



PSDP—Resources and Tools: Reflective learning for knowledgeable and ethical practice: the Key Situations in social work model

Introduction

Practice supervisors have a responsibility to help supervisees make knowledgeable and ethical decisions. This tool offers ideas about how they can do that.

Social work practice is full of dilemmas and uncertainties. Therefore, social workers need to be able to make professional judgements on a case-by-case basis. In other words, social workers need to deliberate and reflect on different perspectives, dilemmas and uncertainties (Munro et al., 2017) and weave together different kinds of knowledge with practice. Aligned to evidence-informed practice approaches, this tool suggests how practitioners can meaningfully integrate knowledge, ethical principles and practice. It builds on research and theory discussed in the 'Enabling evidence-informed practice' knowledge briefing.

This tool is based on the [Key Situations in social work model](#). The suggested activities in it can inform how practice supervisors can create reflective learning activities for individual workers and teams, to enable them to co-construct and defend knowledgeable and ethical professional judgements. These activities support in-depth learning that requires practitioners' time over a number of sessions. It is best to organise these as joint CPD (continuing professional development) activities. As a practice supervisor, you may be able to negotiate CPD time for your team (around 20 hours are suggested for the completion of the whole reflective learning process). At the end of this tool you can find a suggested session planner that will help you to organise the reflective learning process.

Situation-based reflective learning

Like other reflective practice approaches, the Key Situation model starts with an experienced practice situation. A situation is experienced as a discrete and meaningful sequence of activities with a beginning, middle and end, such as a home visit. Rather than focussing on a whole case, which usually contains many such situations over time, a situation focuses on the actions, emotions and thinking of social workers. Learning thereby arises from analysing a situation, identifying relevant emotions, cognitions and knowledge, and thinking about their relevance to the situation. This learning leads to an understanding of quality in relation to the practice situation, which can inform professional judgements and practice in future similar situations (www.keysituations.net).

This situation-based reflective learning approach suggests that social workers need to:

reflect on the actions, emotions and intuitions that occurred in the practice situation

identify different forms of knowledge relevant to a situation, child or family

understand this knowledge

interpret this understanding in relation to a specific practice situation, child or family

think through how they will put this new understanding into practice.

Practice supervisors can engage in shared learning with their supervisees and team by creating spaces, time and opportunities for such learning.

The reflective learning process of the Key Situation model

Adapted from the Key Situation reflective learning approach, this tool suggests the following eight steps around which learners' activities in relation to a situation can be structured:

