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# DEVELOPING YOUR COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN SOCIAL WORK



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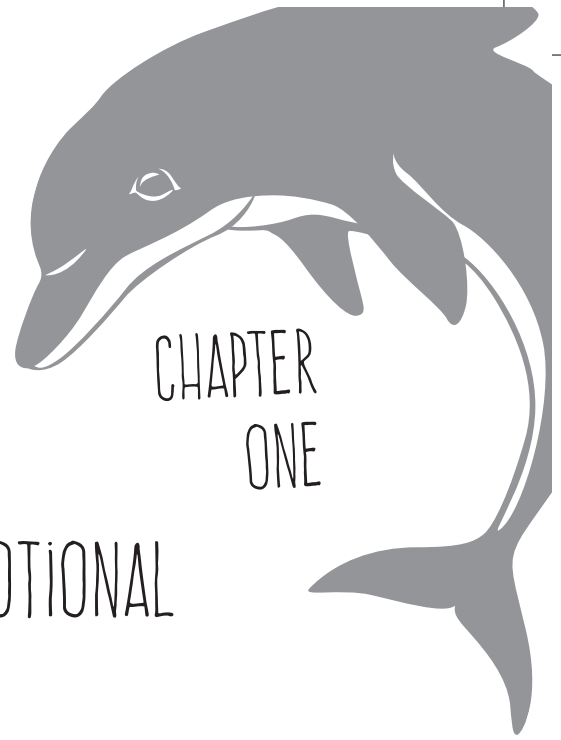
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## CHAPTER ONE

# REFLECTION AND EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

### Links to Knowledge and Skills Statements

Adults: critical reflection and analysis; organisational context; professional ethics

Children's: relationships and effective direct work; communication; role of supervision; organisational context

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter will consider student reflection and its impact on skill development. You will be asked to think about the conscious competency matrix to ensure that you understand that thought needs to go beyond your initial response to your ability. Reflective models will be considered, including Gibbs' reflective cycle, and Schön's reflection in and on action. The chapter will introduce you to the concept of emotional intelligence and how your emotions and your understanding of the service user's emotions will impact on your ability to communicate.

## REFLECTION

A basic tenet of social work practice is that you should always reflect on your practice, and aim to enhance and develop your knowledge and skills. Ingram (2015) argues that reflection should also include an understanding of our emotional response. In any situation, you will need to reflect on why it happened and what could have been different if it were to happen again, so that if it did happen again, there would be a(n even) better outcome. As a social worker we should never feel safe that we know how to be a social worker, as at that point we are no longer a good social worker. We should continually be learning about new legislation, theory and procedures, and we should also be constantly adapting and enhancing our practice to meet the individual service user's needs and ensuring that we practise in our best possible way. As a student social worker, you should aim to reflect on all events, to evaluate and enhance your practice. This can be undertaken after a home visit or meeting or on the commute home. You should consider your practice, the impact of your *self* on others, the actions of service users and colleagues, and the impact of contemporary challenges such as oppression, social policy and legislation on your practice. Bassot (2016) suggests that reflection utilises a *metaphorical mirror*, whereby the reflector utilises a range of different mirrors to enable them to see an intervention from several angles or perspectives. This will enable greater understanding of the interventions that you undertake and the service users with whom you work.

Students can initially often find it difficult to decide what to reflect upon. In order to avoid the choice of content becoming a stressful preventive factor, we advise that the written reflection content should be the incident that is still making you think as you leave placement for the day, as that is the one that has intrigued, upset or pleased you. The 'chore' of writing reflections can also be preventative, so ensure that you see it as a learning task – as important as attending lectures or undertaking an assessment. If you allow yourself fifteen minutes a day to reflect, it will become part of your routine and easier to undertake as you develop your reflective muscle.

Reflection is entrenched in policy for social workers as Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) registration requires that we demonstrate continuous professional development (CPD). Similarly, reflection is entrenched in the British Association of Social Workers Professional Capability Framework (PCF; BASW, 2016), which expects continual development as your career progresses. Reflection has its own domain in the PCF – Domain 6, critical reflection.

Social workers are knowledgeable about and apply the principles of critical thinking and reasoned discernment. They identify, distinguish, evaluate and integrate multiple sources of knowledge and evidence. These include practice evidence, their own practice experience, service user and carer experience together with research-based, organisational, policy and legal knowledge. They use critical thinking augmented by creativity and curiosity. (BASW, 2016)

ACTIVITY 1.1

Write a 300–500 word reflection on a conversation that you had with someone this morning.

- Think about briefly describing who said and did what.
- Think about why you and they may have said and done those things.
- What communication strengths did you use?
- What communication skills could you have used differently?

With this exercise, we are asking you to begin to undertake your communication skills audit. As you progress through this book you will be asked at every juncture to reflect on which communication skills that you possess and which you need to develop further.

