

What is it and why is it important?

How often do you get time in your working week to reflect on your practice with colleagues and explore issues you are facing in your day-to-day work? Reflection is an essential part of learning and professional practice, especially when working in any aspect of Public Protection. Donald Schön, an American philosopher and educator, describes reflective practice as “the ability to reflect on one's actions so as to engage in a process of continuous learning”. His model emphasises learning from experience, an essential aspect for professionals who face complex situations.

Reflective practice provides staff with a safe space to connect practice and theory and can take a number of forms to flexibly suit different situations and needs – either individual reflection, process recordings, reflection in supervision, mentoring, informal reflection with a peer, or a group session.

What are the benefits of reflective practice?

Reflective practice has been associated with a number of benefits, leading to better communication between staff, improving team functioning and supporting staff to feel valued and respected. It:

- Enhances critical thinking and help analyse situations more effectively, leading to better decision-making and practice improvement.
- Enhances self-awareness. It helps us to be conscious of bias and discrimination, to remain open minded and reconsider an interpretation of a case.
- Helps us to be professionally curious.
- Helps maximise opportunities for learning and practice improvement by sharing ideas to incorporate into our own practice.
- Helps build resilience. It can be a source of emotional support, providing a safe space to think about what you and your colleagues may need help with.

- Provides team support around professional dilemmas, help with practical issues and learning from others' input into their cases.
- Can be useful in situations where professionals feel 'stuck' or unclear about the systems, processes or decisions being made.
- Identifies positive experiences and helps recognise what works well and what to keep doing.

The essential elements of reflective practice

- Understanding what it means to be involved in a reflective session – the expectations, the benefits and how it works.
- Buy in from managers, demonstrating organisational commitment to staff wellbeing.
- Having protected time, away from the normal working environment.
- Creating a physically and psychologically safe space and blame free environment where practitioners can speak openly and honestly.
- [Experienced facilitation](#) – including the ability to provoke critical thinking and hypothesising, clarifying roles and expectations.

Reflective groups

Reflective groups can take different forms and there is no prescribed best approach. The National Wellbeing Hub has created a [Reflective Practice Toolkit for Scotland's Health and Social Care Workforce](#) to help guide whether reflective practice may meet the needs of your team. It outlines the key considerations, including whether the facilitator is internal or external, whether attendance is voluntary or mandatory and when and how groups should be scheduled.

Informal reflection

Informal reflection within Public Protection work is a spontaneous, ongoing process of considering your experiences to learn and improve practice, often occurring through quick discussions with colleagues or a brief daily mental review. It differs from formal reflection because it is typically unstructured and can happen 'in the moment' such as an opportunistic chat after a visit or meeting, or during a review of the day's events.

How to engage in informal reflection:

- Opportunistic discussions: Talk with a colleague right after a specific event to discuss what happened, why you acted in a certain way, and what you learned.
- Daily review: Take a few minutes at the end of each day to think about what you did well, what was challenging, and how you could improve your practice moving forward.
- Group reflection: Engage in informal discussions with peers on placement or with other team members to share experiences and insights in a less formal setting.
- Honest self-assessment: Be honest with yourself about your actions, decisions, and feelings in a particular situation.
- Identify opportunities: Recognise the value in even quick reflections. Acknowledging the learning from an informal chat or a brief daily review is the first step to improvement.

Models to support reflection

There is a number of different models to support reflection, one of the most well-known being Gibbs' Reflective Cycle. This offers a framework for examining experiences, allowing you to learn and plan for things that either went well or did not go well. It covers six stages:

- Description of the experience.
- Feelings and thoughts about the experience.
- Evaluation of the experience, both good and bad.
- Analysis to make sense of the situation.

Spotlight on reflective practice



- Conclusion about what you learned and what you could have done differently.
- Action plan for how you would deal with similar situations in the future, or general changes you might find appropriate.

Read more about [models to structure reflection on experiences](#).

The stages of reflective practice

The stages of reflective practice

Watch this [five-minute video](#) to learn more about the stages of reflection.

Reflection for action – this is arguably the most important stage, but in busy work environments, we may lose sight of the importance of this stage. It is important to slow down, tune into the situation and look forward. The following prompt questions are useful at this stage – What do I know? What do I not know? What environment am I going into? What might happen?, What are the opportunities in this piece of work? What are the obstacles? What am I worried about? Could I use supervision to help plan for this piece of work?

Reflection in action – this happens during the interaction ('in' can stand for 'I' and 'now') – your own thinking, responsibility and immediacy skills while undertaking a task. Reflecting on what you can change about your approach at that time allows you to react and change an event at the time it happens. In this stage, we would consider What can I do right now? What influence am I having on this situation? Why am I here? What am I seeing and hearing? Why do I feel like this?

Reflection on action ('on' can stand for 'others' and 'next') is the stage most people think reflective practice is, following a piece of work or an interaction. At this stage we can consult with others, share what happened and get feedback to help see the situation differently. What could have been happening for others in that situation? What was the other person's understanding of the situation? How clear what the other person about what was to happen next?

Resources

[Stages of Reflection - what reflective practice means - 5 minute video](#)

[Understanding Reflective Practice - three minute video](#)

[8 things to know about the experiential learning cycle - 8 minute video](#)

[Reflection Toolkit - University of Edinburgh](#)

[What is the Schon Model of Reflection?](#)

[Reflective Practice: A Quick Guide](#)

[Reflective Practice Toolkit for Scotland's Health and Social Care Workforce - National Wellbeing Hub](#)

[Research in practice podcast – the importance of reflective supervision](#)

[Process Recording as a Learning Tool for Social Workers](#)

[Facilitating reflection: a review and synthesis of the factors enabling effective facilitation of reflective practice](#)

**“By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest.”
(Confucius, Chinese Philosopher)**

