



Field Work: Embracing Vulnerability and Trusting Process

Author(s)

*Michele Lubowsky, MSW Candidate
Simmons School of Social Work*

It is all right to be vulnerable. What's necessary is to *realize* our vulnerabilities and be rowdy and fearless anyway. If we recognize that as humans we're connected by vulnerability, we stay present and honor the mission of social work: to improve the well-being of others.

With this insight I reflect upon my second year of field placement at a residential program and day school for adolescents. The school serves students with brain injuries and other neurological and/or behavioral health challenges and students with autism spectrum disorders. This placement has been a sacred experience for me because of compassionate advisors and *magnificent* students. I'm fortified with humility and gratitude.

I entered into a milieu where each student battled their demons, struggled for wins, and clawed their way back from losses as a daily part of life. I realized that I needed a way to hold these students' experiences and be a helpful clinician. But what I initially faced was trepidation and a lack of confidence as I engaged with a population of which I was so unsure and had never known. In the role of clinical intern I felt like a lost imposter. Then my vulnerabilities emerged and evolved. How can I be present with the work put forth without asking for help, without a fearless, messy self-advocacy that could *only* be manifested through appreciating vulnerability? I accepted that there'd be no movement without utilizing resources. I was apprehensive, but recalled a goal to actualize the pledge of an emotional commitment to serve, one that lay outside of my own comfort and security.

I brought my fears to helpers that were compassionate and supportive, doing exactly what we ask of our clients. Our challenges as social workers serve as calls to action and they are a privilege. I entered my field advisor's office in tears and disclosed each self-doubt of "I'll never be able to do this." Together we figured out the best way I could move forward in the placement and accept the uncertainties. The next step was to share my fears and concerns to my agency supervisor. *What am I doing here? How can I help these kids? I know nothing.* I was asked to trust the life experience that being a career changer had given me, alongside a successful academic history and innate clinical skills,

intuition, and sensitivity. Through self-advocacy I obtained extra supervision time and had staff join our peer supervision group for guidance and structure. In time I began to internalize the encouragement of others who provided understanding.

Ultimately, the students and their remarkable stories provided me the motivation necessary to dig into the muck of uncertainty and mimic the bravery they demonstrated every day. These acutely challenged young women and men reminded me of the importance of empathy and compassion. As social workers we have a duty to hone and cultivate empathy. We are more than the sum of theories, interventions, paperwork and procedures. Compassion is good ethical behavior and our personal experience helps us to understand the *power* of empathy. We have the fundamental ability to connect, to experience what it means to be fully human, and to care. From this premise I was finally able to acknowledge, hold, and honor the students' experiences, build rapport and trust, and create a safe space for work through consistency, reliability, acceptance, and respect.

As my internship draws to a close, I come away with many learning moments. But it's the simple, quiet moments with students that are the most valuable. These are the moments when light shows through the tiniest of cracks, and in which a glance, word, sigh or exhale unearth a connection. Thus, maybe if I'm lucky, there is an indication of something the student will hold and remember. I extend my thanks to staff and those remarkable, extraordinary, and unique students. I emerge a better social worker and a better helper.

"So in all that you do in all of your life, I wish you the strength and grace to make those choices that will allow you and your neighbor to become the best of whoever you are." -Fred Rogers