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How to cite:

Haider, Sharif (2019). Despite the importance of giving advice in social work, we rarely talk about this skill. Community Care.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© [not recorded]

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2019/04/16/despite-importance-giving-advice-social-work-rarely-talk-important-skill/>

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Advice for Giving Advice

Whether you are a social work manager or a social worker advice is something you give or seek as part of your role; some of you probably give advice frequently, others every now and then.

But it is clear we do not talk about this important skill in social work. Perhaps it is expected that as part of being human this should be one of our natural skills that comes automatically by living in society. Hence, probably most of us do not think about the mechanisms of giving advice or offering choices.

From the research evidence (Gavin and Margolis, 2015) [link] we know that competent advice can make a positive difference and bring positive outcomes. However, wrong advice can cause problems and, worst of all, could cause serious harm.

How to give advice

You may consider that you provide choices rather than advice to your service users and let them decide. However, you lay down all the choices, which means you need to understand the issues, concerns and problems that arise with a range of solutions, i.e. choices. They are all essential components of giving advice.

Although on its face value giving advice sounds a simple thing, in practice it can become harder than you think. For example, when you give advice can you put your hands on your heart and say you are not cognitively biased and not allowing your self-serving rational to dictate your advice? You may unconsciously incline to give advice based on something worked for you in the past without considering its appropriateness in a different context; probably you advice what come to your mind first and forget to step back, challenge your initial thoughts and explore alternatives options.

Until you think about the bias carefully you will not be able to stop your autopilot mode of practice.

First of all, when you give advice you need to understand what advice was being sought. Are you the right person to provide the advice? Understanding the issues and problems are vital in relation to giving advice. Research has shown that poorly understood problems can result in wrong advice and choice.

You will not be able to give advice if you do not understand the problem. Ineffective communication could influence the way advisors understand the context and problems. As an advisor you need to understand that advice seekers can become overwhelmed by the complexity of an incident or issue; emotions sometimes take over the rational part of their brain. You need to understand that not everyone can easily identify the root cause of their problems. They may tell little chunks or they may tell you at lengths; they may not be focused or they may not be in possession of all the information or they may omit information; they may not remember accurately or they may not provide the background or context. They may provide arbitrary boundaries around the issues or problems.

Some seekers may assume you have the full background knowledge and exclude the essential information. All these possible components make your job as an advisor difficult. So, what should you do?

Well, listen actively and carefully. This may be hard to do when you are under pressure and an immediate decision is required. Suspend your judgement and ask open-ended questions and probe carefully. Hold your nerve, and rein in anxiety - which may increase with the pressure and the type of decision you need to make – do not let your anxiety spread to those seeking advice.

The aim is to use all these interlinked skills to understand the incident holistically. Some advisors tend to quickly provide a solution without considering all the aspects and factors impinging upon the decision - specifically when they are under pressure, though sometimes they may be effective depending on the advice given, e.g. routine decisions.

But it is important that advisors should consider the circumstances and context carefully; they should not take things on their face value. If they do, there is a chance that advisors may miss something. Identify the gaps in the information. This is important to explore the limitation of the advice.

Be sensitive, pause, understand emotional and non-verbal cues, explore rationale and, most of all, clarify your understanding of the matter. My research has suggested that it is wise to clarify and confirm with the seekers what you have heard. Rather than jumping upon the first solution that come to your head; an advisor needs to explore alternatives.

It is important that advisors and seekers both share their perspectives and think jointly about the solution. In some instances advisors should be very clear and directive, specifically in a crisis situation when seekers do not have knowledge and experience in that area. Advisors should involve the seekers to generate viable and feasible options, supporting them to understand positive and negative aspects of options, rationale, and principle for their advice.

Advisors should strive to take the guiding role rather than making the decision on behalf of the seekers. One way some skilful advisors achieve this is by asking non-leading questions, probing, showing alternative ways of exploring the matter and sharing their own experiences.

When you give advice you need to provide reasoning of your advice; it is important because advice seekers will see how you come up with the advice. They will then be able to understand the reasoning and learn and develop to deal with the matter independently in future.

You may find it helpful to bring a third party into the equation, sometimes it results in fruitful outcomes.

Some of you due to your good nature provide advice without thinking whether you have the expertise to provide that advice and whether advice or suggestions were invited. Both could cause problems and you could lose your credibility, influence and position. Always remember that some people only remember the bad advice even though you always provided good advice.

References

Garvin, D. A. and Margolis, J. D. (2015) 'The art of giving and receiving advice', *Harvard Business Review*, January-February