach out and touch an angry, agitated client.

Cynthia Garthwait (2008, 57–58) discusses Irwin’s four stages of crisis management in her book. If your agency practicum does not have training or some form of safety education, I suggest you start with this material and ask your supervisor for direction to other literature on the topic.

Health Precautions

You may be working with a client population often referred to as at risk or high risk. Whatever term is used in your agency, you must have a full understanding of what it means in relation to the clients you will serve. I want to highlight this point for your safety when working with clients in general. When we take a first-aid class, universal precautions are taught. If you take a CPR class, you will be taught universal precautions,
because of the risk of being infected with acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS). This topic may be adequately covered in your classroom but in the field we often do not think in terms of universal precautions. Discuss the various risk factors that apply to your placement with your supervisor and develop a good working knowledge of these risks. Remember, knowledge is power. Develop an understanding of how this disease and other diseases are transmitted; you do not want to be fearful in your placement because you have been asked to work with an individual with whom there may be some health concerns.

We as social workers often provide services to populations that have multi-dimensional problems. For example, a homeless individual may also have health problems, such as tuberculosis or hepatitis. Again, I emphasize, get a good understanding of the population in your placement agency; knowledge is power. As mentioned in the Introduction, you need to know if you are required to have immunizations along with a PPD test (tuberculin skin test) prior to your placement. There are more examples that I could provide but I believe I have made the point that you have to work comfortably with the clients in your placement and you need to feel safe. Being anxious in a new placement in one thing but safety concerns can paralyze your learning. In such cases, ignorance is not bliss.

Quite recently, I learned that pregnant women should avoid exposure to anyone who is receiving radiation treatments, such as clients suffering from prostate cancer. I am not an expert in this area so I offer a suggestion; any relevant health history should be part of your meeting with your supervisor. You need to protect yourself: the only person who can do that is you. Before you start your placement, see your doctor and discuss your health and any potential areas of concern. Be sure to discuss any concerns with your field placement director. Do not wait till you are in your placement and see if something comes up: this is a bad plan!

If your placement is in a community hospital that provides medical care or in a skilled nursing facility (SNF), be aware of current health care concerns about super bugs. These are not the only places you need to be concerned. The same concerns exist if you are doing your practicum in a psychiatric hospital, just to a different degree. MRSA, *Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus* and/or C-Diff, *Clostridium difficile* are major health concerns. There is a large volume of information on the web covering these infections, so I will not cover that topic; however, learn how to protect yourself. We know that proper hand washing is part of good prevention and you can learn the proper technique for hand washing at your agency orientation. If this is not available to you, go to the college health center and speak to a nurse. They have been trained in the proper technique of hand washing and can give you a demonstration. Also, the Internet is a great resource. Website sources, such as the World Health Organization, fondly known as WHO, www.who.int, are helpful. Your supervisor is also a source of information.

When you go to a patient’s room and there is a “use protective gear” sign on the door, this means either you or the patient is at risk for some type of exposure. If you are unsure as to what to do, ask someone at the nursing station or return to your supervisor for further instructions. Use the same procedure before entering a negative-air-pressure room.

**MISTAKES: ERRORS OF TECHNIQUE VERSUS ERRORS OF THE HEART**

Before their first field placement, many students worry if they possess enough knowledge. They often are certain that they do not know nearly enough about theories and techniques. Remember this old saying: “Our clients will forgive us for errors of technique, but they will never forgive us for errors of the heart.” If your heart is in the right place, if you sincerely want to help your clients, and if you are humble enough to admit your mistakes and apologize, you will learn the techniques you need as you go along.
A client wanted me to help him make a phone call. Being very new in my placement, I was afraid that would be against the rules or somehow not appropriate. I told him “no” in no uncertain terms, because we had to concentrate on my agenda. He became angry with me, and seemed to withdraw and shut down. I didn’t have a good feeling about the situation. When I talked to my supervisor, she suggested I apologize to him and help him make the call as soon as possible. He seemed very relieved when I told him how sorry I was that I did the wrong thing. We made the call, and ever after, he was much more open and cooperative. My apology seemed to make a huge difference in the quality of our therapeutic relationship. Even though it was hard to admit I was wrong, my supervisor helped me to correct a serious error.

What you have learned from your classes and textbooks is very important. That knowledge serves as the base of the pyramid upon which you will build your career. However, in the helping professions, it is impossible to learn everything you need to know from books and classes. You learn by doing. You learn by experience, by getting your feet wet, by observing, and by making mistakes. Life and your clients will continue to teach you what you need to know throughout your entire career. You will keep on learning and growing, no matter how many years of experience you attain. Just keep your mind and heart open, and the lessons will appear.

