

## Social Work Praxis Course

Social Work Praxis is a course designed by Samraksha to bring together the theory and practice components of Social Work along with components of self development in a unique blend to build capacities in working counselors. In 2012, 54 counsellors from 15 organisations working in HIV prevention took this course.

Bringing contemporary concepts from social work education in simple local language, the course catered to a heterogenous group of people with or without formal education in social work, people with varying levels of counselling experience and those with lived experiences. The course was designed to facilitate horizontal learning and helped different participants to learn from each other. The take-away for each was different. It varied from an increased understanding of communities, to learning theory and application, to improving practice and increasing self awareness. This issue of Manthana describes some of the core values, principles and practices that Social Work Praxis tried to focus on and participants share the impact of the course on their personal and professional lives.

## Client-centered Counseling

Belief in client self-determination and client-centeredness are core principles of Social Work Practice. But the settings in which social workers and counselors work, including HIV testing centres or STI clinics, have other demands and pressures and they are often unable to adhere to these principles. The responses that they are able to make, lead mostly, only to temporary change. For this change to become a lasting one, the clients have to understand and own the change. This ownership evolves only when the approach is client-centred. It is this internal motivation that can bring about transformation. The course examined theory and practice through the lens of these principles, and led the participants to recognize the importance of client-centred approaches.



### As counselors, we need to identify and build a team of supporters for the client.

Pradeep feels that the counseling training has added depth to his counseling. "Earlier, I used to speak to almost 30 women every day. But I was just giving them information. Now, I not only give complete information to the clients but

also help them understand and act on it. Earlier, I lost most of the clients in follow-up, but now, even if I speak to only six women in a day, at least five of them come for follow-up and I help them take action to reduce risk."

He also adds that using tools like social network maps has helped him in understanding clients and their support systems thoroughly. "Recently, one of the women was facing a lot of problems because of intimate partner violence. I recognized that her parents were a potential support for her, but they had not so far intervened in any way. I spoke to them and made them realize that it was their duty to support their daughter. The parents spoke to her partner and resolved the issue. I have learnt that we need to understand the different social relationships a client has. She may know a 100 people, but only 50 people are supportive. Then it is important to identify and reach out to those people. As a counselor, we should build and strengthen a team of supporters for the client who will be able to help her, whenever needed."

*Pradeep is a counselor in Chaitanya Mahila Sangha, Bagalkote.*

### My community has placed a lot of trust in us as counselors, and we should not compromise it in any way

Mounesh feels that this course has really strengthened his commitment towards his community, "The community has really placed a lot of trust in us, and we should not compromise it in any way. I am available to my

community, 24 hours a day. This course has really helped me understand what I can do for my community as a counselor." He shares some of his recent experiences with pride, where he has motivated community members to register for ART and also identified some new community members. "I don't know what has changed in me which has made me more effective. Maybe it's because I don't give suggestions anymore, I put no pressure on them. Instead I help them reflect on the future. And they listen to me."

He also feels that the course has helped him analyze client issues better. He recalls a recent instance when a community member was under great distress due to different family and social pressures. "There was pressure on the client from the family to marry. He was very scared to disclose his identity to his family. He felt he would be shunned in the family as well as his community. I supported him to disclose to his family. Now after many sessions he has settled down. His family has accepted him and he has also decided he is not going to get married."

*Mounesh is a counselor in Soukhya, Gulbarga.*





### **I thought counseling was only about filling a slip**

“My organization has given me different opportunities to grow, but I think this course is the most significant of it” says Shashikala. She explains, “Earlier I was not clear about my role as a counselor, about how I could actually help the clients. My counseling was very hurried, I thought it was about filling up a slip, sending women to a doctor or referring to some other service. Now I give time to the clients, and therefore our relationship is deeper.” She takes great pride in the fact that her clients refer to her as ‘amma’. “It shows the depth of our relationship”, she says proudly.

She also values the reflective spaces which the course has opened up for her, which has helped her understand herself much better. She feels habits like journal writing, which she acquired through this course has considerably reduced stress for her, personally. “The journal helps me reflect daily and has reduced a lot of tension. For many years I have always needed sleeping tablets to sleep, but since I have started writing this journal, I have been able to sleep without them.”