ACTIVITY 1.2

Ask the person you were talking to:

- What did they think of your communication strengths and areas to develop?

Did the person mention anything that surprised you? The conscious competency matrix (Figure 1.1) asks you to think about where you are in your skills audit. There will be skills that you know that you can do well, which is when you are consciously conscious of your skill, and skills that you know that you need to develop further, when you are consciously incompetent. In many ways these are the easy skills; you are aware of your strengths and area of development. But throughout this book, we will ask you to reflect further and start to identify those communications skills in which you may be unconsciously incompetent: those that you do not know you need

Unconscious incompetence: You don't know you don't have the skill	Conscious incompetence: You know that you don't have the skill
Unconscious competence: You do the skill well without thinking about it	Conscious competence: You are aware that the skill is one of your strengths

**Figure 1.1** Conscious competency matrix (source unknown).

to develop. By asking your partner in the conversation, you may begin to identify communication skills that you were not aware that you needed to develop.

When using this book and reflecting on your communication skills, it may be helpful to be aware of your preferred method of learning to enhance your development. There are a number of questionnaires that enable you to do this. For example, VARK (Fleming, 1987), which stands for Visual, Aural, Read-write and Kinaesthetic, or Honey and Mumford's (1982) Activist, Theorist, Pragmatist and Reflector learning styles. These may help you to understand the best way for you to learn: if you are a reflector the reflective exercises may be more beneficial than reading the theory. However, we cannot but raise a word of caution at this point: just because you prefer one way of learning, do not ignore the rest. At this stage, you should be strengthening your learning in your weaker areas. An active learner who ignores theory and fails to reflect does not develop themselves and may end up as unconsciously incompetent. Ingram (2015) reminds us Schön (1983) stated that in order to reflect effectively, you have to apply the theories to understand why things happened. He argued that to just be a reflector was impossible, you have to action your conclusions.

## HOW TO REFLECT

There are many ways to reflect. As discussed above, you should aim to develop the reflective skills that enable you to reflect quietly as you finish a home visit, commute or write an assessment. However, when first starting to reflect, it can be helpful to have a structure to work within and a common way to achieve this is by utilising a written exercise. Indeed, many social work courses require the social work student to write regular reflections, and it is likely that your university will have a proforma for you to complete, which will guide you through your reflection with prompts and/or questions. When undertaking the reflective exercises in this book, consider using one of the following formats initially to aid your focus.

The simplest one is Driscoll's (2007) What? model, which suggests the following format:

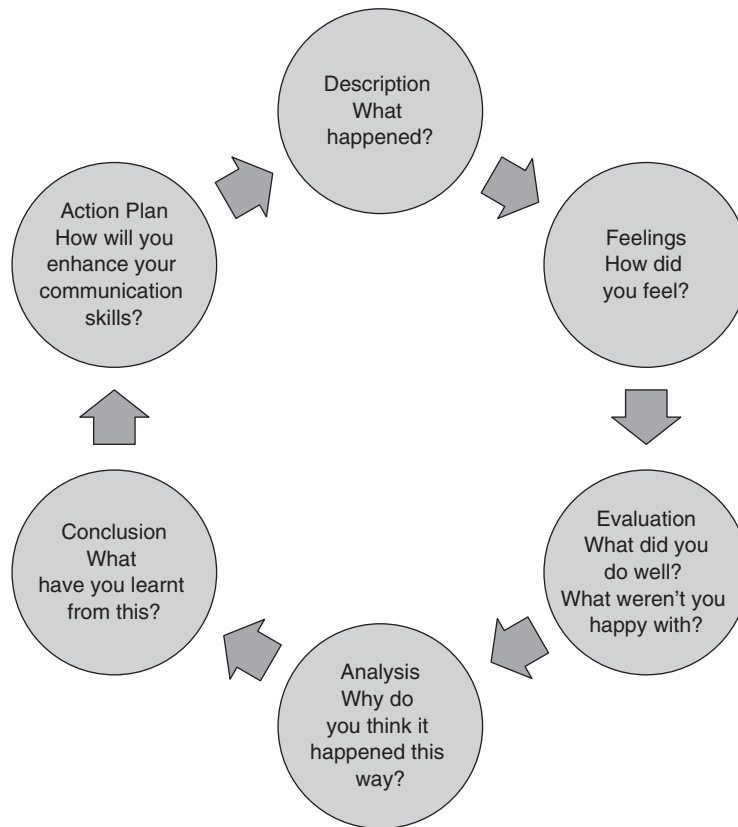
What? Describe briefly the incident

So What? Why you think this may have happened

Now What? What can you learn from this incident

Gibbs (1988) proposes a reflective cycle to reflect within (Figure 1.2). This can be helpful as it can facilitate understanding of the steps that are necessary to go through to reflect effectively:

*Description:* The reflective cycle begins with a brief description. When many students begin to write they spend much time telling us about what they did. Try to develop a clear, concise writing style so that you briefly tell the reader the most important facts. Chapter Nine discusses concise writing for recording purposes: the skills you need are transferable and development of one benefits the other. A reflection should be no more than 500 words long: it is not an



**Figure 1.2** Gibbs' reflective cycle (adapted from Gibbs, 1988)

assignment but a reflection to support you to develop. This means that your description cannot exceed 100 words. Give it a try: it's hard! And remember, you do not always have to write: a pictorial representation can work well too. The important task is to think about and reflect on the incident.

