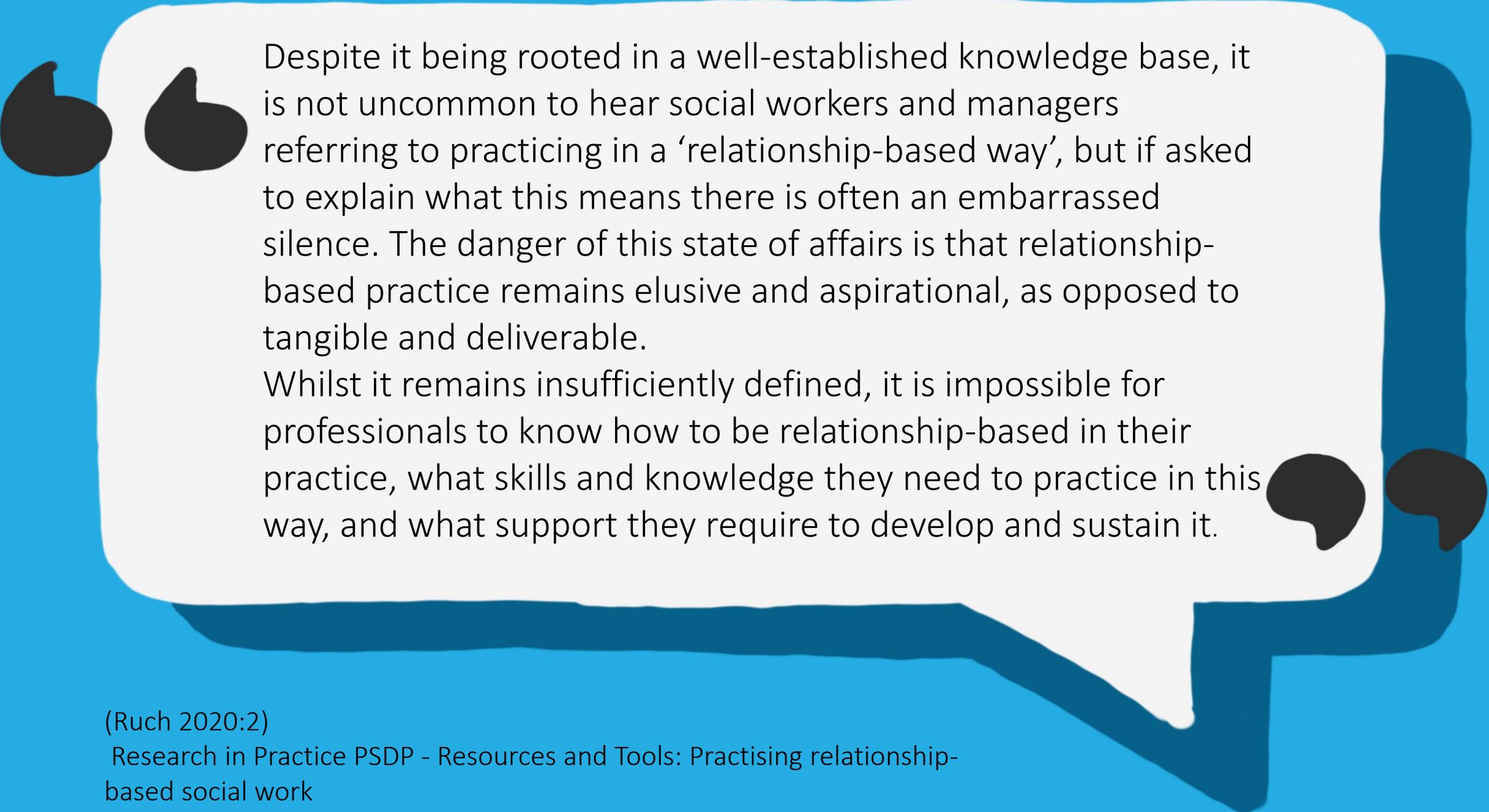


Relationship based
practice: theory and
practice but mostly
experience

Siobhan Maclean

16 May 2025

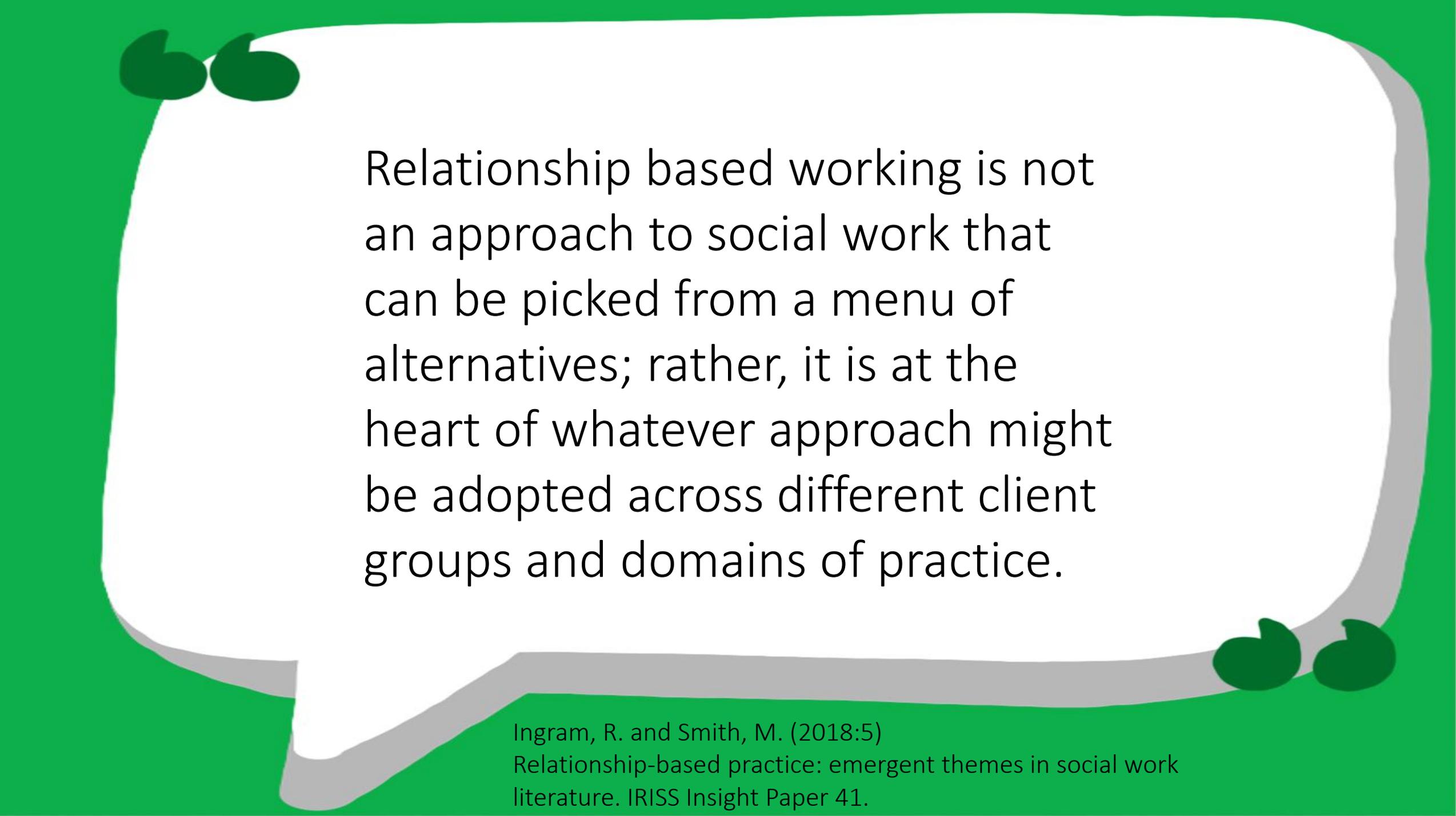


Despite it being rooted in a well-established knowledge base, it is not uncommon to hear social workers and managers referring to practicing in a ‘relationship-based way’, but if asked to explain what this means there is often an embarrassed silence. The danger of this state of affairs is that relationship-based practice remains elusive and aspirational, as opposed to tangible and deliverable.