*Shashikala is a counselor in Swati Mahila Sangha, Bangalore*

### **The women come for testing because they know it is important for them to test**

Yamunamma feels she has grown in confidence and her commitment to her community has strengthened now. She identifies many changes in her counseling practice since she came to the course. “Earlier I was focusing just on targets. Now I am patient, and give clients all the time they need. My relationship with clients has improved. Because of that, I know that the women come for testing or services not because I have chided them but because after I have explained to them the importance of the service, and **they feel** it is important to come. They come for testing for the sake of their health.”

She shares her initial apprehension about coming to the course where her co-participants were more educated. “I haven’t studied much, only till the 7th standard. I can’t write well. But now I have realized that it is not just writing but, my ability to learn that is important. I would really like to thank my programme manager and team, who had enough confidence to send me to this course, despite my lack of formal education.”

*Yamunamma is a Counsellor with Soukhya Mahila Sangha and MYRADA in Hospet.*



## **Developing a therapeutic relationship**

Active listening, showing empathy, questioning and rapport building are all critical counseling skills. The participants found that the theory and skill practice sessions have helped them to better understand and practice important counseling micro-skills. These have led them to establish better therapeutic relationships with their clients.



### **Whatever be the situation, first I must understand the client fully**

Shivalingava has been a peer educator and peer co-ordinator before becoming a counselor. “I used to observe the counselors in the STI clinics. Sometimes, if they were not available, I would myself do counseling. But at that time, I was simply giving the women information. I would just repeat the same information which I had heard the counselors give before. I had not understood what counseling was really about. It was very superficial. Now I understand about rapport building, about risk assessment, the whole process of step by step counseling.”

She adds that she has become more analytical and holistic in counseling. “I know, whatever the situation, whether it is to motivate condom use or give a positive result or motivate for ART registration, I must try to understand the client fully and proceed systematically while counseling.”

For Shivalingava, the course has been a revelation in terms of her own capacity and potential. “I came thinking what will I do in this course. There are so many graduates and MSWs. They will all speak English. I have just completed 10 std. How can I participate in a course with all of them. After coming here, I realized that I need not have felt like that at all. I now feel that so what if others are graduates. I also have good knowledge and understanding. I can also contribute something to the other participants.”

*Shivalingava is a counselor in Chaitanya Mahila Sangha, Bagalkote.*



**Only when clients feel the counselor is not there to scold us but to help us will they share their problems with us**

Jyoti feels that the counseling training she has received in the course is what has helped her finally do counseling which can influence client behavior. "It is only now that I have changed as a person and therefore I am

helping clients change their behavior."

She adds that the course has been critical in helping her at every stage of counseling right from rapport building. "At first the clients would not open up to me at all. Now I realize they had no reason to open up to me at that time. It is only now, when they feel that the counselor is not there to scold them but to help them that they feel comfortable telling me their problems. They are beginning to do that."

On a personal level, she values the introduction to the habit of journal writing. "The journal, to me, is a friend. I feel it talks to me and I can write anything in it. Who else is there to listen to all that we want to say. It has helped me record my life. Now I feel that in future, if I face any challenge, I can look back in to this journal. It will give me courage and make me feel that just as I tackled these challenges, I will be able to tackle those too."

*Jyoti is a counselor in MYRADA, Gulbarga*

**My clients have been telling me I listen more to them these days.**

Prabhu feels that the course has helped him understand the role of a counselor much better. "I now understand that the role of the counselor is to help the client resolve whatever issue they have. I have to build rapport with the client and create an environment where they can share their problems with me. I have to be able to show empathy, give emotional support to the client. I should be able to strengthen the client to resolve the problem on their own."

He feels that his behavior while counseling has changed considerably. "Earlier, I was a bit rough while counseling. Now my behavior has changed. I show them a lot of respect. I treat them in an age-appropriate manner." He recalls that some of his old clients have actually started observing and appreciating these change in behavior. "One of my clients told me that I have changed a lot after starting this training. He said earlier I used to tell him what to do, but now I ask him what he wants to do and how he wants to do it. I listen more to him. I felt very happy that he had recognized these changes in me."

