

## EXAMPLES OF FAMILY SESSIONS

*‘Clients and their family/whanau are not usually at their best when we meet them. Their circumstances may cause them to be agitated, frustrated, or vulnerable and they may demonstrate erratic or emotional behaviour’ (Whiteside & Steinberg, 2003).*

### PREPARATION

1. Organising a family session can seem a difficult task. Talk with the client as to a possible time and date for a meeting and how to best communicate with family members. Spend some time preparing and discussing any anxiety the client has concerning the process and content of a family session.

2. Consider an appointment letter to the family members to ensure that all are fully aware of appointment details and possible content of the session.

3. Book a family friendly room or create a family friendly atmosphere in a room available.



### THE FIRST SESSION

1. As an important starting point introduce yourself, your service and allow the family members to introduce themselves. When working with other cultures allow for the cultural processes to occur. If you are not sure what the correct cultural process is, check with colleagues and cultural advisor. It can be helpful to ask an appropriate family member to open the session.

2. Establish the guidelines of the session (make sure there is a copy on the wall). You may also need to agree on times for breaks. Emphasise that everyone will have a chance to participate. Spend time on this as it can assist where there is a need for structure to maintain progress, and avoid ‘derailing’ when there is considerable family stress.

3. The main focus of the session is getting to know the family and the problem. Use active listening skills, empathic listening skills, allow for emotions to be expressed and set achievable goals that will empower the client, family or significant others.

4. Allow for each family member to identify the problems and strengths that exist and the stressors that they experience. Using a white board allows for common issues to be identified and clearly prioritised. Assist the family to identify a problem to start working on, make sure that everyone is heard and has some level of agreement.

Problem solving and negotiation are key skills to be modelled and reinforced in the session.

5. Consistently reinforce clear communication.

6. The client sets achievable goals around their alcohol and drug use and is asked to report this back in the next session. Talk with the client and the family about the risks of monitoring and establish with the client explicit means of monitoring their use. Sometimes it is helpful to limit discussion about past alcohol and drug use, to individual sessions between the client and the practitioner.

7. Sometimes it is not appropriate for children to be present, for instance, if parenting roles are being discussed. If children are present, ensure there is time allowed to address the children and explain in developmentally appropriate language, the processes that are underway. Encourage children to ask questions to determine their level of understanding, remembering that children may only wish to hear limited information.

8. Explore some of the following options for additional intervention:

- Attending meetings e.g. AlAnon, AA/NA, GA, ACOA
- Other Health Services including Mental Health Services
- Residential treatment
- Relapse prevention courses
- Other types of specialised therapy, e.g. Family therapy
- Strengthening Families (CYFS)
- Education/courses
- Children's programmes
- Parenting programmes, employment services
- Work and Income NZ

9. Set another appointment in a week's time and identify who will attend this session. Determine if young children need to attend further sessions and investigate other agencies that may provide additional support. eg subsidised childcare.

10. At the end of the session, where at all possible, provide information on topics and a written summary of homework.

11. Record details of the session, identifying key process details, identified strengths and goals to be worked on.

## **SECOND SESSION**

1. Preparation as is outlined above. Have the Kawa or guidelines visible in the room.

2. Allow time for feedback about the last session and the last week before moving on to setting the agenda for this session.

3. Working on family relationships is a key aspect of treatment. This can be done by increasing communication skills, problem-solving skills, increasing quality time as a family and developing caring behaviours (Fals-Stewart et al. 2004).

4. Affirm people when they do something positive or when you notice positive change, for example "Good listening" or "That was a really good way of saying how you felt without blaming John".

5. Some of the areas that you can work on with the client and family could be:

- Understanding the overall effect of addiction on those present to provide insight and facilitate discussion.
  - Using a genogram to deepen understanding of familial patterns
  - How do family members feel and react when the client uses drugs or alcohol?
  - How does it affect each one of them?
  - What are the reasons for drug and alcohol use?
  - What are current coping skills, what are the advantages and disadvantages of these and what are alternative ways of coping?
  - What changes would each one like to see?
  - Learning to communicate and work together.
  - Monitoring change, following individual steps.
  - Cultural appropriateness, continuing family traditions and culture.
  - Discussing how those present maintain resilience by effectively managing family process and developing additional skills and resources. Reinforcing any useful and healthy strategies.

You will not be able to address all of the above. Plan your session but be flexible. When working with a group of people a session may change direction. Monitor process and acknowledge shift from the original plan. Determine any changes in the session direction with the family.

6. Consider homework aimed at, for example, noting communication patterns in specific contexts and practising different skills covered in the session. Alternatively, homework could be about monitoring any feedback of drug and alcohol use. Only introduce homework if the family is likely to complete it.

7. Set another time to meet, let the family know that the next session will involve an evaluation of sessions to date to determine what the next steps will be.

### **THIRD SESSION**

1. Welcome the client and their family.
2. Discuss and review time since the last session - have changes been made?
3. Review the identified problems and goals set in the first session. Check whether they are still relevant or whether they need modifying. Steps towards family goals may be illustrated using different visual methods.
4. Evaluate the work the family has completed in these three sessions and make sure that each individual feels confident to achieve the steps towards their goals. Key components are a good support system and ideas on how to care for themselves in stressful times.
5. Finishing the session, poroporoaki and farewell the members that will not continue treatment in your service. Follow the process that is suitable to the client and their family.

Treatment need not stop after the three sessions. By this time there will be a clearer picture of the treatment that is needed to instill and maintain changes.

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