Whilst it remains insufficiently defined, it is impossible for professionals to know how to be relationship-based in their practice, what skills and knowledge they need to practice in this way, and what support they require to develop and sustain it.

(Ruch 2020:2)

Research in Practice PSDP - Resources and Tools: Practising relationship-based social work



Relationship based working is not an approach to social work that can be picked from a menu of alternatives; rather, it is at the heart of whatever approach might be adopted across different client groups and domains of practice.

Ingram, R. and Smith, M. (2018:5)
Relationship-based practice: emergent themes in social work literature. IRISS Insight Paper 41.

YOUR 'BODY' OF THEORY

head

The head can represent theory, because this is the way that the practitioner is understanding what is happening

hands

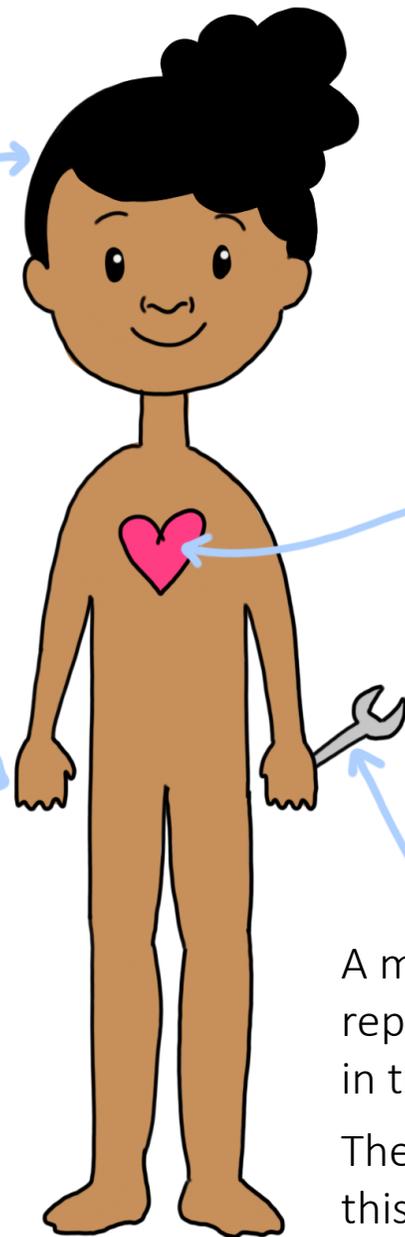
The hands represent the model used, because this is all about what the practitioner actually does in the situation

heart

The heart represents the worker's overall approach to practice

A method can be represented by a tool placed in the hands.

The tool demonstrates that this is about the use of a specific skill or intervention