Treating your clients with respect and dignity is essential to being a good social worker. Your clients know when you are sincere and truly want what is best for them, without the exact words ever being spoken. Treating others with respect and dignity applies to macro practicum as well. If you are leading a meeting of several agencies, your role, behavior, and attitude can be critical.

Shortly, I will begin to share some actual process recordings with you to illustrate certain points with real-life experiences. Note that these recordings are not necessarily the ideal way to handle a situation, but an example of how a social worker actually reacted.

PAPERWORK

You will find at least four categories of paperwork activities occurring at the same time: first are the papers you need to produce for your college or university. Make your on-site supervisor aware of these in order to give him or her time to direct you if you need assistance. This may begin in the form of a learning contract, which many social work programs require. Your supervisor is a resource; use him or her for input. If you ask for help when your paperwork is due in just a few days, expect little or no help. You will also be sending the message that you are not responsible enough to plan ahead, keep track of your tasks, and complete them in an orderly fashion. Your supervisor may be very helpful if given time to think about what you need.

The second kind of paperwork is advocacy for your client, including Social Security forms, forms to replace lost green cards, unemployment papers, Department of Social Services forms, public assistance forms, or any other kind of paperwork they need help with. This type of paperwork strikes at the heart of what it means to be a social worker. Often referred to as concrete services, this kind of paperwork is crucial to your clients’ well-being. As a social worker you may find yourself helping your client in this manner. We advocate for our clients. We help them do things they need help with. Ask your supervisor or other staff about the common types of advocacy paperwork at your agency.

The third type of paperwork is the documentation paperwork required by your agency. Documentation is a critical part of agency work and it is important to remember
that each piece of paperwork becomes a legal document. It is important that you understand the documentation needs of your agency from day one. The kind of paperwork you will do depends on what kind of agency you have been placed with; for example, federal, state, private, not-for-profit, school-based, specialty programs, or grants, just to name a few, all have different requirements.

Increasingly becoming more popular is the electronic record keeping system. While visiting someone in the hospital you may have seen the nurse take the patient’s vitals and then enter that information on a computer in the patient’s room. Some electronic record keeping systems are partial, meaning the complete client record is not computerized. An example of this partial record could be tracking vitals. In other systems, the entire client record is computerized and referred to as paperless documentation.

Access to computerized client records is well guarded to protect the client from any breach in confidentiality; therefore, your access may be limited. On the other hand, if there is an expectation you will be completing these computerized forms, you will go through the process of being granted access. This can involve signing forms stating you will protect against others gaining access, finger printing for scanners, and changing passwords often. Often this process is followed in training sessions.

Many supervisors encourage their students to read client records to get an idea of the kinds of paperwork needed. If your supervisor does not offer to show you actual client records, you might ask to see examples of completed paperwork. As you will be required to do paperwork, looking at such examples will help you know exactly what is expected of you. Ask questions. For example, do the forms or paperwork have detailed categories to be filled in or are they free-form? Make notes on a blank form or make yourself an outline to follow. Show the outline to your supervisor and get his or her feedback on its completeness. Rewrites are time consuming and not a rewarding activity, even though you will often find yourself doing them. You will need to know what forms to use, and how often they are to be completed. Some agencies have standardized questions that are asked of all new clients. You may be expected to complete these forms as part of your practicum.

It is important to note recent changes in documentation issues. You will see that most documentation is date stamped either in a computerized system or by the staff person. You now see in many agencies an expectation that you not only date stamp your entry but also time stamp it. The driving forces behind this movement are not important, only that you are aware of your agency’s expectations.

**Writing in a Client’s Chart or Record**

Kagle and Kopels (2008) have a list of what they consider important principles for good record keeping. I want to share a few of them with you. Some or all may be useful to you as you begin to document information.

- Is the client involved?
- Have you considered the cultural context of the individual?
- Is there a good assessment and is it impartial?
- Who is the source of the information; does it tell me who the informant is?
- Is the written material well written?

If you demonstrate these five basic principles in your paperwork, you will be off to a solid start.

Generally speaking, each time you have contact with a client, whether it is a structured, face-to-face session, a telephone conversation, or even a significant interaction in the hallway, that contact needs to be documented. Some of this documentation may be...
related to agency billing. Your documentation in the chart leaves a trail of activity; this is valuable if someone needs to work with your client in your absence. That person will know about the last contact and the content of that contact. You will find value weeks or months later when you and your client reflect on progress, as you will have the documentation to trace the progress or lack thereof.

If not offered, ask to see client records to begin to understand the forms the agency uses, the intervals in which forms need to be completed, and the structure of notes. In some placements, you are asked to write notes in rough-draft form on scrap paper. Your notes are then reviewed by your supervisor, with input to help you rewrite the note. In some cases, a supervisor might rewrite the note or help you put it into final form. When you have demonstrated your ability to write acceptable notes, you may have less supervision concerning them.

