

Making Interdisciplinary Collaboration Work

Interdisciplinary collaboration can be one of the most rewarding, yet challenging, aspects of social work practice. It's also increasingly essential, regardless of practice setting or client population. The following techniques can help you work more effectively with other disciplines.

Quick Guide

MAKING
INTERDISCIPLINARY
COLLABORATION WORK



CLEARLY ARTICULATE YOUR ROLE IN THE TEAM.

- » Be prepared to describe your role in both dyadic and group situations.
- » Review NASW's *Code of Ethics* (2008) and standards of practice applicable to your practice setting or client population.
- » Keep up with advances in practice and research by reading social work and other relevant professional literature and by participating in continuing education activities.
- » Be familiar with your job description, functions, and tasks, and update this information as needed.
- » Identify your professional strengths, specific contributions to the interdisciplinary team process, and client outcomes related to your interventions.
- » Use social work supervision, peer review, consultation, and mentoring to strengthen your professional social work identity.

UNDERSTAND THE ROLES OF OTHER DISCIPLINES ON THE TEAM.

- » Read practice setting-specific information, even consumer-oriented materials, to understand the responsibilities of other disciplines.
- » Observe similarities and differences in the approaches of various disciplines.
- » Ask questions of your interdisciplinary colleagues to ensure your understanding of their roles.
- » If possible, shadow your colleagues or do joint meetings with clients.

IDENTIFY AND SEEK COMMON GROUND WITH YOUR INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLEAGUES.

- » Highlight commonalities in professional goals related to client services and organizational processes.
- » Ascertain areas of overlap in assessment and intervention.
- » Recognize ways in which your professional style (such as your communication pattern) is similar to that of your colleagues.
- » Connect with your colleagues about personal similarities, such as families or hobbies.

ACKNOWLEDGE THE DIFFERENCES AMONG SOCIAL WORK AND OTHER DISCIPLINES.

- » Be aware of your own frame of reference and assumptions.
- » Affirm the strengths of each discipline.
- » Discuss differences in respective disciplines' responsibilities and tasks.
- » Explore differences in professional goals and outcomes.
- » Examine a variety of approaches to achieve desired professional outcomes.

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ADDRESS CONFLICT AND DON'T LET RESENTMENT ACCUMULATE.

- » Recognize that conflict within teams and organizations is inevitable.
- » Talk directly with the individual (or individuals) involved.
- » Use peer consultation and supervision to problem solve, while avoiding gossip and triangulation.
- » Use inquiry to understand others' points of view.
- » Refrain from judgment and reframe your colleagues' judgments as concerns.
- » Stay focused on common goals.
- » Affirm the strengths of all parties.
- » Acknowledge your own learning needs.
- » Consider how you can help your colleagues better understand psychosocial perspective and intervention.
- » Seek compromise without sacrificing what's essential.
- » Jointly seek another perspective as needed.

BE PROACTIVE IN ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING COLLEAGIAL RELATIONSHIPS.

- » Offer positive reinforcement to your interdisciplinary colleagues.
- » Present yourself as an equal partner within the team or organization.
- » Exchange client information on a regular basis, if possible; don't postpone communication until crises occur.
- » Seek the expertise of other disciplines to enhance your understanding of client situations and offer your own perspective with confidence.
- » Clearly convey both information and questions.
- » Anticipate and be prepared to address potential disagreements.
- » Strive for cultural competence in interdisciplinary communication, just as in communication with clients.
- » Initiate and maintain personal connections, however limited (such as favorite pets).
- » Be patient. Developing trust and reciprocity takes time.

RESOURCES

Encyclopedia of Social Work (20th ed.) articles (NASW Press & Oxford University Press, 2008):

- > Collaborative Practice (Lawson)
- > Interdisciplinarity (Moxley)
- > Interprofessional and Partnered Practice (Aronoff)

NASW *Code of Ethics*: www.socialworkers.org/pubs/code

NASW standards of practice: www.socialworkers.org/practice

NASW journals and books: www.naswpress.org