*Feelings*: At this point you should think about how the discussion made you feel: happy, sad, upset, angry, elated, disappointed, neutral. It may be that you are experiencing a variety of feelings. Howe (2008) reminds us that we can have 'multiple, contrasting, even conflicting emotions', and points out that awareness of this is one element of our emotional intelligence.

*Evaluation*: Now you should start to reflect. What elements of the discussion were you happy with? What did you say that afterwards made you smile? But equally, were there elements that you would have liked to communicate differently? Did you say anything that makes you squirm? Whilst you are now reflecting, you are evaluating *how* you did, not reflecting on the why.

*Analysis*: It is here that you start to think about the why. You will need to critically reflect on your contribution to the incident. What issues may have impacted on



the quality of your communication? Your existing (or lack of) relationship with the service user can cause or ease anxiety, your emotional and physical health will affect your ability to process and express your thoughts, and external issues (a heated row with a friend, a need to understand the topic for your assignment, concentrating too hard on saying the right thing, etc.; see Chapter Seven) will all impact on your ability to communicate. However, you will also need to reflect on your existing communication skills and areas to develop, and utilise the conscious competence model to reflect if there are areas that you are becoming aware of as you progress through the book (which, of course, the minute you become aware of them are no longer unconscious incompetent areas, but now conscious incompetent areas, and hopefully will progress into conscious competence by the end of the book). It can be helpful for some people to draw a spider diagram to help them think about the issues that may be impacting on their communication.

You will be required at this stage to utilise theory to help you to understand the why, in this case the communication skills theory that we will draw on throughout the book. Knott (2013) calls this being an informed reflective practitioner. Without drawing on theory, it becomes impossible to understand why things work or how they could be enhanced. You may need to reflect on whether you have communicated in an anti-oppressive manner, and whether your values have impacted on your communication. Further thought should also be given as to whether your agency's philosophy or procedures, or legislative criteria, have influenced your ability to communicate. Knott (2013) reminds you to reflect on the ethical issues that arise: for example, your agency's needs and the service user's needs may differ: how do you balance those needs? You may also need to reflect on the social construction of the service user's response. Fook (2016) recommends reflection on the impact of social structures and oppression on the service user: why does the person behave and respond in the way that they do? What influences have led to this?

If you are reflecting within the PCF and/or the Knowledge and Skills Statement (for adults or children), you would also consider in this section the domains you had met and those you need to develop further. The analysis section should be the longest and most detailed section of your reflection, as it requires you to think of layers of issues. This means that one issue can never explain a situation, as many factors will contribute to an outcome. The role of the reflector is to identify some of these contributing factors and explore their influence.

