

This small piece of work


was inspired by a joint process involving a group of influential researchers. The idea of preparing recipes for client encounters presented itself in the final stages of the Social Reporting Project (2009–2011) carried out by the Heikki Waris Institute at Socca, The Centre of Excellence on Social Welfare in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area.

The recipes in this book are meant for people who carry out client work, that are clients themselves, or who are studying or teaching or are otherwise interested in client interactions. The idea is that clients are the most competent people to guide in client work encounters.

The back cover of the book holds a DVD which contains four stories about encounter experiences.

Encounters in Social Work

– Recipes for Interaction



Socca – The Centre of Excellence on Social Welfare in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area and Heikki Waris Institute, Social Reporting Project (2009–2011)

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Dear Reader,

This small piece of work was inspired by a joint process involving a group of influential researchers. The idea of preparing recipes for client encounters presented itself in the final stages of the Social Reporting Project (2009–2011) carried out by the Heikki Waris Institute at Socca, The Centre of Excellence on Social Welfare in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area. The recipes in this book are meant for people who carry out client work, that are clients themselves, or who are studying or teaching or are otherwise interested in client interactions.

Throughout the project, young adult clients had wanted to influence social work, especially encounters with professionals. When giving instructions, it is usual for the most competent person to instruct the trainee or student. In preparing these recipes we wanted to retain this idea and in this case it is the client who is the most competent person in such encounters.

The recipes are based on experiences that have been chosen from material collected in the project, and the recipes have been drawn up in shared dialogue. We wanted to keep this guidebook as compact as possible, so that lack of time and pressures of work would not prevent anyone from reading up on this important matter and in doing so we hope this guidebook reaches as many readers as possible. The back cover of the book holds a DVD which contains four stories about encounter experiences.

Wishing you pleasant encounters,

Helsinki, 18 March 2012

Jukka Keskinen, Aino Kääriäinen, Julius Oravisto, Rauli Pitkänen and Anna-Kaisa Tukiala

First impression

The first impression is important. It dictates how we see and act, it can get us on our guard or make us react in a bold, gloomy or friendly manner. We do not easily change our ideas after first impressions, because we direct most of our attention to things that confirm the ideas we have already formed. You can only give a first impression once.

"I have to say, experiences of doormen and the first people to answer telephone calls have been horrible. It's pretty absurd that when someone who is already a bag of nerves, finally, after a week's self convincing, drags themselves to the social office, the first thing they encounter is a grumpy, hot-tempered doorman who gets all their thoughts mixed-up, and then their precious time with the social worker is wasted trying to calm down and pluck up courage to face the doorman again downstairs..."

Recipe

Make the entrance pleasant and bright to encourage people to step inside. Make sure that doormen exude a good attitude – do not keep them behind glass. Treat even an unsuccessful person as a person. There is no reason why the first encounter should not be positive!



Seeing the good

Failing in life, marginalisation – far from what you were hoping for – is a powerful experience. The shame that falls on you like a thick curtain may result from an expectation handed down from generation to generation – I must cope at all cost! But who is it that casts a shadow on you when you already feel like you are diminishing? Is there shame in seeking help or shame in not giving it?

"I am so ashamed I feel like I don't know what and who I am anymore. I come here to be judged, I'm tired and I'm asking for help because I don't have the strength or resources left to help myself. I'm desperately clutching at straws, trying to find just a glimpse of light in this crushing situation..."

Recipe

Help people to see what is most important right now – the things that should be dealt with first. If possible, let things mull over in peace and leave things be that are not worth worrying about right now. Build good things and make them grow! Describe the good you see or, if you do not see it, ask people where they feel they have succeeded.

Listening

Being heard is the first, and a very important, element of human interaction. When a person is really heard in any given situation, they become receptive to others, too. Really listening to people makes change possible.

"My last support network refused my plea for help at first. It was a dark moment. I felt crushed. They told me that I should close my business and look for other work."

Should people first change to get help or should they be helped so that they can change their circumstances and themselves?

Recipe

It is vitally important not to crush people. Carelessness and vagueness can cause needless despair. Clearly explain the reasons for your decisions. Increased understanding helps people feel more in control.



A safety net?