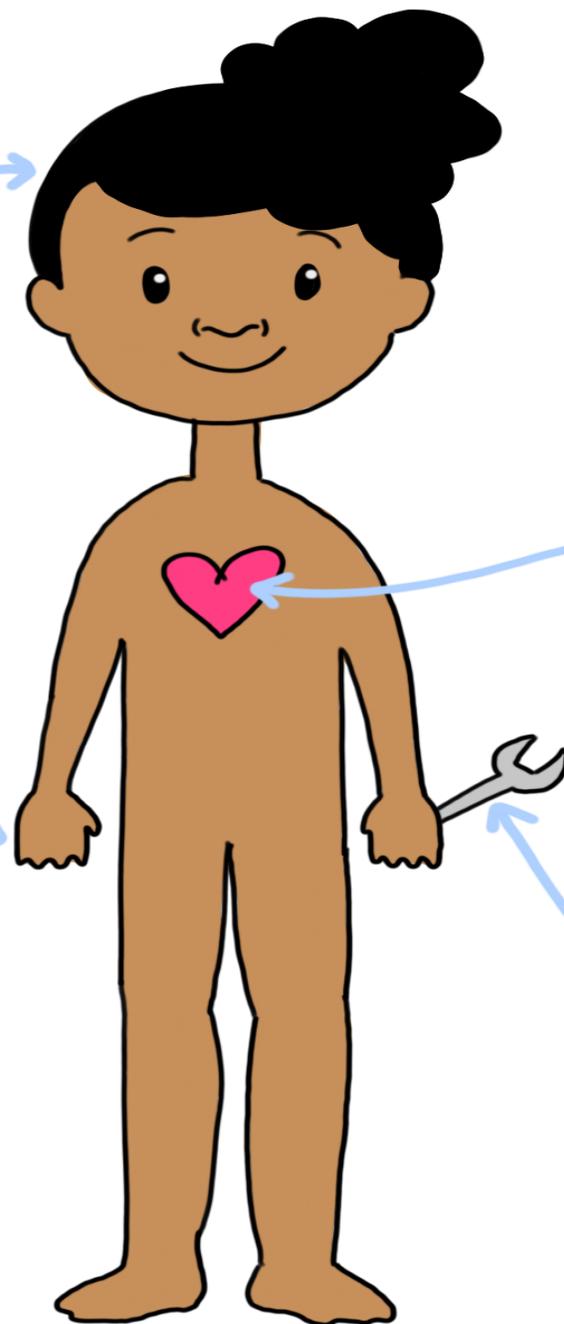


You need to put thought into relationship-based working – what theory and knowledge are you drawing on? What do you know about this person? Etc..

head

hands

What skills do you use as part of relationship-based ways of working?



heart

We know that relationships are all about the heart... they should also sit at the heart of social work practice

Sticking a tool in your hands represents the methods you use in practice – what methods are you using to create connections in relationship-based working?

