

Overview of Social Work Practice

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Key concepts, settings, roles, and ethical foundations

1. What Is Social Work?

Aspect	Description
Definition	A profession dedicated to enhancing the well-being of individuals, families, groups, and communities through the application of social science knowledge, values, and skills.
Core Mission	Promote social justice, empower clients, and improve access to resources and services.
Foundational Values	Service, social justice, dignity & worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, competence. (NASW Code of Ethics)

2. The Practice Process (The “Helping Cycle”)

- Engagement & Rapport Building** – Establish trust, clarify boundaries, and assess client readiness.
- Assessment & Data Collection** – Gather biopsychosocial, cultural, and environmental information; use tools such as genograms, eco-maps, and standardized scales.
- Goal Setting & Planning** – Co-create SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) goals with the client.
- Intervention** – Apply evidence-based methods (e.g., case management, counseling, advocacy, group facilitation).
- Evaluation & Termination** – Review outcomes, adjust the plan as needed, and plan for sustainable independence or transition.

3. Major Practice Settings

Setting	Typical Client Populations	Primary Functions
Child Welfare	Children, families, foster care	Protection, reunification, permanency planning

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Healthcare	Patients, families, interdisciplinary teams	Care coordination, discharge planning, psychosocial support
Schools	Students, families, staff	Counseling, crisis response, behavioral interventions
Mental Health	Individuals with psychiatric disorders	Assessment, therapy, case management, advocacy
Community Development	Neighborhoods, NGOs, local governments	Program design, capacity building, policy advocacy
Criminal Justice	Offenders, victims, families	Re-entry planning, restorative justice, victim services
Gerontology	Older adults, caregivers	Aging services, elder abuse prevention, hospice support
International/Development	Populations in low-resource settings	Human rights work, disaster response, capacity building

4. Key Roles & Functions

Role	Core Responsibilities
Case Manager	Coordinate services, monitor progress, maintain documentation.
Counselor/Therapist	Provide individual, family, or group therapy; apply therapeutic modalities.
Advocate	Lobby for policy change, represent client interests, raise public awareness.
Researcher/Evaluator	Conduct needs assessments, program evaluations, and outcome studies.
Educator/Trainer	Teach social work students or community members; develop curricula.
Administrator/Program Director	Oversee budgets, staff supervision, strategic planning.

5. Theoretical Foundations Guiding Practice

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Theory	Main Idea	Application
Systems Theory	Individuals are embedded in interrelated systems (family, community, society).	Ecological assessments, multi-level interventions.
Strengths-Based Perspective	Focus on client capacities rather than deficits.	Empowerment planning, resilience building.
Person-In-Environment (PIE)	Human behavior results from the interaction of personal and environmental factors.	Holistic case formulation, environmental modifications.
Trauma-Informed Care	Recognizes prevalence of trauma and	