*Prabhu works as a Counselor in Navaspoorti Sangha, Bijapur*



**I don't go into information giving mode immediately.**

Vittal had little idea of what counseling entailed when he assumed additional responsibilities as counselor along with being a staff nurse at DIC. "When I became a counselor, I had no skills, no patience at all. I was only interested in my own questions. Now I am attempting a deeper understanding of the client and don't go into information giving mode immediately."

Vittal recalls one instance when he was able to help a client in crisis. "This person was having suicidal ideas. He was positive and he said he faced a lot of discrimination from his brother and sister-in-law at home. He had stopped even going home. He was not eating well, he was not sleeping well. I spoke to him about his life, about how he should not lose heart but try to overcome his difficulties. I encouraged him to reach out and try to integrate with his family and not avoid them because of their behavior. With his permission I even spoke to his brother

and helped him realize his duties and responsibilities in supporting the client who was on ART. Now he is living with them happily." This case gave him particular happiness because he had earlier had a severe shock due to the suicide of a community member, "He was also saying he wanted to end his life but we thought he was not serious. I was very upset when I learnt of his suicide. That day I put up a board in my room, "Aapta salahe padeyiri, aatmahatye tadeyiri."

*Vittal is working as a staff nurse and counselor in MYRADA's TI programme in Bagalkote*



### **I am able to make the clients open up and build rapport. Clients respect my words**

Devaki feels that the course has sharpened her counseling skills and helped her establish more effective therapeutic relationships with her clients. "I am now able to build rapport and make them open up to me. My clients respect my words" she feels.

She adds she has been fortunate to attend a course of this kind at the beginning of her career. "I have been able to understand the groups at most risk, understand their life situations. I have learnt skills like questioning, probing and how to ask open ended questions, how to avoid close ended questions. I have learnt how to understand the clients' verbal and non-verbal behavior as well as their emotions and feelings." She feels that with this kind of understanding, she will be able to help clients understand their own problems and also find solve them.

At a personal level, she feels she has become a more out-going person, after coming to this training.

*Devaki is a counselor in Chaitanya Mahila Sangha, Bagalkote*

## **Learning together promotes understanding and acceptance**

Horizontal and experiential learning are now widely acknowledged as being more effective forms of learning compared to vertical or didactic learning. Based on this, the course built in a mix of different communities. This provided participants an opportunity to interact with people from different communities and identities and share experiences. This helped participants understand and genuinely accept people from different communities. Their growing self-awareness also helped them identify and address their own prejudices. Acceptance and non-judgmental attitude being critical in a counseling situation, the structure and processes of the course made a difference.



### **I have gained respect at my workplace, even though I am not from the community**

Shivanand feels that because of this course, he has been able to gain respect at his workplace. "Earlier, I was not completely accepted because I am not from the community. Even the staff felt I could not understand the community's

problems. Now clients come and talk to me. Even if they have come to meet the programme manager or other staff and can't see them, they feel if they talk to me, I will be able to help them."

This change, he feels is due to a number of changes. In his personal and professional behavior. He feels he has started trying to understand the client's behavior. "Why do people behave the way they do. Was the behavior always like this or has it changed. Why did it change? What can be done to change it again? When I get to understand why clients behave in certain ways, my risk assessment and risk reduction efforts are more effective." He also feels that because he has become more accepting, it has made a difference.

He has also been able to control his impatience and anger ever since he started writing in the journal and reflecting on his behavior. "Earlier I used to lose patience with people very easily. Now I try to understand their intentions, did they mean to behave like that, why did they do it?"

*Shivanand has worked as outreach worker and field coordinator and has recently been promoted as counselor in the MSM programme run by BIRDS.*

### **Now I am beginning to build relationships with my clients who are from the SM community**

Nagaratna shared that as a counselor in a SM TI programme she faced, many challenges initially "I used to feel the SM community is difficult to mobilize. But now I am beginning to form relationships with them. When I accept and acknowledge their feminine identity, they are more comfortable with me. I also try to engage them in conversation. Some of the new clients have now completely accepted me, the older clients are a bit hesitant, but I am sure they will also accept me."