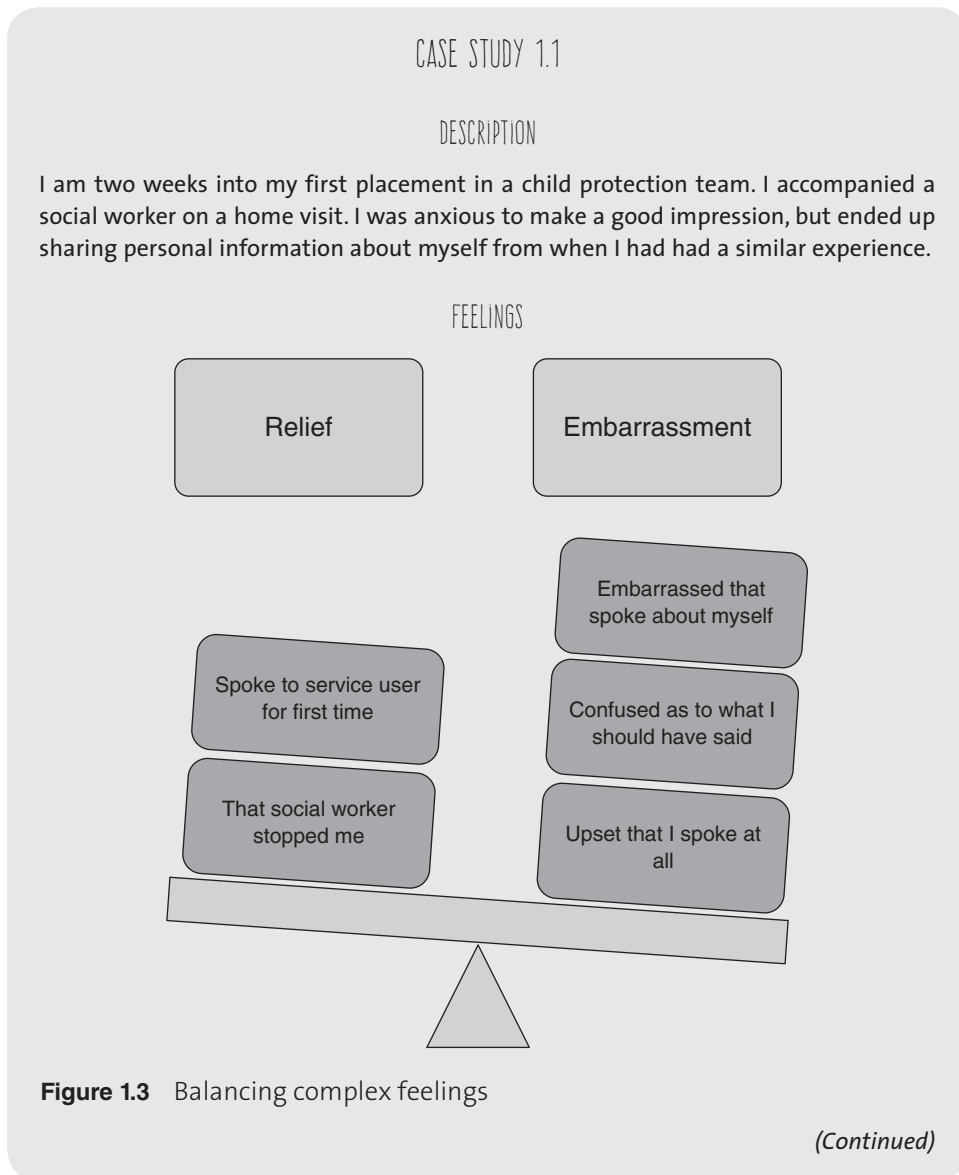
But remember, there is no right or wrong at this point (other than gross misconduct or oppressive practice). There will be many reasons why something happens, and it will be impossible to identify each and every one to pinpoint the cause. The idea is for you to reflect on possibilities of why, but not for you to identify areas for development or to apportion blame.

*Conclusion:* Here you will summarise your communication skills audit, your communication skills strengths and areas to develop.

*Action plan:* And finally, you will give yourself one to three action points that you will take into your next discussion with your tutor or practice educator, which will

enhance your communication with them. Gardener (2014) argues that as a reflective student social worker you will need to be open and creative. This means that when thinking of an action plan for developing your practice, you will need to be open to change as well as open to creative and flexible ways to enhance your skills.

We have just worked through each step of Gibbs’ reflective cycle. Now consider it in practice. Below is Aisha’s reflection based on a home visit she undertook on her placement.



*(Continued)*

I am feeling very confused right now. I feel elated: I spoke to a service user for the first time. But I feel devastated because it was a disaster. I just wanted to disappear into the settee when I started talking about myself, but I just couldn't stop myself.

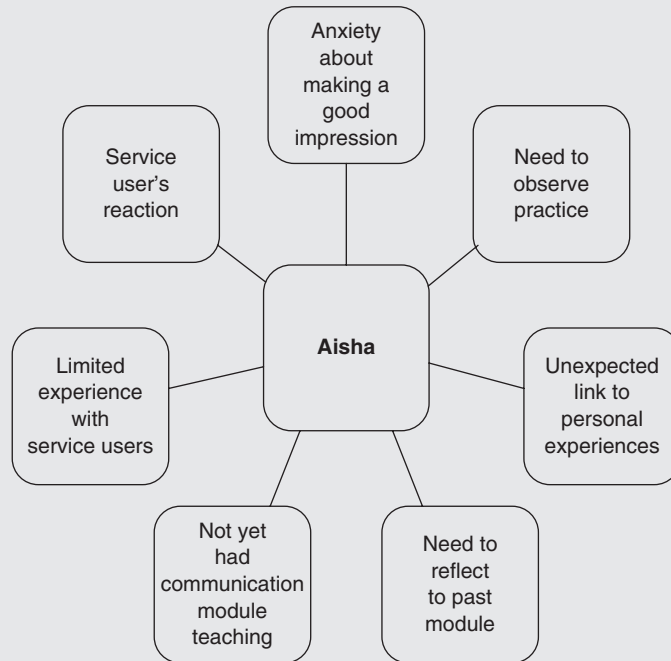
#### EVALUATION

**Table 1.1** Example of possible thoughts when reflecting on practice

Positives	What went wrong
I was dressed professionally, my phone was turned off, I felt prepared.	I shared personal information about my history with the service user and the social worker.
I watched how the social worker spoke to the service user. She had a relaxed but clear manner. I will try to use that when I speak to service users.	I was not clear on the purpose of the visit: I was so excited to be going on my first home visit that I rushed into it without discussion.
In the car on the way back, I was able to tell the social worker I was sorry.	I was very anxious to do well, and concentrated so much on that that I lost concentration.

