RELATIONAL RESOURCES FOR CHANGE

Care ethics and relational thinking

What are care ethics?

Relationships are the centre of all practice. Without a strong, positive relationship, the mahi will not work (Alexander & Grant, 2009; Fewster, 2004; O'Leary et al., 2013; Trevithick, 2003). Care ethics help explain this (Ingram & Smith, 2018). They shift the focus from rules and rights, to caring as a normal part of any relationship. Care ethics can be described in this way:

> Relationships are bi-directional involving an inevitable mutuality – a client's personality and preferences influence levels and degrees of closeness, entailing that the nature of any personal/ professional relationship varies from client to client. There is, therefore, no one way of doing RBP. (Ingram & Smith, 2018, 6)

Care ethics fit well within te ao Māori and Pasifika understandings (see Māori centred approaches, RBP in Pasifika contexts). People are seen as connected, related, and relying on each other for wellbeing. Compassion, nurturing, sensitivity, and care are normal parts of social life. Mahi needs to address both the practical and emotional needs of rangatahi.

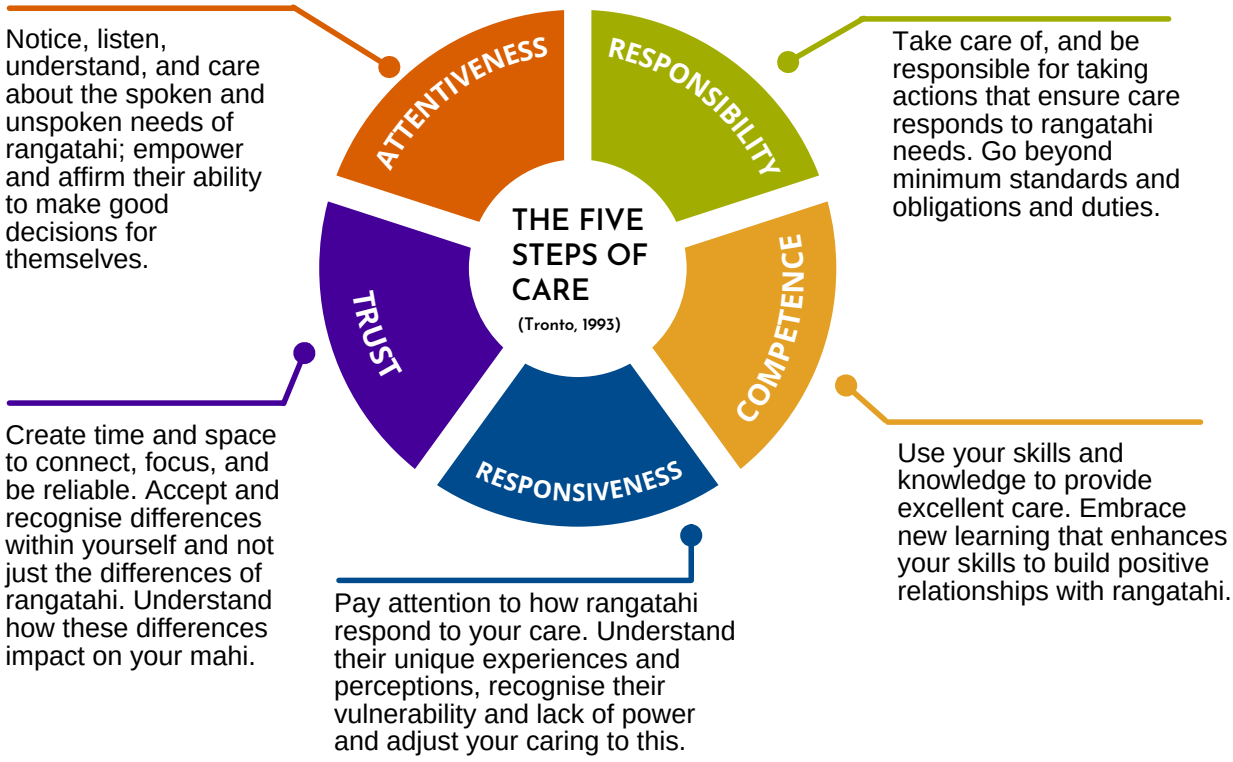
This might all seem obvious, who could argue with the idea that kaimahi should care about rangatahi and respond to their needs? But research with rangatahi, tells us that kaimahi do not always do this very well (Duncan, Miller & Sparks, 2007; Garland et al., 2003; Haapasalo, 2000; Heinze, 2013; Sanders & Munford, 2019; Sanders, Munford & Liebenberg, 2017). For instance, often rangatahi report that kaimahi do not take their issues seriously and do not even listen to them. They tell us that kaimahi can be very difficult to contact, that they don't turn up to appointments and don't keep their word. As a result, rangatahi often feel their kaimahi do not care about them and that kaimahi do not see them as capable and able to make and sustain change. This tells us we do not always use care ethics in our practice.