Other supervisors may discuss the necessary content of a note and then let you write it on your own. Remember: you haven’t written chart notes before. This will be your first time, so don’t expect to write a perfect note. Soon you’ll become comfortable with the process and be able to write notes that fulfill your agency’s requirements.

**Progress Notes and Documentation**

The purpose of a progress note is to document the client’s progress (or lack of progress) toward particular goals. Ask your supervisor about what you say and don’t say in a chart note. As these are legal documents, you must always keep in mind that it is possible that some day, your note or notes may be read out loud in a courtroom, so write the note accordingly. Ask your supervisor how brief or expanded the notes should be. Given current changes in privacy laws, some agencies prefer that you document as briefly as possible in order to protect the rights of the client.

Another possibility is that at some point, clients may ask to read their own charts. In the past, it was standard procedure not to allow a client to read his or her records, but state and federal laws are changing on this issue. Would you be comfortable with your client reading what you have written about him or her?

Regardless of the format of the note, make sure that above all, the content of the note is accurate. Take care to document only what is necessary, and consult with your supervisor if you think the content of a note might harm the client either now or in the future. For the future protection of the client, you may be asked to write notes in a vague summarized fashion. There are ethical issues here that need to be discussed; I suggest you take the time to discuss them with your supervisor and this is wonderful material for classroom discussions. For example, you might not write in detail about a past event that might inadvertently prejudice a less understanding worker against the client.

There are many formats in which a note can be written; a SOAP note is one such example. You will find there are many more acronyms for notes that I have not mentioned but their goal is all the same: to present the client problem, show what has happened, and where to go from here. A SOAP note stands for subject, objective, action, and plan. The subject can be a parent getting custody of his or her child. The objective is to determine how he or she will achieve the goal. The action is what he or she has been doing, including the level of progress and the plan from this point. SOAP notes and other designs are discussed by Kagle and Kopels (2008). I suggest looking at their material as it can help you understand the different approaches to address the same issue. Kagle and Kopels also discuss target behaviors and measurability of progress—critical issues for today’s agencies. Your agency may use a particular format that you will be expected to follow.

At the risk of repeating myself, it is important that I mention that your notes, or whatever type of documentation, be dated and indicate what time you had the conversation with the client. Recently, oversight organizations such as The Joint Commission and
the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services have been stressing the date and time stamp on documentation.

**Sloppy Documentation**

I have seen this done many times: things entered into a client’s record that have not been validated, such as arson. You have a moral and ethical responsibility to report and record with as much accuracy as possible.

*A social worker came to me and reported that there was an entry in his client’s records that the client had set fire to his home. He was making a referral for housing for the individual and knew this would impact his client’s chances of being accepted. This social worker took the time to interview the case manager and others only to find out there had been a fire in the home at an earlier date and it was not set by the client. This is important information; if not corrected, it would have impacted this client for the rest of his life. And every time he denied the event, how would he be perceived? as a liar? Documentation is important and I just want to heighten your understanding on this topic.*

**Group Notes and Meetings**

Often, the leader of a group activity is expected to document the group’s activity in the form of a note in the client’s record. Electronic record keeping often will allow you to write one note that is then populated to the records of all members of the group. You can see this is a time-saver for the writer but it does not allow you to customize the note on any particular client. Also, be very careful not to mention anyone by name or use any identifying information that would suggest an individual in the group. Check with your supervisor if you find yourself leading a group and documenting that event. You may need only a summary of the group event and it will not be placed in any client records. But be sure to follow the policies of your agency. Here are three basic elements in documenting a discussion: (1) the topic; (2) what was discussed; and (3) what was the outcome/action as well as who is responsible for any follow-up. The function of the last part is important in follow-up meetings to ensure the action was completed and the topic is closed.

**Recording Errors**

As for documentation, I want to bring your attention to a product that got a social work student into trouble. Do not use any kind of white-out on your forms or notes. Ask your supervisor for the proper procedure to correct a mistake in a client’s chart or formal paperwork. You may not want to discuss a mistake or misspelling with your supervisor, but do not use white-out. Find out your agency’s policy in making corrections. The general rule, draw a line through the word and write the correct one next to it. Your agency may also require you to initial the correction. Again, don’t forget that the client’s chart is a legal document, and you do not want to create a situation where someone can say that you were trying to hide something, no matter how trivial the detail or how innocent your motivations.