#### ANALYSIS

So why did I blurt that out? Well, the service user struck some chords with me: similar age, similar story, even similar name! Reflecting back, I can see that I over-identified with the service user. But in some ways, I was also feeling a little bit 'safe'. I liked the colleague I was out with. We had been chatting about our interests, life plan, etc. I can see now that boundaries are really important in social work (Domain 1: Professionalism). Henderson and Mathew-Bryne (2016) recognise that having different personal and professional boundaries are very important for any social worker, but it is especially hard for student social workers to get the balance right. That made me feel better: that it is okay to get it wrong, that learning from this is what is important. I am beginning to see that service users aren't my friends, or my peers. I am here to help them, so I need to be friendly, yet not too personal. Not an easy line to walk, but I am going to try (Domain 6: Critical reflection).



**Figure 1.4** Example of spider diagram of contributing factors that impact on intervention

#### CONCLUSION

I feel that although I shared information inappropriately with the service user by interrupting the social worker's intervention, that I have been able to reflect on my reasons for doing so. I need to develop understanding on the importance of professional boundaries, and an ability to adhere to them.

#### ACTION PLAN

1. Seek university counselling to address personal issues.
2. Talk to practice educator about how I felt, the impact of the visit on the service user, and if this impacts on my placement.
3. Talk to practice educator about coping strategies to help me if this situation arose again.

Now consider how you can use Gibbs' reflective cycle to reflect on your own experiences by completing Activity 1.3.

### ACTIVITY 1.3

Think back to your reflection on a conversation from this morning. Do it again using Gibbs' reflective model below:

- Description: What happened?
- Feelings: How did you feel?
- Evaluation: What did you do well? What weren't you happy with?
- Analysis: Why do you think it happened this way?
- Conclusion: What have you learnt from this?
- Action plan: How will you enhance your communication skills?

It is beneficial to start reflecting using these proformas as a prompt, and in time it will become instinctive to reflect on all interventions you undertake. As your journey through the book progresses, initially use Gibbs' format when undertaking a reflection exercise, and then begin to practise without the proforma. As your reflection skills progress, it is likely that you will find Gibbs' model simplistic. It is worth remembering Kolb (originally 1984, reviewed in 2015) recommends a model in which to undertake the reflection on action that is widely used. It is based on the same principles, but that as a reflector you move through concrete experience, where you might undertake communication with a service user or professional; then undertake reflective observation, where you reflect on the communication skills that you have used; then turn to abstract conceptualisation, thinking about your strengths and areas for development; and finally undertaking active experimentation, where you try different communication styles to see which suit you and the service user's needs. It may be that you find this model more useful as you progress.

Another reflective model is that of Schön's (1983) reflection in action and on action. He argues that when you are in the middle of an intervention you will be reflecting *in action*: making rapid reflections that inform your responses and interventions. Many of the chapters in this book will require you, whilst practising the communication skill, to reflect and respond whilst in action. For example, when listening to a service user you will be required to undertake active listening: reflecting on all the verbal and non-verbal communication that you receive whilst also filtering possible coping strategies behind presenting behaviour, and yet also applying relevant legislation, agency policy and theory. Fook (2016) refers to this as *reflexive* practice, and recognises it is a complex and difficult practice, but that beginning with reflective practice you will become more reflexive, therefore enhancing your interventions.

## REFLECTIVE TASK 1.1

Arrange to have coffee with a fellow social work student. During the conversation, actively reflect on your use of your communication skills (consciously be aware of your competence (skills) and incompetence (areas to develop)) and reflect on your peer's responses.

Schön (1983) recommends that after the intervention you reflect further on the issues discussed whilst in action, but also reflect on your own practice. What did you do well, what practice could you enhance? You can utilise the written reflective models at this point to aid your *on action* reflection.

## REFLECTIVE TASK 1.2

After you have finished your coffee and left your peer, reflect further: what issues affected the way you communicated? (Location, your relationship with your peer, your emotional or physical wellbeing that day, etc.?) Could you have communicated differently at any point?

We often say that retrospection is a wonderful thing. It can be easy to say this is what I would have done when not in the heat of the moment, influenced by a range of factors. But in Schön's reflection model's case, retrospection *is* a wonderful thing. Schön (1983) asks you to look back, to be retrospective, not to judge and lay blame, but to learn from the experience and enhance your future practice.