Showing care in professional relationships

The purpose of reflection processes is to improve the quality of the young person's experience of the relationship. The quality of that relationship is the way that change is achieved (Duncan, Miller & Sparks, 2007; Garfat & Fulcher, 2008).

Critical reflection provides opportunities for us to examine what happens when we are with rangatahi, to explore what might be underneath their actions and responses and to think about how our mahi is supporting their growth and change. Alongside this, it is a time to think about how we are managing our own emotional responses and boundaries (Garfat & Fulcher, 2008; McMahon, 2018).

The relationship is not enough on its own though; relationships can be good or bad. In mahi with rangatahi, relationships have a purpose; they are intentional and are focused on positive change. Care ethics is about making sure the mahi helps rangatahi to make positive change. Key words in care ethics are: caring about, taking care of, care giving and care receiving, and reciprocity. Tronto (1993) talked of five steps of care which we can use when thinking about how care ethics might look in our mahi:



To do this well, kaimahi need to understand themselves and how they can be effective in the relationship:

> Beckett and Horner (2006) tell us that change comes about through relationships. Even in situations where programmed interventions are employed, their impact is secondary to the social worker–client relationship (Nicholson & Artze, 2003). Qualities of hope and expectancy that change will occur are also implicated in successful outcomes" (Ingram & Smith, 2018, 8).

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HOW DO I USE THESE IDEAS IN MY MAHI?

The following two examples outline ways of thinking about an ethics of care – the first one takes and organisational perspective, the second explores use of an ethics of care in interactions with rangatahi.

At our regular team meetings, we reflect on our mahi with rangatahi; we talk about the support we give to rangatahi through our programmes and we also reflect on the wider practices in our agency, such as how we welcome rangatahi to the agency (show manākitanga) and transition them between programmes and services. We have a diverse group of rangtatahi coming to our youth agency for counselling, an alternative education programme, employment programmes, and parenting programmes. Some of the rangatahi have been coming to the agency for over a year and have been involved in several of our programmes. We always aim to ensure that all the rangatahi that come through our door feel welcomed and are treated respectfully. We want to show them that we care about them and that we value them. We do this by providing a welcoming space that is safe form them to share their experiences with a kaimahi who listens and is non-judgemental. In one of our team meetings the facilitator of our young parents group suggested we could show that we valued rangatahi and their contributions by inviting them to a meeting each month to get their feedback on how we respond to their needs of rangatahi. This would occur outside the usual programmes; kai would be provided. As rangatahi became confident in participating we could ask them to think about running the meeting. We wanted to keep finding ways to show rangatahi that the agency was there for them and was a safe place where they were supported to work on the challenges they faced, but was also a place where they could participate in new activities and develop skills that would enable them to achieve their goals. In reflecting on this we saw this activity as a core part of promoting relational practices in our agency and reflecting on how these work in all of the programmes we offer to rangatahi.

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I'm a corrections officer who has just received a new file from a retiring colleague. I read in the file of my new parolee Amber. As part of her sentence she had to write a letter of apology to her victim. Her previous probation officer stated that Amber clearly did not care about her future or her rehabilitation, and as such was not worth concern. As evidence of this, the officer noted that at the end of every session she would ask Amber if she had written the letter yet, to which Amber consistently responded, no. In my first meeting with Amber, I arranged extra time for us to have an opportunity to become more familiar with one another (recognising that relationship building takes time and will continue across our many sessions together). Later in the first session I review the conditions of Amber's probation with her, and what Amber thinks of these conditions. By doing this I can better understand how Amber makes sense of these conditions and understand their relevance to her life. During this process it seems that she appreciates the need for and purpose of the letter of apology. Rather than focusing in on this, we then review the conditions to see where Amber is at with each of the conditions. Where she is seemingly unengaged, or behind on the conditions, I ask her what would help her to meet these conditions. With some of the conditions she is quick to provide answers. With others, including the letter, she shrugs and says she doesn't know. Each time we meet after this, we review the list of actions and progress. Where she is struggling I ask what could help and try to support her with this. After three sessions, Amber starts the session off by saying she has been thinking about the letter, and explains that she has never written a letter before and has no idea where to start or what to write. She asks if we can arrange a time for the two of us to work on this.

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Here are some places to look for more information.

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Trevithick, P. (2003). Effective relationship-based practice: A theoretical exploration. Journal of Social Work Practice, 17, 2, 163-176. https://doi:10.1080/0265053020000145699

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