The 3Ps and relationship-based practice

- Private
- Personal
- Professional

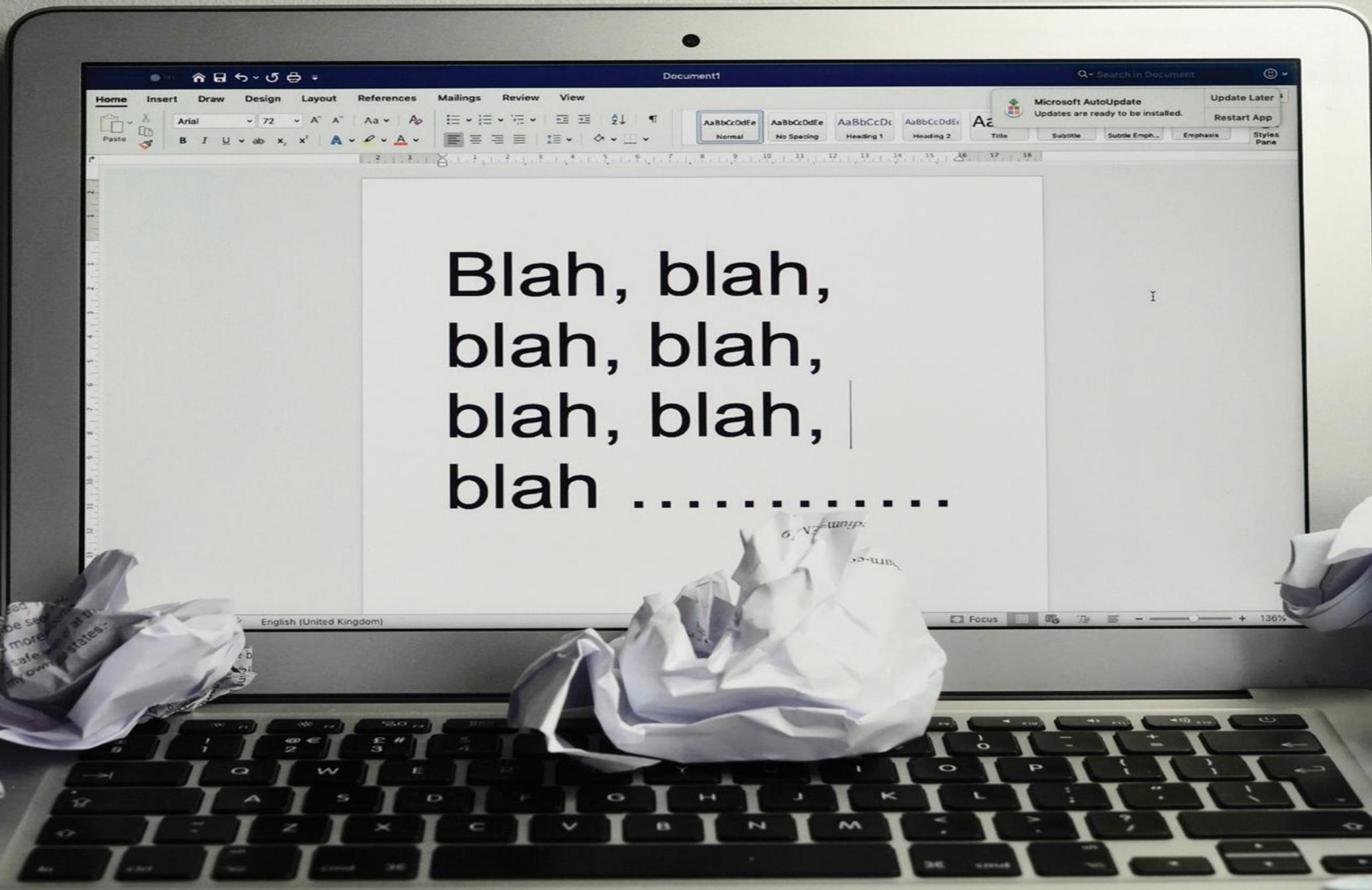
These can be really helpful in understanding how we position ourselves in our work and how we can maintain boundaries in relationships

Drawn out of social pedagogy which has a great deal to offer us in terms of understanding relationship-based practice

The 3Ps that underpin organisations?

- Process
- Policy
- 'Performance'





Blah, blah,
blah, blah,
blah, blah, |
blah
.....



- Relationships in professional practice have a purpose. What is the reason for this relationship?
- In the busy world of social work it is easy to lose sight of purpose and the reason for our work and our relationships – especially when we talk about relationship building or ‘engaging’ why are we doing that?

Restorative relational practice

There are 3 key values of restorative practice:

- Respect
- Responsibility
- Relationship

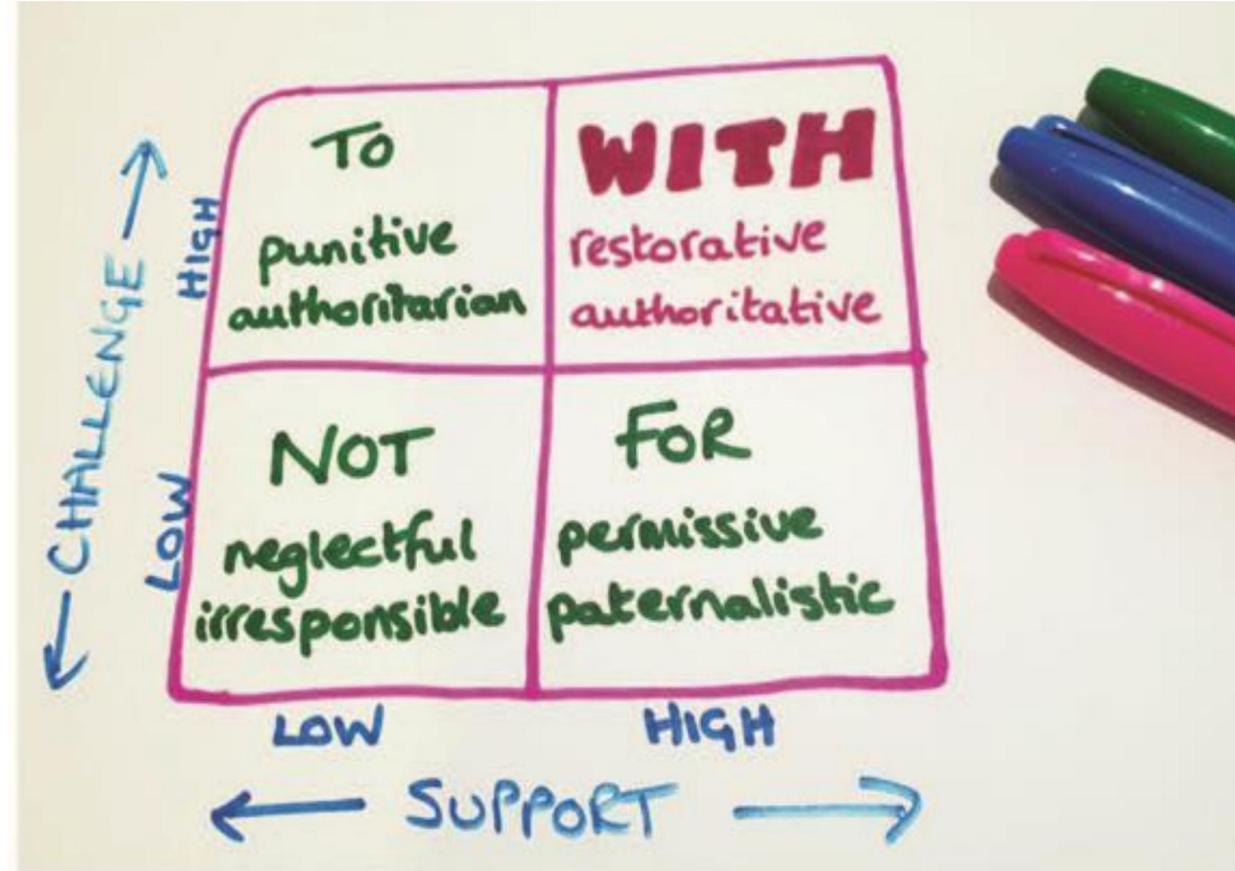
The ethos of restorative justice is based on relationship based practice:

- Understanding how and why relationships may be sometimes challenging
- Repairing harm when relationships have broken down
- Rebuilding relationships
- Resolving difficulties together, both in the present and future collaborative approach taken to problem solving
- Recognising that all difficult situations contain opportunities for growth and for potential



Restorative relational practice

- The social discipline window is particularly popular in terms of the theory around restorative practice
- According to Lloyd (2016) working 'with' people is not a method or a model but a "way of being"



- SHARE addresses the multi-sensory nature of social work
- SHARE: A New Model for Social Work (Maclean, Finch and Tedam 2018)
- Written originally for practice education, we now say ‘show us anything in social care work and we will show you how you can SHARE it!’