Gardener (2014) recommends that you should develop from seeing reflection as a chore, when you write a reflection for a module or for placement demands, to seeing it as a natural and positive part of your practice. Once you understand the process of reflecting utilising written formats, you will become adept at reflecting on your own. Many social workers reflect automatically (unconsciously competently), immediately after every visit that they undertake. They will think about why the service user acted in the way that they did, and how their responses impacted on the assessment of the situation. They will reflect on how they intervened with and responded to the service user, what they did well, and how they could enhance their practice further.

Qualified social workers will access reflective support in supervision, where they can discuss the case and their interventions to reflect to ensure that they are making the best decision for the service user. The Knowledge and Skills Statement for adults (Department of Health, 2015) has critical reflection as a clear component in Section 8, which recommends the use of supervision to enable and develop reflection

on case work. Whilst the Knowledge and Skills Statement for children (Department for Education, 2016) does not have a section called reflection, it is clearly incorporated into the equivalent section, Section 10, on supervision. As a social work student on placement, you should expect a strong level of reflective practice from your practice educator. Scragg (2014) reminds us that your practice educator will be skilled at reflection and will help you to develop your reflective skills in supportive supervision, where you can explore areas of development. Scragg also reminds you to advocate if you are not receiving this. Ingram (2015) reiterates that social workers have professional norms, which will vary from team to team and agency to agency. However, it is acceptable to demand time to reflect even in a team that does not see reflection as part of the team's identity, as it is entrenched in our national professional identity through the HCPC, PCF and the Knowledge and Skills Statement.

## HOW TO ACCEPT FEEDBACK

The process of this book is about developing your communication skills through self-awareness through reflection. However, it is also very useful, although difficult, to receive, hear and utilise feedback from others. Many of the activities throughout the book will ask you to think about how you feel about interventions, but some will ask you to ask the person involved for feedback. As you progress as a student social worker, you will benefit from feedback from your practice educator, colleagues and service users with whom you work.

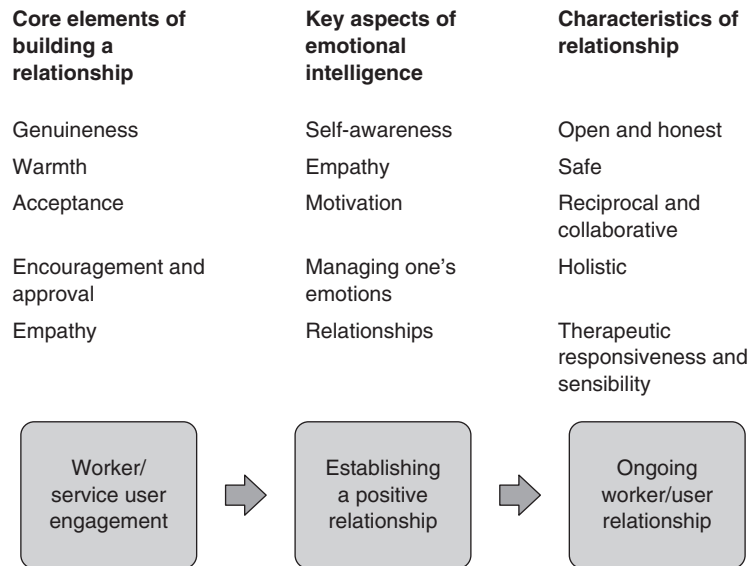
When receiving feedback, the important issue is not to take the criticism personally. It is likely that whilst you will receive positive comments you will also receive constructive criticism, in order to help you identify your areas for development. If these are provided using evidence-based explanations, then you can reflect on the described incident using one of the reflective styles described above. This should help you to identify why the person made their comments and to develop an action plan to enhance your communication skills. It is the other person's reflective opinion on your communication skills, and you must filter this opinion by considering whether it is objective and relevant. You do not have to take every negative comment to heart, yet be open to hearing the need to develop your communication skills.

## EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Emotional intelligence is a combination of your understanding of your own emotional wellbeing, an awareness of how you are feeling at that time and your more consistent strengths and areas of development, and an awareness of the person with whom you are talking, be it service user, peer, professional or supervisor (social awareness). Goleman (1995) argued that emotional intelligence is made up of

self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management. This means that it is not just awareness, but a conscious adjustment to enable optimum communication given Goleman’s factors. Grant et al. (2014) argue that your self-awareness and social awareness enable you to manage the emotional complexities of communication, which will help you problem solve and thus support service users’ progress and development.

Ingram (2013), in his emotionally intelligent social work model (Figure 1.5), combines the historical and ongoing promotion of communication skills in social work practice (for example, the use of many of Roger’s techniques of person-centred practice to engage the service user, as discussed in Chapter Three) and the philosophy of emotionally intelligent social work (for example, awareness of our own emotions and those of the service user) as a means to engage service users and enhance outcomes.