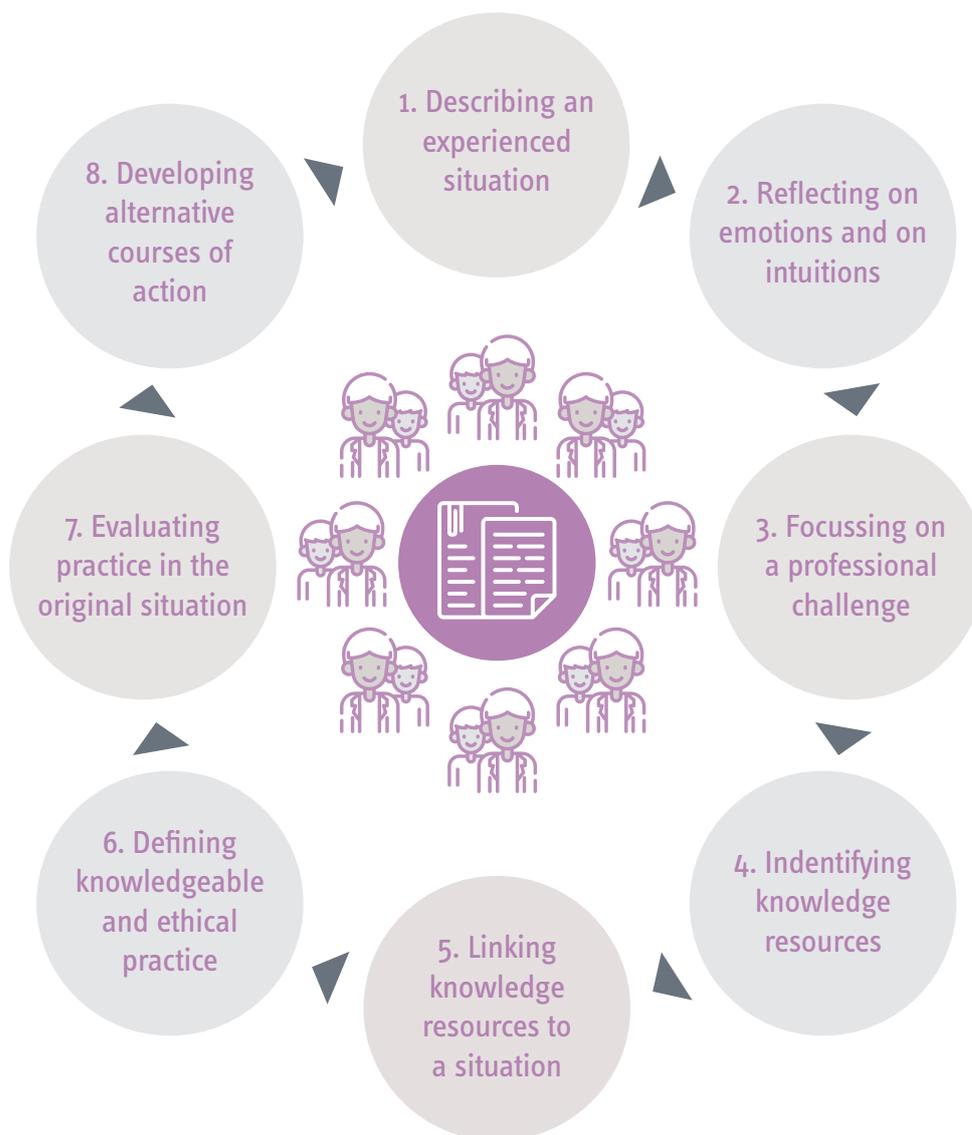


Figure 1: suggested reflective learning activities

We suggest that social workers work in small groups and focus on a similar key situation that typically occurs in their team.

For example, they could focus on 'visiting a child, young person, carer or family member in their home' with each social worker then reflecting on their own their own experienced situation, for example a parent with severe depression, or following a referral to child protection, etc.:

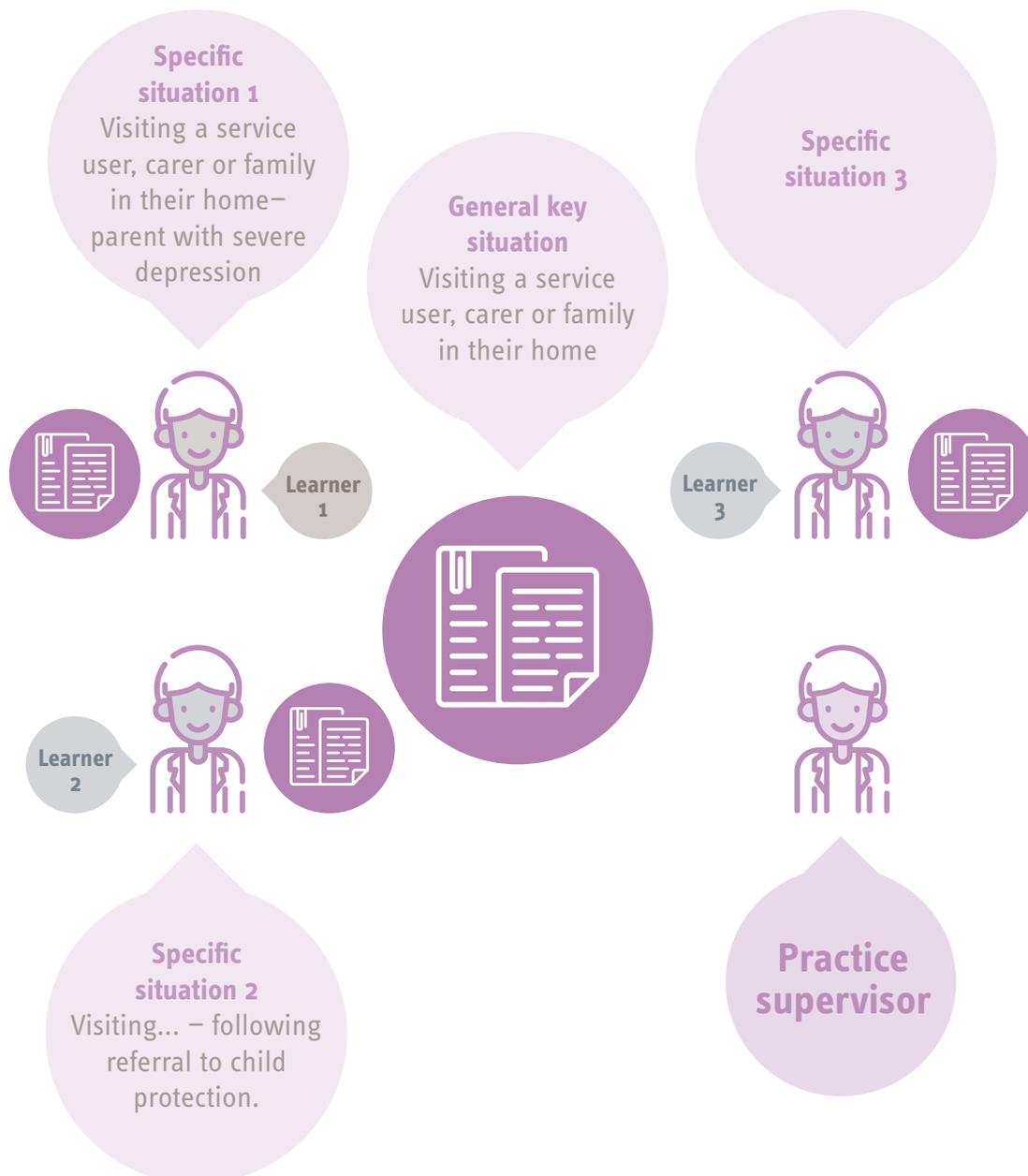


Figure 2: reflecting on similar situations in small groups

In this group, the eight steps should be carried out in sequence and involve group discussions and individual reflection and researching over a number of sessions. The practice supervisor could act as a facilitator, providing feedback to each social worker. Examples of other key situations are:

‘receiving and responding to new contacts and referrals’

‘supporting service users to strengthen their social, family and support network’

‘seeing and assessing someone in crisis’

‘meeting with adults, children or parents to understand and assess their situation’

‘seeking advice from an experienced colleague’

‘giving evidence in court or at tribunal’

‘writing a report’

‘engaging in supervision’

‘discussing concerns with service provider’.

Each step is briefly outlined in the following sections:

1. Describing an experienced situation

Start with a description of an experienced practice situation. What was the context? Who was involved? How did it start, progress and end? What did those involved do and say? Refrain at this point from making any interpretations or judgements and focus on doings, sayings and observable behaviours.

2. Reflecting on emotions and intuition

Pay attention to emotion and intuitive aspects in a practice situation. Emotions and intuitions have an impact on practice and decision-making. It is therefore important to elicit these and bring them to the surface to enhance self-awareness and enable discussion. Ask practitioners about how they felt in that situation, what they thought, and what their inner dialogue was. This can lead to unearthing emotions, ideas, concepts or assumptions that guided their actions. Roleplay can be used here to support this.

3. Focussing on a professional challenge

It is helpful at this point to focus on a practice dilemma or challenge of the social worker. Ask the social worker to pose a question that they would like to reflect on. This could for example be a question related to an ethical dilemma, suitable interventions, understanding of potential biases or emotions etc. that participants would like to address. Consider the knowledge types that each support, exploring understanding of the situation from different perspectives. The following figure outlines possible avenues that could be explored:

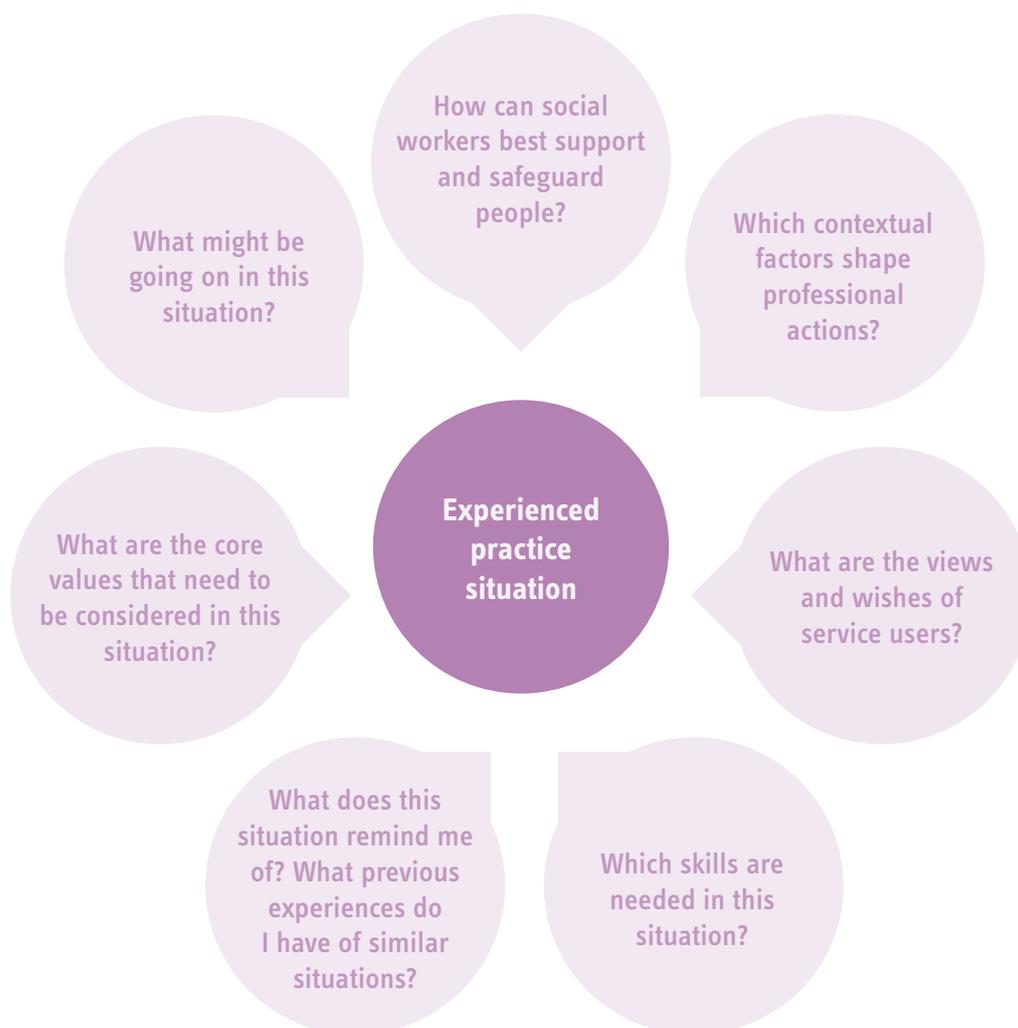


Figure 3: possible focus questions for reflective learning

4. Identifying knowledge resources

Having identified the focus for the social worker's reflective learning, the next step involves the identification of relevant different forms of knowledge in relation to the situation and focus question. The overarching question is, which knowledge and skills are needed to practice knowledgeably and ethically in this situation? The following figure illustrates the different types of knowledge that should be considered:

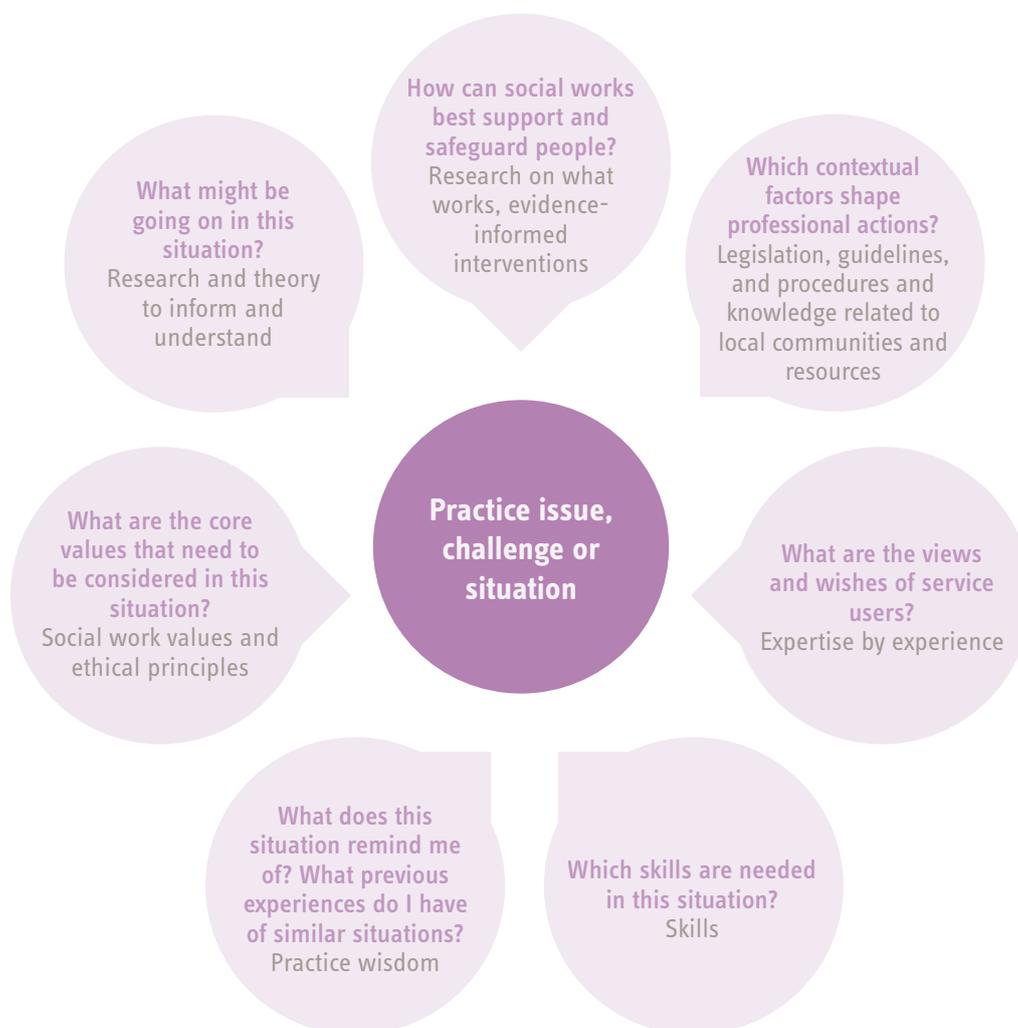


Figure 4: seven knowledge forms relevant for professional judgements and practice

You could ask social workers to collaborate on identifying relevant research and theory. How can you access knowledge and research in your organisation and in your team?

Once knowledge has been identified, ask practitioners to describe each idea (e.g. a concept from a theory, an intervention method and its evidence base, an ethical standard or value, an experience, a section of a law or a specific skill) in a short paragraph. Helpful questions to consider are: What have the authors said? What are their main findings? What does the ethical principle from the code of practice state? What does the case law say? What social work skills are described in the literature? Tip: if you collect these descriptions in your team or organisation, they could be referred to by others in future discussions.

5. Linking knowledge resources to situation

Based on the descriptions, ask practitioners to relate each knowledge type (terms, concepts, research findings, values, etc.) to the specific situation. A helpful question to ask is: In what way exactly is this knowledge relevant in this situation?

6. Defining knowledgeable and ethical practice

Following the description and interpretation of knowledge, initiate a discussion from which conclusions can be drawn about knowledgeable, ethical and emotionally intelligent practice in this or similar situations. Perhaps, together with practitioners, you could formulate quality criteria that captures the essence of these? In doing so, focus on the learning from the description and interpretation, and consider each knowledge form. Is there relevant research evidence that suggests principles which are pertinent? Are certain theories of particular importance for this type of situation? Which ethical principles and values are important? What would knowledgeable and ethical practice look like? Examples of a quality criteria are: 'The voice of the young person is actively sought and heard' or 'Conflicting expectations, values and legal obligations are made transparent and are discussed'.

7. Evaluating practice in the original situation

To evaluate the practice that occurred in the described situation, ask social workers to reflect on how far the quality criteria were enacted.

8. Developing alternative courses of action

Perhaps the overall reflective learning has brought new ideas about knowledgeable and ethical practice to the fore. These may point to other possible ways to practice. These alternative courses of action may be able to increase social workers' repertoire in similar situations. So, if the practitioner engages in a similar situation, you could discuss how far their learning has informed their practice. Questions you might want practitioners to think about are: How far did your understanding of the different knowledge forms influence your practice? Were the quality criteria or alternative courses of action meaningful? How far were you able to consider these? What challenges did you encounter? How far did you meet the quality criteria?

The following session planner suggests how these steps can be organised in a sequence of sessions and tasks, and makes suggestions for the required space, tools and materials. Each practice supervisor is encouraged to experiment with this plan and their facilitation of the process. It is recommended that no more than four small groups (twelve participants) take part at the first attempt. The facilitator takes responsibility for the process and supports and coaches participants. Remember, this is a learning opportunity for all involved.

