10 Tips for Writing Ethical Case Notes

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1. **Develop an ethical workplace culture.** Ethical behaviour fosters trust between clients, colleagues, and other stakeholders. Review the *Code of Ethics* contained in the *Canadian Standards and Guidelines for Career Development Practitioners (S&Gs)* as you case-conference with your team and apply the ethical decision-making model to your various scenarios.
2. **Hang your *Code of Ethics* on your wall.** Frame it for your office wall to create an awareness for your visitors that you value an ethical code of conduct. It will be a good reminder for you, too, that the Code of Ethics is part of your professional practice. Your clients may see it and ask questions about what the code means, thereby increasing trust and respect for you as their career coach.
3. **Comply with professional standards.** *The Standards and Guidelines for Career Development Practitioners (S&Gs)* defines the professional conduct required by those working in the field. Case notes reflect your level of professionalism, so ensure that they comply with relevant Canadian acts and regulations. Proofread to avoid "red flags" such as omissions, errors, inconsistencies, alterations, or criticisms of clients or other stakeholders.
4. **Apply the 3 C's of communication.** With the reader in mind (colleagues, supervisors, funders, etc.), ensure the notes are *Clear*, *Concise* and *Consistent*. Use the 5 W's (*Who, What, When, Where, Why*) so readers know exactly what's going on. Use as few words as possible in short sentences or bullet points. Spaced paragraphs make reading easier. Be consistent as it is difficult for readers to understand if the writing style changes throughout the notes (for example, switching between 1^{st} and 3^{rd} person narrative, and mixing past, present, and future verb tenses.) Limit the use of pronouns and contractions. Don't forget to check your spelling and grammar.
5. **Use factual statements in case note entries.** Base entries only on what you hear, see, and experience during your work with clients. Capture what clients tell you and don't write about your assumptions, opinions, or hearsay. Collect external documentation, as necessary, and confirm facts. Avoid words and phrases such as *I think*, *I assume*, or *probably*, all of which signify an interpretation of the situation rather than the facts.
6. **Write without preconceptions.** Instead of writing, "Client arrived high/drunk to the session," write only what was observable. For example, your notes could read, "Client smelled of cannabis/alcohol; had delayed reactions to questions asked; was unsteady on feet; wore sunglasses indoors." Details should be factual and quantifiable through direct observation.
7. **Try the SAR model.** We encourage job seekers to use it. Why? Because it's simple and it provides the structure that tells a complete story. Use the *Situation*, *Action*, and *Results* for your case notes (without using the actual SAR words). This will allow your notes to be brief, yet detailed, making them easy to read for others not familiar with the case. If you prefer, you may consider using another model such as POR (*Problem-Oriented Recording*) or SOAP (*Subjective, Objective, Assessment, and Plan*.)
8. **Handle sensitive topics with high regard for privacy.** Clients may over-share confidential information. Allow the principles of "do no harm" and "do good" to guide which details you will capture in case notes. Clients may be denied services if information is inappropriately disclosed, or – even worse – you or your agency may be culpable.
9. **Choose words that foster respect.** As you write about your clients' progress toward goal attainment, write notes using helpful words – words that assist your clients in moving forward. Use words such as *advised*, *discussed*, *supported*, and *encouraged*. Avoid words that are judgmental and biased, such as *troubled*, *overwhelmed*, *anxious*, *suicidal*, and *dangerous*.
10. **Keep learning.** In a world of constant change and amidst constantly emerging technologies, models, and theories in career development, make it a priority to always be learning. Consider webinars, workshops, online courses, and/or lunch 'n learn events to keep your skills fresh and on the leading-edge.