**Figure 1.5** Ingram’s (2013) emotionally intelligent social work model.

Ingram (2013) argues that emotional intelligence is both aided by and creates good communication skills, and that both are required to develop good relationships with the service user. Indeed, many of the discussions that will be had throughout the book combine the need for use of *self* and *empathy* (see, in particular, Chapter Five) in your communication, so clearly an understanding and awareness of your emotional intelligence will be highly beneficial to your communication skills’ development.



## REFLECTIVE TASK 1.3

Reflect back to a time when you had an argument with a loved one. How did your feelings impact on your ability to communicate your feelings and perspective to them?

It is likely that you may have been upset, but responded angrily, said something you did not mean to, or gone quiet to avoid doing just that. But most likely, you did not exhibit your best communication skills. In order to be an emotionally intelligent communicator, you will need to be aware of the impact of your emotions on your ability to communicate. If you are anxious going into the home of a service user who is known to be aggressive, how does this affect your ability to communicate? In Chapter Five, we discuss empathic responses to service user's defensive behaviours (Trevithick, 2011), but it worth remembering here that we too may have conscious or unconscious defensive behaviours, in anticipation of, or in response to difficult situations.

Howe (2008) reminds us that our emotional state will impact on the service user's emotional state; if we are agitated, they are less likely to feel calm. By being aware of this, you can allow for it and plan. Think back to using Gibbs' cycle of reflection – you have just gone through the evaluation and analysis stages within this scenario, so what action plan would you put in place as a coping strategy to resolve and counter your defensive behaviours? As we mentioned in the Introduction, throughout this book you will be asked to think about your communication skills audit. An awareness of your *self* will be critical in this, and an awareness of your emotional wellbeing adds to your emotional intelligence. Of course, if you are calm or happy, the service user will equally respond to a positive mood.

## REFLECTIVE TASK 1.4

You go to your general practitioner (GP) with a personal health issue that you are anxious about sharing with them. When you enter the doctor's surgery, they are short tempered when asking you how you are today. When you tell them, they seem judgemental and tell you curtly to take the prescribed medication, and then dismiss you.

How do you feel after this appointment?

It is possible that you may be reluctant to share the information that you want to, and may be brief in your description, or anxious so forget an important detail? It is likely that you will leave feeling unvalued and 'processed'.

## REFLECTIVE TASK 1.4 CONTINUED

When you enter the doctor's surgery, they are interested in you, respond with patience, empathy and understanding at how the personal health issue is affecting you. They talk to you about how you would like to resolve the problem by giving you options.

How do you feel after this appointment?

It is likely that after the appointment with this doctor you felt valued, that you had been afforded time to explore the issues, and that you had been heard. Imagine, then, that you are a service user, and the difference in your openness to sharing information with a social worker who is accessible and empathic. That is, your emotional intelligence can and will form the basis of an engaging social work relationship.

Hennessey (2011) discusses *relationship-based social work* and argues that relationships are central to our wellbeing, that people are by nature *relationship seekers*. He therefore argues that it is only natural to assume that the quality of the social worker's relationship with the service user will influence the quality of service user engagement, and impact on the success of the outcome. He concludes that in order to use your *self* most effectively within a positive working relationship with a service user, you must be aware of your strengths, moods and areas to develop, and how they will impact on the service user, which is, of course, being emotionally intelligent. However, he reminds us that it is never that simple, as personal and procedural issues will influence your ability to be your natural self. Munford and Sanders (2016) reinforce this perspective in their research into positive outcomes for young people. They found that relationship-based social work utilising empowering and respectful communications enhanced engagement. Chapter Eight on barriers to communication discusses the issues that could impact on your attempt to communicate to the best of your ability and therefore your positive working relationship. Frost et al. (2015) encourage enhancing your practice and development of quality relationship-based social work practice through reflection on the impact of your communication skills on the service user and service provision.

But you will also need to be aware of how others are feeling. Chapter Three on listening and Chapter Five on empathy particularly discuss this issue. To be a good communicator, you will need to be aware of the other person's emotional state, and respond to their needs to optimise communication. This is the second half of being an emotionally intelligent student social worker: to be aware of the other person's emotional wellbeing. Howe (2008) argues that it is imperative that, subsequent to awareness and analysis of your own and the service user's emotional states, that your understanding of the service user's feelings is communicated. He concludes that service users want to feel understood, which enables them to develop a working relationship with you. This is, of course, a key social work principle: to value the service user by listening to them and ensuring that they feel heard.

If you can be aware of the impact of your emotional health and issues that affect your communication, and be aware of the service user's emotional wellbeing and other issues that can influence their presentation and communication, then you can adjust your communication to optimise effectiveness. This concept should also be applied to working with peers and other professionals (see Chapter Eleven on inter-professional working).