Nagaratna has trained as an ANM and has recently taken on additional responsibilities as a counselor. This training-her first exposure to counseling- has changed her basic understanding of building a relationship with clients and their autonomy. "As a nurse, I would simply advise them to go and test. There was definitely some force there. Now I understand that the decision always has to be the clients'. We cannot force them. We can motivate them; help them understand the consequences of their actions. Sometimes they decide at their pace. Someone will test immediately, someone will say they will come back next month, but we just have to let them do it."

*Nagaratna is a counselor in Suraksha's TI programme for Sexual Minorities in Dharwad.*





**I have now really understood how to leave our own values outside the counseling room**

Savitri Prabhakar feels that the course has also helped in dealing with certain value conflicts while working with communities at risk. “No matter how much we say that we as counselors accept the

women in sex work as clients completely, it is a constant challenge. Once we leave our work situation, we go back to our families and the values which we have learnt all through life. After coming to this course, I have been able to really understand how we have to leave values outside the room, before stepping into a counseling session.”

She identifies many other changes in herself following the course. “While counseling, I just had a checklist and would simply proceed with it, without bothering about what the client was saying or feeling”, she shares, recalling about herself before coming to the course. Now she feels her counseling practice has improved in different ways. “My clients like to talk to me. They come more regularly for follow-up because they like talking to me.”

She also feels that some of the tools she has learned has helped her uncover client strengths. “I did not know how to understand family or social situations of the clients. Now, when I see a client who has come to me in great distress, I am able to sensitively question them about their family and society. I draw the family eco map and social network map in front of them only, and while doing this, they realize how many strengths and supports they have. This realization itself gives them a lot of courage. In this way, I am able to respond to their emotional needs.

*Savitri Prabhakar is a counselor in the TI Programme of SPAD in Dharwad.*

**Earlier, I never respected non-community people. Now I am more accepting of them.**

Ghousiya feels that as the only transgendered person in the course, it has been an interesting experience in trying to understand and accept people who are not from her community. She identified many positive changes in her

behavior, her understanding and relationship with people who are not from her community. “Earlier I never respected non-community people. I felt they were laughing at me and I would get angry. Now I am more accepting of them. At work, in all staff meetings, I introduce myself to the new staff as a transgender. And now I feel they all respect me also.”

The calmness and openness has also helped her in other circumstances. She recalls a recent instance of interaction with the ART centre “When I went to the centre with a client, counselor said there was only 15 minutes left for the centre to close and I should come tomorrow. I tried to explain to him that today this client was in a mood to come, but it is difficult to find our community members in this mood all the time, if we let go today it is a missed opportunity, who knows when there will be another. The counselor was very irritated and said that our community members were always coming for services but never following up. This time, I did not get angry. I understood he was taking out the frustration he was having with other community members on me.” She adds that she even volunteered to help follow-up with some clients. Her behavior helped change the counselor’s attitude towards the community.

*Ghousiya was working as a ORW in Soukhya Belaku Samudaya Seva Samsthe, Bellary. After she joined the course, she has been selected as a counselor.*



## The Blend of Theory and Practice strengthens counseling

The Social Work profession’s unique strength has been its emphasis on practice that derives from and contributes to theory. The emphasis on theory, application and practice in the course has helped participants to understand theories within the contexts of their own counseling practice. Theories have helped them to interpret their practice as well as the clients’ circumstances and lives much better. Practice, on the other hand, has helped them make several observations that contribute to a deeper and wider understanding of theory

**The theory was taught in the context of the clients’ lives**

For Geeta, who is working on a project for positive sex workers, the biggest learning that this course has given her is that in order to motivate a client for CD 4 testing or pre ART registration, one cannot “simply scold them or give them advice. It is important to work with their own support systems, to speak to the people who are close to them, and motivate them to start medicines.”

She adds that the subject inputs she received in sociology and psychology were very different from what she learnt while doing MSW. “We learnt a lot more theory in college, but here these subjects were covered briefly. But we were able to understand it much better, because it was done in a context. Now I understand sociology in terms of social context of the clients, how society has marginalized them, how this has impacted their lives. It helped me

understand more about the lives of the clients.”