The learning documented by each participant could be shared with other team members or teams. Practice supervisors may want to think about a suitable platform for this.

More information on this model is available from www.keysituations.net, where you can also find a [reflection guide](#) and an [example of a situation](#).

A publication with the 116 agreed key situations in English social work is in preparation. For more information and support contact adi.staempfli@keysituations.net

Session planner

Session / time / step	Aims	Tasks	Space, tools, materials, roles
Session 1 - 2 hours Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Participants have an initial understanding of the reflective learning process. > Key situations relevant to participants are identified. > Small groups (three people) are formed. > Each participant knows which situation they will work on over the next few sessions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Participants read and discuss this tool. > Participants think about the key situations they regularly encounter. > Participants think about experienced situations related to the key situations that they would like to reflect on and form groups of three around these. 	<p><i>Space:</i> Group room.</p> <p><i>Tools:</i> Handout tool.</p> <p><i>Materials:</i> Flipchart and pens.</p> <p><i>Roles:</i> Practice supervisor facilitates sessions with a group of social workers and other professionals.</p>
Session 2 - 2 hours Describing an experienced situation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Each participant has a written description of their experienced situation linked to a key situation title. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Participants write an account of the situation with a focus on doings and sayings of those involved, with no interpretations and a brief outline of the context. > Small group discussion: In their small groups, participants review each other's situation account. 	<p><i>Space:</i> Group room with movable furniture for small group discussion.</p> <p><i>Tools:</i> Handout tool.</p> <p><i>Materials:</i> Laptops or paper and pens.</p> <p><i>Roles:</i> Practice supervisor facilitates session.</p>

Session planner

Session / time / step	Aims	Tasks	Space, tools, materials, roles
<p>Session 3 – 2-3 hours Reflecting on emotions and on intuitions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Participants are able to name the thinking and emotions that played out in the situation. > Participants have an understanding about what gave rise to these emotions and thoughts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Each participant thinks about how they felt and what their inner dialogue was in the situation. > <i>Optional:</i> Groups could roleplay a situation. > Small group discussion: Participants reflect on their thinking and feeling in their situation. What gave rise to the feelings (e.g. reaction to behaviours, memories, general emotional state, etc.) and thinking (e.g. theories, concepts, assumptions, etc.)? > Learning is documented in writing. > <i>Optional:</i> Discussion in the whole group about shared emotions and thinking. 	<p><i>Space:</i> Room(s) suitable for group discussion.</p> <p><i>Tools:</i> Handout tool.</p> <p><i>Materials:</i> Laptops or paper and pens.</p> <p><i>Roles:</i> Practice supervisor facilitates session.</p>

Session planner

Session / time / step	Aims	Tasks	Space, tools, materials, roles
<p>Session 4 – 3-4 hours Focussing on a professional challenge</p> <p>Identifying knowledge resources</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Each participant is clear about the focus for their learning about the situation. > Participants understand the seven knowledge types. > Participants develop a search strategy to investigate the focus question. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Small group discussion: Participants discuss what they would like to learn and reflect on in relation to their situation and their own actions or emotions. > Each participant notes one overarching question on their reflective document. > Whole group: Facilitator provides an input in relation to the seven knowledge forms. > Small group discussion: Participants discuss and support each other to identify one relevant knowledge resource for each type of knowledge. 	<p><i>Space:</i> Room(s) suitable for group discussion.</p> <p><i>Tools:</i> Handout tool. Access to research and theories, legislation, policies, ethical code.</p> <p><i>Materials:</i> Laptops or paper and pens.</p> <p><i>Roles:</i> Practice supervisor facilitates session and proposes follow up task in preparation for the next session: access relevant articles, codes, policies and bring them to the next session.</p>

Session planner

Session / time / step	Aims	Tasks	Space, tools, materials, roles
<p>Session 5 – 3-4 hours</p> <p>Identifying knowledge resources</p> <p>Linking knowledge resources to situation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Participants have produced a short paragraph for each knowledge type that is relevant to their situation and focus question. > Participants are able to talk about the relevance of each idea (related to the knowledge types) with regard to their situation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Each participant describes an idea (e.g. a concept from a theory, an intervention method and its evidence base, an ethical standard or value, an experience, a section of a law and a specific skill) in a short paragraph. > Small group discussion: Participants share / discuss their notes in relation to the seven knowledge types (clarification, similarities or differences, ideas relevant to all situations). They support each other to formulate ideas succinctly and coherently. > Small group discussion: Participants discuss in what way exactly each idea (in respect of all knowledge forms) is relevant to their own situation? 	<p><i>Space:</i> Room(s) suitable for group discussion.</p> <p><i>Tools:</i> Handout tool. Participants' own articles, etc. and access to research and theories, legislation, policies, ethical code.</p> <p><i>Materials:</i> Laptops or paper and pens.</p> <p><i>Roles:</i> Practice supervisor facilitates session.</p>

