

THE HELPING PROCESS IN LIFE-MODELED PRACTICE

Like life itself, life-modeled practice is phasic. Four phases, preparatory, initial, ongoing, and ending, constitute the processes and operations of the practice. These processes ebb and flow in response to the interplay of personal and environmental forces. While the phases are separated in order to organize our presentation, they are not always distinct in actual practice.

Chapter 5 examines the professional processes of skillfully entering people's lives. Beginning a professional relationship requires careful preparation in order to create a supportive environment. People must feel safe and accepted before they can trust and confide in a professional. Chapter 6 focuses on the actual beginnings in practice. All helping efforts rest upon shared definitions about concerns, needs, and explicit agreement about goals, tasks, and reciprocal roles.

The ongoing phase is ushered in by the joint recognition that client and worker have reached a shared, possibly tentative, understanding of the nature of the stressor(s) and its amelioration. In the ongoing phase, the professional purpose is to help people effectively cope with the biological, social, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral demands posed by life transitions and traumatic events and to influence the social and physical environments. Effective help requires attention to (1) painful life transitions and traumatic life events, (2) associated environmental stressors, and (3) dysfunctional interpersonal processes. An interpersonal focus applies when the social worker is involved with a family or group system or with issues between the worker and client. If a social worker, for example, is working with an abused woman, but not with the partner, the focus is on life transitional concerns (e.g.,

separation or grief) or environmental concerns (e.g., linkage with community resources, negotiating with her partner, or securing a court order of protection). By contrast, a focus on dysfunctional interpersonal communication and relationship patterns requires conjoint work with both partners and/or the children.

The reader will see in the bereavement group presented in chapter 7 that the worker and members had to work simultaneously on the traumatic life event and the interpersonal tensions that erupted in the group, while at the same time constructing a safe social environment that could support the painful grief work. For purposes of discussion, however, we believe that considering the three arenas of practice in separate chapters yields greater clarity. We ask the reader to remember that actual practice is not as separated as our presentation might seem to imply.

Ending a professional relationship also requires careful preparation to deal with the feelings aroused by the ending; a review of what has been accomplished and what has yet to be achieved; planning for the future, including, where indicated, transfer to another worker or referral to another agency; and evaluation of the service that was provided. Like the initial and ongoing phases of helping, the ending phase requires sensitivity, knowledge, careful planning, and a range of skills on the part of the social worker.