*A supervisor explains: One of my students was not the best of writers or spellers and had made a spelling mistake in a client’s progress note. I read the note she had written and co-signed her signature, as is the policy in my agency. A few days later, the client’s doctor came to me concerning something written that day by my student that I had not yet seen to review, discuss, and co-sign. When I looked at the new note there was a word that had been whited out, but the situation grew worse when I noticed that the prior note I had*

Tips concerning paperwork:

- Know which forms are required on every client and which are not.
- Know how often forms must be completed (every three months, six months, yearly, or every visit)
- Ask for a written reference guide at the agency for the structure of notes and forms. Make notes on the blank forms if you can, or take careful notes.
- Know what content is needed in a note, and what content should be omitted (and why).
- Know your agency’s note format.
- Don’t use white-out products.
co-signed had also had altered with white out after I co-signed it. Once I stopped hyperventilating, I called the student in to my office to explain herself.

The first mistake was that as a supervisor, I had apparently not made it clear to her that white-out was never to be used. The second error was that the student should never have altered a note that a supervisor had co-signed.

The incident became a learning experience for both the student and for me as a supervisor. The student was trying to present the best note possible, but ended up with more problems than she had bargained for.

A final comment on client charts and documents that are part of the record: they are legal documents and are never to leave the agency without proper authorization. As a student, never remove documents from a client record for your use in a classroom assignment. I have seen a student lose his placement because he took home a client's record to prepare an assignment on cultural differences.

**PROCESS RECORDINGS**

An important category of paperwork is your process recordings, a time-honored tradition in social work. Your process recordings are invaluable tools of learning.

Your supervisor may give you a form he or she prefers or your college or university may have a format. Sometimes it is included in the program field manual. In the absence of a formatted process recording, there is a basic structure that can be made up on any computer. With most word processing programs you have the ability to make tables; create a simple five-column table that will fill a page in landscape format. If you get stuck, ask a friend to help.

The top categories can be arranged as your supervisor prefers. Remember to write your name, the date, and the number the pages at the top of the process recording even if you staple the pages together.

Generally, your process recording will begin with a cover sheet that guides the reader to the meeting content. That information sheet may vary but it will cover some basic information

- Client
- Location of interview
- Purpose of the contact
- Basic client description
- Pre-engagement discussion

This format below will work well for a single client, a family, or even a group setting.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>He Said/She Said</th>
<th>Feelings/Reactions</th>
<th>Analysis of Feelings</th>
<th>Supporting Literature/Evidenced by</th>
<th>Supervisor Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
However, if you are doing your placement in a macro setting, I suggest a different format for your process recording of meetings you attended or participated in. The structure of the process recording is very different. The cover sheet will include the following: location, participants, purpose of meeting, and structure/format of the meeting. However, the content of the process recording form is very different.

The table below will give you some guidance on how to address process recordings other than the direct client meeting.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What Occurred</th>
<th>Student Reflections</th>
<th>Self-analysis</th>
<th>Interpretation of Meeting/Evidence Based</th>
<th>Supervisor Comments</th>
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</thead>
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</table>

Within the first column the student must include introductions, if any, level of participation of members, decision making, and what was covered. The difference for the student is that the client is the group or an organization, not an individual. Even if you are not in a macro placement, I suggest you try doing a process recording on a meeting you attend, such as a student case conference, a treatment planning meeting for a client, or a discharge or placement meeting or a court hearing.

You will fill in the appropriate columns, and the supervisor will add comments under “Supervisor Comments,” either in writing or verbally in the supervision session.

Present yourself to your supervisor as an organized person. When you write your process recording, did you remember to number the pages and put your name and the date on the top of each page? Don’t forget to make copies of your process recordings. If your supervisor gives you the process recording back with his or her comments before you meet, make a copy of those comments as well. That way when you meet, you will each have a copy of the same material during the supervision discussion and can easily refer to the same material together.

My supervisor always tells me, “When you come to supervision, bring two copies of the process recording.” One of my peers did not do this. He would enter the room with one copy and the supervisor would ask him to go to the copier and make another copy. When he returned he would have two copies, but they were now out of order and disorganized. This is not how you want to present yourself to your supervisor.

**Best Practice**

One of the columns on your process recording will be evidence-based or best practice. This is where you put the supporting literature for what is happening in your meeting. Your director of field work or the coordinator will guide you and this will be discussed in class. It is important to know that what you are doing is based on some evidence. It is no longer acceptable to do something just because you always did it this way.
A representative from a day program for individuals with chronic schizophrenia told me that the clients needed to attend five days a week to remain stable and not get re-hospitalized. The agency running the program lost their lease and were temporarily housed with another agency. The clients could be shuttled there only once a week. Ironically, the program’s hospitalization rate did not go up.

This is a good example of not knowing what is in the literature and making assumptions. Agencies are now paying closer attention to this issue because of requests for reimbursement from third parties.
NOTES