

Relating to Persons with Mental Illness

Adapted from Providing Vocational Services: Job Coaching and Ongoing Support for Persons with Severe Mental Illness, by M. Furlong, J.A. Jonikas, J.A. Cook, L. Hathaway, and S.L. Goode, Thresholds National Research and Training Center, 1994.

- 1) **Ask clients about their experiences with mental illness.** Understanding what a client has been through will help you start to know how he or she might be feeling. Stories told by the person are much better for developing empathy than learning about symptoms or reading hospital records.
- 2) **Train yourself to be an expert observer** in your work with clients. Continually assess how the client is acting by asking yourself.
 - a) Does he or she seem to be experiencing symptoms at the present time?
 - b) In what ways are the client's current actions similar to those of persons who do not have mental illness?
 - c) In what ways do the client's actions currently set him or her apart?
- 3) **Employ active listening techniques** - paying attention to what clients are saying even if the content does not seem relevant or is delusional. Give clear indications that you are listening attentively.
- 4) **Do not be afraid to ask questions.** If you would like to find out more about a client, ask him or her in a straightforward manner; you can take an active interest without intrusive probing. It is important to show clients that what they have to say is valuable and that you would like to hear more from them so that you can get to know them better.
- 5) **Display your empathy.** As you continue to work with this group of people, you will better understand the painful experiences that individuals with mental illness often confront, and will be able to express that you care about those experiences.
- 6) **Give a name to the feelings** that people are experiencing. This process entails being sensitive to the emotions that a client is displaying, clearly identifying these emotions in your mind, describing them to the client, and then asking the client for verification: "You look like you are in a good mood today," or "Are you feeling sad today? It seems like something is bothering you."
- 7) **Stay focused on here-and-now situations.** Helping clients stay focused will enable them to stay on task for longer periods of time, benefit them in social interactions in the workplace, and make it easier to form relationships.
- 8) **Build trust** by going at the client's pace, avoiding the tendency to rush them into getting to know you more quickly than is comfortable. Follow through when you tell clients that you are going to do something for them. Never make promises you know you cannot keep.