*Geeta Neeralagi is a counselor working in BIRDS.*



## Supervision improves Practice

Several authors (Dawson, 1926; Kadushin A, 1992; Smith 1996) have talked of the three critical roles that supervision plays in social work. The administrative, the educational and the supportive. The administrative element ensures that agency policy is implemented and oversees the quality of the work. The educational element encourages reflection on, and exploration of the work. Supervisees are helped to understand the client better, be aware of their own responses, examine the dynamics of the relationship and evaluate their intervention. It suggests further development through mentoring, reading or training to deliver on objectives. The supportive element builds on morale and job satisfaction at its basic level. It involves understanding, identifying stress factors that may affect the professional and may impinge on the client. Part of this is ensuring that staff is carrying manageable workloads, which allow them to meet the requirements of their role.

Targetted Intervention programmes currently have a component of administrative supervision but have not made provision for these last two aspects of supervision for its counselors.

Participants valued the supervision especially the educational supervision which was a key component of this course.



### We get an opportunity to do counseling with somebody supervising us.

Subhashini feels that the skill practice aspect of the course helped her gain comfort and confidence with counseling skills. "I had learnt concepts like paraphrasing in MSW, but only here I really understood what it was and how to do it.

And we had an opportunity to do counseling under supervision which we never get anywhere else. We have all been practicing in the field. But where do we get opportunities to do counseling with somebody supervising us. Usually there is no observation, no assessment or feedback. Here, we are able to get that support. We can ask for inputs on what to do if we get stuck in a counseling session, how to make our questions more open-ended." She finds the course so intensive that she adds, "It's like a small Ph D".

She is also very appreciative of the efforts to simplify concepts and help participants understand. "I have done MSW and learnt some of these subjects. But here they used such simple everyday language to explain all those concepts so that all of us could understand it, no matter what our education."

Subhashini adds that both her understanding of clients and her counseling interventions have become much more holistic now. "Earlier, I tended to focus on the verbal cues of the client. Now I am far more attentive of the non-verbal cues. Also I use tools like genogram, social network map and eco-map to understand client situations much better." This has impacted the counseling practice. "I see that there is better follow-up from clients. I am also able to handle situations like denial of positive status and non-disclosure of sex worker identity in a much better way."

*Subhashini is working as a counselor in Swati Mahila Sangha*

### We need to understand what is important to the clients and motivate them based on that.

Bhagyajyoti feels that the linkages between theory and practice and the space to come back and share the field experiences and seek some inputs has strengthened her counseling practice considerably. "I work with

positive sex workers, trying to motivate them for ART and CD 4 testing. Earlier I used to get frustrated if people did not listen to my words and give up after telling them two or three times. Now I understand the value of repeated follow ups. I know that it is important to understand the client and what they feel is important to them. This will help us motivate them to go for ART registration or CD 4 test."

The analysis of case interventions in the context of the relationship between the counselor and the client helped Bhagyajyoti. She is proud that she has been able to motivate most of the positive women in the programme to register for ART. She has also reached out to women who had stopped taking medicines, and motivated them to start again. "Three of them have been linked back to the centre. One of them had stopped the tablets for herself and her child because she felt goddess *Yallamma* did not want her to take them. After I spoke to her, she has now started medicines again. Their health has improved after that. She now comes regularly to our support group meetings and shares her own story with others."

*Bhagyajyoti is a counselor in Shakti AIDS Sangha, Belgaum.*



## Overcoming personal challenges

In counseling the instrument used is the self. As the self spans the personal self and professional self, self awareness is one of the priority areas to focus on in counselor training. Preparing counselors for practice by offering them space and support towards personal development through self-awareness is a critical but neglected part of counseling training. Helping participants to explore and understand three sets of abstract concepts, core to social work practice: Uncertainty/risk/fear, Empathy/self-awareness, Resilience/strengths helps them to cope with such difficulties better (Anghel et al, 2012). The course strived to increase the level of self-awareness in the participants with the belief that this will lead to personal changes which in turn will be reflected in their professional work.