The need to be emotionally intelligent is embedded in the PCF and the HCPC. Within Domain 1, Professionalism, there is a requirement to be aware of your safety, health and wellbeing, and the impact of *self* on service users. The HCPC (2016b) *Standards of Conduct, Performance and Ethics* demands that as social workers we ensure we are 'fit to practise'. As a student social worker you have a duty to develop your emotional intelligence to ensure that you can act professionally.

## REFLECTION DEVELOPS EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND RESILIENCE

It is suggested that by reflecting on your communication skills, you will become more aware of your strengths and areas to develop, which will make you more aware of the impact that different physical and emotional influences have on your communication, and your ability to adapt your communication to address the issues. Furthermore, as you develop a proficiency to reflect on service users' reactions and communication patterns, you will enhance your capability to empathise and recognise and understand service users' feelings, and thus your competence to respond appropriately, which will result in enriched communication that meets their emotional needs. By developing your communication skills through reflection and audit, you will inevitably develop your emotional intelligence. This view is supported by Grant et al. (2014), as well as previous research referred to in their research, that reflection enhances emotional intelligence. Howe (2008) argues that reflection is the start of emotional intelligence, it is the application of the reflection that makes us emotionally intelligent. We see this as akin to Gibbs' and Kolb's cycles of reflection, that is, to merely reflect is insufficient, you have to apply the learning from the reflection in the next intervention and continue to reflect to be a reflective practitioner and an emotionally intelligent student social worker.

Whilst this book is not written to ask you to develop your ability to deal with stressful social work interventions, a positive by-product of developing your reflectivity and your emotional intelligence will be that you become more emotionally resilient. As you understand your communication skills better, you will also develop your sense of *self* more. As a consequence, you will gain an understanding of the issues that impact on you and cause you stress, so stimulating reflection on coping strategies that will support you to work with greater emotional resilience. Grant and Kinman (2012) identified that emotional intelligence is a predictor for social workers building their emotional resilience. Greer (2016) argued that resilience could be enhanced through greater self-confidence, self-esteem, self-efficacy, a strengths-based perspective, optimism, coping strategies, and having a support network and a willingness to

reflect on areas for development, each of which can also be identified with emotional intelligence. Social work is a stressful role, and the development of greater resilience to support you on the hard days ahead of you can only be a good thing.



COMMUNICATION SKILLS AUDIT: REFLECTION SKILLS

ACTIVITY 1.4

Finally, reflect on your strengths and areas for development in relation to reflection itself, and identify two or three action points for you to develop. To give you support, Table 1.2 provides examples of how a student social worker might do this exercise. Use the box below the example to record your strengths, areas for development and action points.

**Table 1.2** Communication skills audit: reflection skills

	<b>Strengths in reflection</b>	<b>Areas for development</b>	<b>Action points to improve reflection skills</b>
Domain 2 Values and ethics	<i>Listen and value service user's wishes and feelings</i>	<i>e.g. Expressing my understanding of the service user's wishes and feelings</i>	<i>Develop clarification skills Summarise service user's wishes and feelings</i>
Domain 6 Critical reflection	<i>I am always able to reflect on my negative input into a situation</i>	<i>Enhance identifying my positive input into a situation</i>	<i>Balance number of positives to negatives in reflection Reflect from a strengths perspective</i>

As this is your first attempt at undertaking a communication skills audit, take time to reflect on what you have read in this chapter and where you feel your skills lie. Now, reflect on which areas you still need to work on, your areas for development, and think about how you will begin to develop them, your action plan. This exercise will be undertaken at the end of each chapter, so you will develop clearer understanding of your learning needs, which if you share with your practice educator, will help you when you are on placement by ensuring it optimises your development.

## CONCLUSION

Reflection is not an easy activity for many social work students, but it is a skill that they have to practise like all other social work skills. Ingram (2015) argues that developing good reflection skills takes time and commitment, but taking that time to develop your skills will enhance your emotional intelligence, and therefore your ability to be a better communicator and a better student social worker. We would argue that reflection should not be seen as a 'chore' to be completed for an assessed or formative task, but as a skill that should underpin your practice to ensure that you are consciously competent in your social work and communication.

It can be argued that emotional intelligence is the combination of your intra-personal and interpersonal skills: how you interpret your thoughts and feelings and express them, and how you interpret the other person's verbal and non-verbal communication and respond to them. Through self-awareness and social awareness, the student social worker can adjust and optimise communication to enhance engagement of service users.

## FURTHER READING

- Gardener, F. (2014) *Being Critically Reflective*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.  
Grant, L. and Kinman, G. (eds) (2014) *Developing Resilience for Social Work Practice*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.  
Ingram, R. (2015) *Understanding Emotions in Social Work*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

All these books provide excellent insight into their area and further exploration will develop and strengthen your skills of reflection, resilience and emotional intelligence.