

What makes a good/competent ASW?

I was interested by the way the question was phrased. There seemed to be an acknowledgment that “good” and “competent” were not synonymous in this case. Competence was not enough on its own, though obviously it is an essential part of being a “good” ASW. An ASW who does not know the Mental Health Act thoroughly, who does not know how to conduct the assessment, who cannot make comparative judgements of potential outcomes is not going to be much good to the client. So we accept that competence is a prime facie requirement for an ASW, but what we need to consider is what else is needed to make her a “good” ASW.

Acceptance;

Perhaps I will seem strange and my beliefs very odd, but I will feel more supported if the ASW accepts where I am. The good ASW will recognise that now is not the time to challenge me. At the moment my reality is not the same as the ASW, I don't feel safe and what I am saying and doing is my way of trying to be safe. If my defences are taken away at this point I will fall to pieces.

Integrity;

The ASW needs to be secure in themselves, to be happy with themselves. If the ASW has to constantly look to others for approval the ASW cannot remain impartial and be guided by what the ASW are hearing and seeing for themselves. This applies both to the interaction with fellow Professionals and crucially with interaction with me, the client. I, particularly, am not in a state of mind where I want to take responsibility for other peoples feelings. At this point for me survival is the name of the game; I haven't the energy to worry about the ASW.

Strength;

The ASW needs to be able to be assertive towards colleagues. In my experience psychiatrists are a tough breed and can often be very sure of their rightness. For them things can seem very cut and dried; they want to get on with the next task. The ASW's task is to co-ordinate the process and like any good Chair needs to make sure that all aspects have been covered and that everyone feels heard, especially the client.

True to professional values;

There are two doctors present asserting the medical model and making a medical assessment. The ASW has to hold the social model and assess what bearing the social situation of the Client has on the case.

Taking Time;

Gathering information is an important part of the process. To do it properly takes time. Talking to me, listening to my story, when I am distressed or in an altered state of mind takes longer than usual. It takes me time to trust and then time to tell.

Sometimes it takes time for others to understand what I am trying to say because I am confused or I may find language difficult: the words won't come or there are so many ideas going round in my head that they pour out like a waterfall.

I may want the presence of an advocate or friend and this may take time to arrange but it will make the whole process easier for me

Assessment is not just a straight choice between admission and non-admission, there may be alternative solutions but time is needed to give them due consideration.

Active listening;

A good ASW is a skilled listener trained in active listening techniques. He knows how to acknowledge the Clients feelings, to reflect back, to listen to silence, not to interrupt and puts these techniques into practice.

If he thinks I am frightened he will say so. If he picks up on anger, he will acknowledge it, not sweep it under the carpet. He won't be dogmatic about it (you are angry), but suggest it (I wonder if, It feels as though...), that gives me an opportunity to own the feelings and sometimes it is a relief to have some one voice them for you. The ASW should acknowledge there own feelings too. They will tell me if they are made sad or frightened by what is said. I am feeling very isolated in my different world; it helps to know that some one else shares my feelings.

Calmness;

A good ASW exudes calmness. They let me feel that they are not being rushed, that they are not fazed by what is happening. They give me a sense that they are relaxed, they find my level. When I am in an altered state of mind I am overwhelmed by the presence of other people so they must be able to veil their personality, become unobtrusive (to me) and make her colleagues do the same.

Directness;

When I am in an altered state of mind I find it difficult to understand what other people are trying to communicate. Sometimes in difficult situations people take refuge in jargon. The good ASW will not do this. They will tell me what I need to know at the time clearly and directly.

Honesty;

It may be tempting to sugar the pill but although it may feel easier at the time, it will make it worse for me in the long run. The good ASW will acknowledge my anger or distress if that is what I am feeling, but she will not shield me from the truth. They will know that I am an adult and will not infantilise me.

All this amounts to treating me with dignity and respect. You would be surprised to know how much I will retain of this encounter, even if I don't talk about it or say I don't remember. Do everything you can to ensure that what I remember does not make me feel even worse about myself. This is going to be a difficult experience for me to come to terms with; please do everything you can to make it more acceptable.