Session planner

Session / time / step	Aims	Tasks (continued)	Space, tools, materials, roles
<p>Session 5 – 3-4 hours</p> <p>Identifying knowledge resources</p> <p>Linking knowledge resources to situation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Participants have produced a short paragraph for each knowledge type that is relevant to their situation and focus question. > Participants are able to talk about the relevance of each idea (related to the knowledge types) with regard to their situation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Participants individually sum up the relevance in a second paragraph for each knowledge type. > <i>Optional:</i> sharing of learning so far in the whole group. 	<p><i>Space:</i> Room(s) suitable for group discussion.</p> <p><i>Tools:</i> Handout tool. Participants' own articles, etc. and access to research and theories, legislation, policies, ethical code.</p> <p><i>Materials:</i> Laptops or paper and pens.</p> <p><i>Roles:</i> Practice supervisor facilitates session.</p>

Session planner

Session / time / step	Aims	Tasks	Space, tools, materials, roles
<p>Session 6 – 2 hours Defining knowledgeable and ethical practice</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Quality criteria for knowledgeable, ethical and emotionally intelligent practice for each key situation are defined. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Small group discussion: Participants discuss their learning so far and focus their attention to what good practice (knowledgeable, ethical and emotionally intelligent) in their key situation looks like. Quality criteria that are applicable across all situations are formulated. > Whole group discussion: presentation and discussion of quality criteria by small groups for each key situation. 	<p><i>Space:</i> Room(s) suitable for group discussion.</p> <p><i>Tools:</i> Handout tool.</p> <p><i>Materials:</i> Laptops or paper and pens. Flipchart for presenting quality criteria.</p> <p><i>Roles:</i> Practice supervisor facilitates session.</p>

Session planner

Session / time / step	Aims	Tasks (continued)	Space, tools, materials, roles
<p>Session 7 – 2 hours Evaluating practice in the original situation</p> <p>Developing alternative courses of action</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Experienced situations are reflected based on the quality criteria and alternative courses of action are identified. > Participants sum up their learning about their practice in relation to the focus question. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Small group discussion: Participants support each other to evaluate practice in their own situation with reference to the quality criteria and discuss possible alternative courses of action that arise from that evaluation. > Small group discussion: Discussion of what they have learned about knowledgeable and ethical practice in relation to the key situation and the focus question. > Whole group discussion: Evaluation of learning and process. Outlook: could this learning be shared with others and if so, how? 	<p><i>Space:</i> Room(s) suitable for group discussion.</p> <p><i>Tools:</i> Handout tool.</p> <p><i>Materials:</i> Laptops or paper and pens.</p> <p><i>Roles:</i> Practice supervisor facilitates session.</p>

Other ways you can use this tool

Rather than following the whole process, it is possible to develop learning activities that follow individual steps. For example, you could consider the second step (reflecting on emotions and intuitions) to start a discussion of a practice situation in your team.

You could also use the knowledge categories and factor in the fourth step (identifying knowledge resources) in a team meeting to gather knowledge and experience of team members and then move to the fifth step (linking knowledge resources to situation).

Alternatively, you could do this by focussing on particular types of knowledge (for example 'research on what works, evidence-informed interventions' or 'social work values and ethical principles').



We want to hear more about your experiences of using PSDP resources and tools. Connect via Twitter using #PSDP to share your ideas and hear how other practice supervisors use the resources.

Practice Supervisor Development Programme
The Granary Dartington Hall
Totnes Devon TQ9 6EE

tel 01803 867692
email ask@rip.org.uk
 [@researchIP](#) #PSDP

www.practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk

Author: Adi Staempfli, Lecturer
in Social Work, Goldsmiths,
University of London

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VAT No. 402196875

Registered Office:
The Elmhirst Centre, Dartington Hall,
Totnes TQ9 6EL