Seeing

Hearing

Action

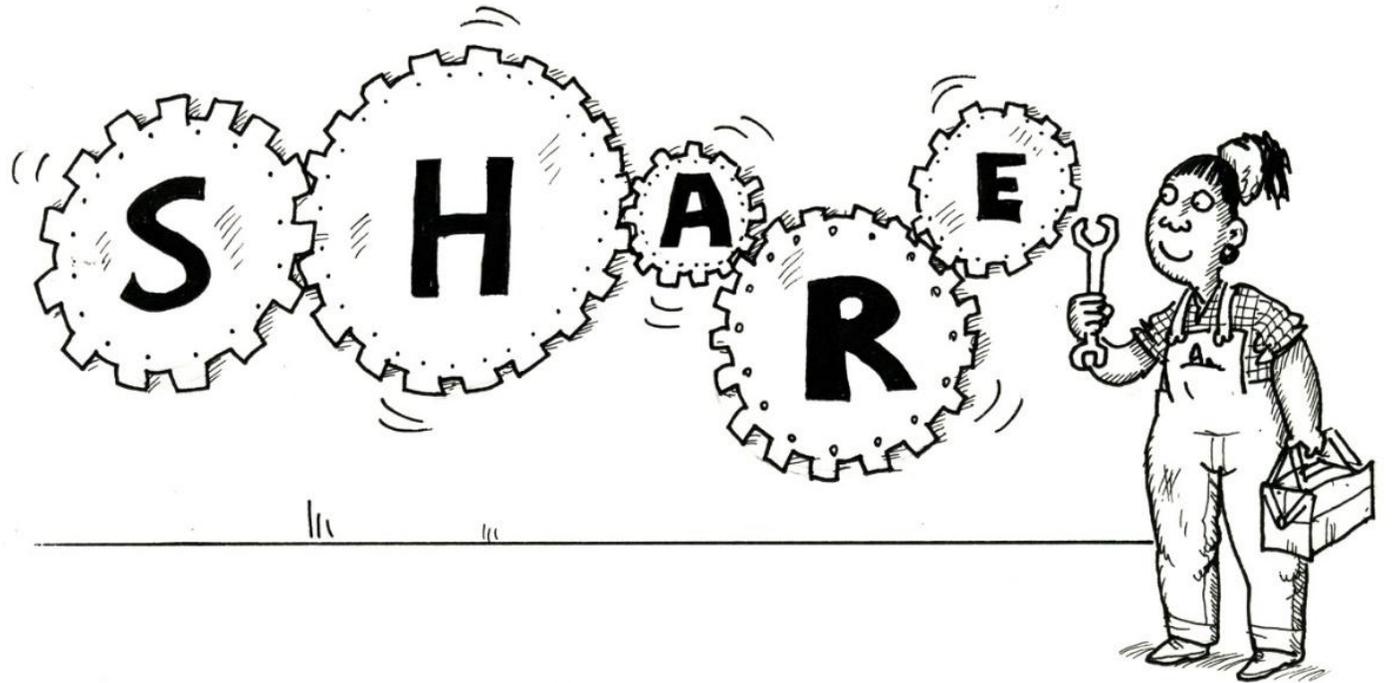
Reading

Evaluation



The SHARE model

- Values based
- Stakeholder informed
- Theory informed
- Research informed
- Wide application
- Contemporary
- Reflexive model



SHARE IN ASSESSMENT

Seeing: What have you seen? What haven't you seen? What have you lost sight of? What are your blind spots? What does a good outcome here look like?

Hearing: What have you heard? What haven't you heard? From who? Whose voice is the loudest? Why? have you kept the individual's voice at the centre?

Action: What have you done? What have others done? What impact has that had? What hasn't been done?

Reading: What have you read? (theory, research, previous notes...) Have you recorded clearly? (for others to read?)

Evaluation: How are you evaluating all this? What is important? What isn't? how do you know? What's worked well? What hasn't worked well? What conclusions can you draw?

It becomes SHARED when you add a defensible decision

What about the person being assessed?

Seeing: What have they seen?

Hearing: What have they heard?

Action: *WHAT WILL THEY DO AS A RESULT?*

Reading: Have they read your assessment? What do they think?

