

2. Assumptions of Family Sensitive Practice

- Working with family members and other carers is an essential part of a comprehensive response to mental illness and entrenched family difficulties.
- Working in an open, respectful and collaborative fashion with families, carers and consumers is likely to promote and enhance traditional clinical goals.
- Being open, respectful and collaborative is highly complex and does not always fit well with traditional clinical practices.
- Mental illness has a similar effect to major trauma in the sense that trauma puts extreme pressure on consumers, carers and other family members and on their relationships with each other. The effect on workers is often hidden and not acknowledged.
- Blame, guilt, grief, shame and frustration are natural companions of the trauma of mental illness and major family difficulties in our culture.
- Most of the personal, professional and organisational responses to mental illness are shaped by complex emotional responses. Some of these responses are helpful; others are not.
- Families and carers have needs in their own rights and have a right to have their needs acknowledged.
- By and large, carers, consumers and workers have a personal and social intention mainly directed to personal and social survival rather than malevolence. Put simply, people usually do the best they can given their situation, history and personal style.
- Approaching families in a generous way, empathising with their hardship and acknowledging their strengths, will in return tend to generate good responses to consumers and to workers.
- The distinction between intention (which is usually good) and effect of action is important in understanding why carers, consumers and workers, at times, all act in extremely unhelpful ways.
- Establishing a trusting relationship with carers puts workers in a better position to assist families to overcome crises and problems. This often means time efficiencies in the long term.
- On the few occasions when family members behave in destructive ways, an appreciation of the family situation can help workers address this destructiveness more effectively.
- All workers are capable of generating practical ideas for the way your service operates that will improve the quality of life for carers, consumers and other workers.
- Organisations, whilst often valuing and supporting family sensitive initiatives, will always find it difficult to change. Organisational change is complex and needs to be approached thoughtfully and with planning.
- It is important to understand the family sensitive principles and assumptions at a personal level in order to be able to make a professional commitment to them.