



## **Critical Social Work Practice**

*The impact on young people's residential units*

### **Nick Balneaves**

Jean Clarke is a social worker in a Local Authority residential unit for young people. So what's her reaction when she encounters change?

### **Jean Clarke**

In the work setting usually, oh no. You know, what's this going to involve, you know. We've just got it working this way and now they want to change and ... and then only be stopped to look into it and think what the actual change is but it's I suppose about panic to start with.

### **Nick Balneaves**

Why is that though? Because I mean social workers are people who deal with change a lot.

### **Jean Clarke**

I may be quite good organising changes for other people's lives, but it's how change affects me that is the difference.

### **Nick Balneaves**

A few years ago, Jean's organisation went through a crisis limitation programme, in which staff had to undergo training in how to deal with aggressive and violent behaviour in the young people they work with. She reacted with that panic that she's already described, but why?

### **Jean Clarke**

Partly because there was ... there was an emphasis on physical training and I've never been a very physical person here, I'd rather talk my way out of anything than ... than become physical. And the other part though was that ... a serious part of it was that I felt there was an expectation that if we weren't able to do this then we would lose our jobs and I was very worried that I wouldn't be able to perform a) physically, but b) under test situations. And that was ... that was really traumatic for me.

### **Nick Balneaves**

And what happened as the course progressed?

### **Jean Clarke**

I became iller and iller and I was just ... I totally broke down, I was sick, I was crying, I was out of the building just refusing to go back in and I ... I'd really got myself worked into an awful state about it.

### **Nick Balneaves**

What could your managers have done to make the situation easier for you?

### **Jean Clarke**

I think they could have explained not just the process of the training, but the impact on the practice. And why we were doing it, not just how we were doing it. And also to ... to assure us that, you know, it wasn't one strike and you're out, you know, the ... the work that I did was valued and this was only a part of it, and okay, it might need developing but fine, I will develop it, instead of do it or else, you know.

**Nick Balneaves**

So simple things like information and dialogue and communication can actually have quite a profound affect on your feelings about your job, your ability to do your job?

**Jean Clarke**

Oh definitely, and social work is all about talking. And I think we're very good at communicating with our service users. Sometimes the breakdown is in communicating with each other and that certainly was the case with ... with that course.

**Nick Balneaves**

How important is that support from your colleagues in any process of change?

**Jean Clarke**

Vital, absolutely vital. And that shows when it's not there. You don't always see the effects of that communication being there, but you definitely do when it's not.