**I realized that as a counselor I should be able to talk and relate to the client well.**

Jayashree recalls that she was “just not able to get set into the course”, when she came initially. “I had just lost my mother and still feeling very bad. Here, everyone else used to laugh and talk to each other and have a good time. But I was just not able to join them.” She adds that she started changing gradually after interactions with the resource people and other participants. “We had an exercise where all participants had to identify one good trait and one negative trait about each one. The other participants all said that I never made an attempt to talk to people, to get to know them or tell them about myself. I then realized that as a counselor, what was most important was that I should be able to talk to clients well, to relate to them. So I have tried to change myself, slowly, gradually. I started opening up to people about myself. Every day I would try to talk for at least 5 minutes with others. Gradually, I increased the duration.”

*Jayashree Hosamani is a counselor in Chaitanya Mahila Sangha, Bagalkote.*

**I am willing to listen to others, to let them also speak**

Savithri Hipparagi identifies her growing openness and willingness to listen to others as the biggest change in her after coming to this training. “I used to think only what I said was right. I was eager to always speak first.

Now I am willing to listen to others, to let them also speak.” She feels this has helped her while counseling, because it allows her to see the different problems which are contributing to the clients’ distress. “I take time to understand what is affecting the client most and then address that issue instead of giving some solution to them. In this way I gradually and systematically help the client.” She feels that her counseling has become more effective and clients’ risk behavior has reduced by at least 25 %.

*Savithri is working in AIDS Jagruti Mahila Sangha in Bijapur as a counselor.*



**Completing this course is a big achievement for me.**

For Gurubasamma, the counseling course has given her strength and skills to negotiate many of her personal problems. “Making a commitment to this course for nine months was difficult, given some of my responsibilities at home and to my families. But since I was very eager to come, I somehow managed to come. I used some of the skills I learnt in this course here to convince and motivate my husband to let me complete this course. You could say, I did counseling for him. For me, completing this course has been a big achievement.”

*Gurubasamma is working as a counselor in Jeevan Jyoti in Gulbarga.*

## Overcoming Challenging Situations while Counseling

A counselor is faced with challenging situations routinely : conveying bad news, overcoming resistance and mistrust from clients and even self-disclosure in some situations. The social work skills of active listening, problem identification and problem solving build competencies in counselors that gives them both the motivation and the confidence to deal with such situations. For instance, controlled emotion involvement with the situation, setting limits or boundaries, recognizing what can and cannot be changed through counseling are some techniques. Practice, supervision and feedback helped to build the confidence to deal with such situations.

### I am sharing my own story to motivate others



Lakshmi has always had great respect for the role of a counselor, after her personal experience with a counselor. "I had tested positive and recently lost my husband. The counselor was a great support to me at that time. I could share everything with her. I wondered what was the nature and background of a counselor, which made them support people like me. I have always wanted to be like them."

She also feels that the course has helped her become a more effective counselor, because it has helped her become more comfortable with self-disclosure, specially in counseling situation. She is thus able to use her own self and experience to motivate other positive people seek services. "I was a positive speaker and used to talk in public situations. But I never spoke about my status to individuals. Now I tell my clients my story to help them understand

the importance of early service seeking. That is the best way I have to motivate them."

She feels that courses like this should be offered more regularly, particularly for positive people like her or members from other communities at risk. "Professional counselors also benefit from this course, but they may leave this sector soon, for other jobs. But community counselors and positive people will always be in this field. We will never leave this. Courses like this really help us grow."

*Lakshmi Marajakke is a counselor in Shakti Mahila AIDS Tadegattuva Sangha, Belgaum.*

### I used to be very hesitant to convey a positive result

Vimla feels that the course has given her the confidence to deal with many challenging situations in the field, about which she used to get very anxious about. "I used to find it very difficult to convey a positive result to a client. I was always very reluctant to do it. Recently one of the community members tested positive. I was very anxious before conveying the result because she had once expressed that she would commit suicide if she tested positive. Still, I went and spoke to her. I tried to be very supportive while conveying the result. She responded very well. I have also gained a lot of confidence in these situations now."

Vimala feels that the training has given her an exposure to different ideas and subjects which have helped her grow. "I have hardly stepped out of my home. Even when I went to college, my interactions with others was very limited. I have grown a lot, personally and in terms of understanding other people around me, after coming to this course. I have gained in confidence."

*Vimla is a counselor in Chaitanya Mahila Sangha*



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