"When you lose your balance in the tailspin of life and start falling there is supposed to be a safety net as your last resource. When things aren't up to you anymore, but somehow seem out of your control. But suddenly I find myself thinking – will the net hold? And will I survive the fall? If I do survive, will I be damaged? A safety net should be reliable, supportive, important – but mine is riddled with shame and guilt. People will point the finger at me if I fall into this net. I want to ask, on behalf of myself, social workers and society: does it have to be like this?"

Recipe

Being able to trust that you will get help already helps. Safety gives people courage.



A change of position

Good and bad encounters last equally long. So why not go for the good straight away?

"It was so embarrassing when I applied for income support – having someone explain to you that you can save electricity (reduce your bill) if you turn off your computer. They actually said that 'this is a computer, this is a switch button, and if you press it you'll save electricity.' Stuff like that. I mean really. It was so frustrating."

Recipe

Irrelevant advice is depressing. Real interaction is not just simple instructions.

A taste of life

"I was a workaholic back in secondary and upper secondary school. It felt like the values of society – hard work, know-how and resolution – had replaced important things like knowing when you are feeling well and that well-being is not based only on achievements. After non-military service, I found myself wondering how this person who had achieved so much couldn't cope anymore and had ended up at social services."

People grow into a world of haste, performance and efficiency very early. When expectations, will and resources conflict with each other, you can feel like a runner in a field of quicksand and lose faith in life and its ability to provide for you.

Recipe

Not everybody can run at the same speed – but we all have our own important goals that deserve the support of others.

A taste of benefit

Someone living in a bad situation may have to defend their very existence to the whole world. Increasing the burden will not increase resources.

"Somebody wrote on the Internet for everyone to see 'you lazy bastard, you should go and get a job like the rest of us.' I had to stop for a minute and think whether they had gone too far or were actually allowed to express their irritation. It seemed like everybody was judging my monthly food budget . If you really want to defend yourself, you have to explain things that go so far back in time. It's easier just to let it be."

Recipe

Our human concepts are transmitted through interaction. It is important to be aware of what you believe in as a professional and where you are going with your work. A respectful work approach requires the recognition of your own values and shared discussion about what a good life means for each individual.

I hear the tone

"The only thing I remember about social benefits from secondary school lessons is this middle-aged male teacher emphasising that the benefits must usually be repaid. So he actually pulled the rug from under the whole benefits system."

Many mistaken ideas and assumptions about social services and benefits circulate in the media, on the Internet, in public, in teaching and in everyday discussion. About both the recipients and the givers. How do you set straight fearful misconceptions created long ago?

Recipe

It is important to offer bright and clear information that will dispel uncertainty. This is our joint responsibility.

Understanding the situation

The package has been sent. Who will receive it? Could it get lost on the way? And what if nobody finds it?

"I was taken to hospital after I had tried to commit suicide. And these people just handed me the telephone number for the psychiatric outpatient clinic. I mean, sure I can take care of things, but I think that the authorities should do it, so that you don't have to call and try to find treatment yourself. They just dumped the ball in my court. I was in a state. Total confusion. I don't even get it how they could have sent me away from that hospital."

Recipe

In crisis and emergency situations, co-operation within the service network is very important, so that responsibility is not placed completely on the shoulders of the client. A key element of professionalism is to make sure that client has resources he needs.

Hatching from the shell

"So this time, when I went to the social office, the discussion wasn't about money but about my general situation. These two fantastic social workers talked with me. They gave a completely new kind of help, just what I needed at the time. They took the time to listen to me talking about my whole life situation, and didn't just start to discuss money. As far as I remember, they visited me at home every couple of weeks and spent time finding me different kinds of support networks even outside social services."

Recipe

Listen to my life.
Mix gently and let the wings do the carrying.





In conclusion

So far,
we have described encounters
in words and pictures.
If you want
to know more,
you can watch and listen to
moments from the enclosed DVD.

Rauli Pitkänen: SafetyNet
Jukka Keskinen: Fusion Cocktail
Peppi Vuorela: Matkalla
Julius Oravisto: Tarina äänenä

Kaikki mitat ovat
Kuivatut pomeranssit
hienonnetaan. osa
uorittavat mantelit
helposti irta
veteen is

