

At the November 9th meeting of ESCOTA (East Side Council on the Aging) SBW Partners led a discussion on "Ethical Issues in Practice with Older People." Using the NASW Code of Ethics and handouts on ethical aspects of decision making, values, and critical thinking, we looked at the difficulties that arise when we apply them to the complex situations faced in our work with older people. Group participants discussed ways in which social work practice skills helped them work through these situations.

This issue of **SBWnotes** contains a summary of their ideas - and ours.
We look forward to your comments and feedback on these thorny issues.

"Yes, But" is a Red Light: Stop, Look, and (mostly) Listen!

We noted a commonly occurring situation - conflict between the rights of older people to self determination vs. our desire to care for and protect them. Example after example was offered. Of clients who return to their abusers. Of clients who refuse needed medical or psychiatric care. Of clients who will not modify their unsafe living situations.

What to do? When the situation is posed as an ethical dilemma (conflict between two goods) there is no exit. Looking at these situations as practice problems opens us up to productive interventions. Noting that our own anxieties and desires to help often get in the way of "starting where the client is", many group participants discussed ways in which social work practice skills helped them work through these problems.

When the older person responds to an offer of help with "Yes, But" ...

STOP: We are on the brink of a power struggle. And - if we insist on all the reasons why our idea is the right one - it will only get worse. As the older person defends her view of the situation, it becomes more firmly entrenched. As we continue to project our view, we demonstrate a lack of understanding of how the individual before us may perceive our efforts as threatening.

LOOK: There is much about every client we do not know. There is much about every client that does not appear on the assessment form. Let's be curious. How did our client get through the eight or nine decades before we met? What strengths did it take for her to survive? What experiences did she have that might affect the way she sees her situation today? What are her expectations and hopes for the future?

LISTEN: As we listen to our clients, we not only receive necessary information but we level the playing field between us. We are not the experts on their lives - they are. We are forming a trusting relationship in which changes (based on their wishes) can take place.

"WHAT IF"... the older person has a mild to moderate cognitive deficit that does not meet the threshold of incompetence but nevertheless affects her judgment?

Forming a trusting relationship with this older person is particularly essential. It will take patience. It will take time - more time than we might think we have. We will need practice skills. We might need advocacy skills. We can only move as far and as fast as our clients will allow us.

SBW Partners is a fee-for-service firm devoted to advancing social work practice in aging. Services are provided by Dr. Barbara Silverstone and Dr. Ann Burack-Weiss, the firm's founding partners, and a group of associates. We provide consultation and staff development for agencies, supervision for practitioners and corporate training programs. For more information, please visit www.sbwpartners.com or call 212.337.2555.