Evaluation: How will they evaluate the social work experience? (Emotions – how do they feel about it?)

“Social work is about life, treasuring humanity, building connections, sharing and promoting fairness. It is about creativity, care and love – being there to help people overcome obstacles and oppressions that hold them back. For people using our services, a social worker should be someone to trust and believe in – someone who helps you believe in yourself. Sometimes we must hold boundaries, protect rights, advocate and challenge. We are always in the midst of the messy stuff, finding ways forward.”

(Ruth Allen. BASW Chief Exec. 2018)

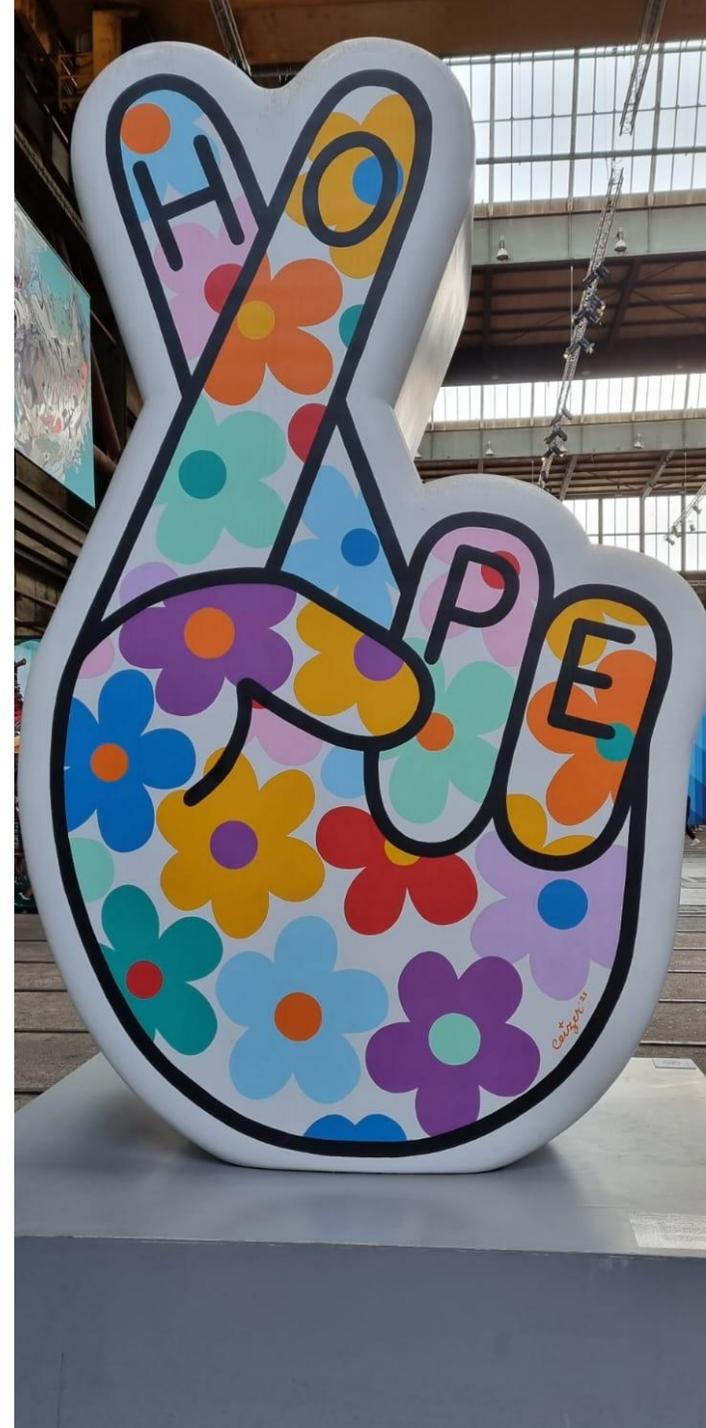


Relationships are...

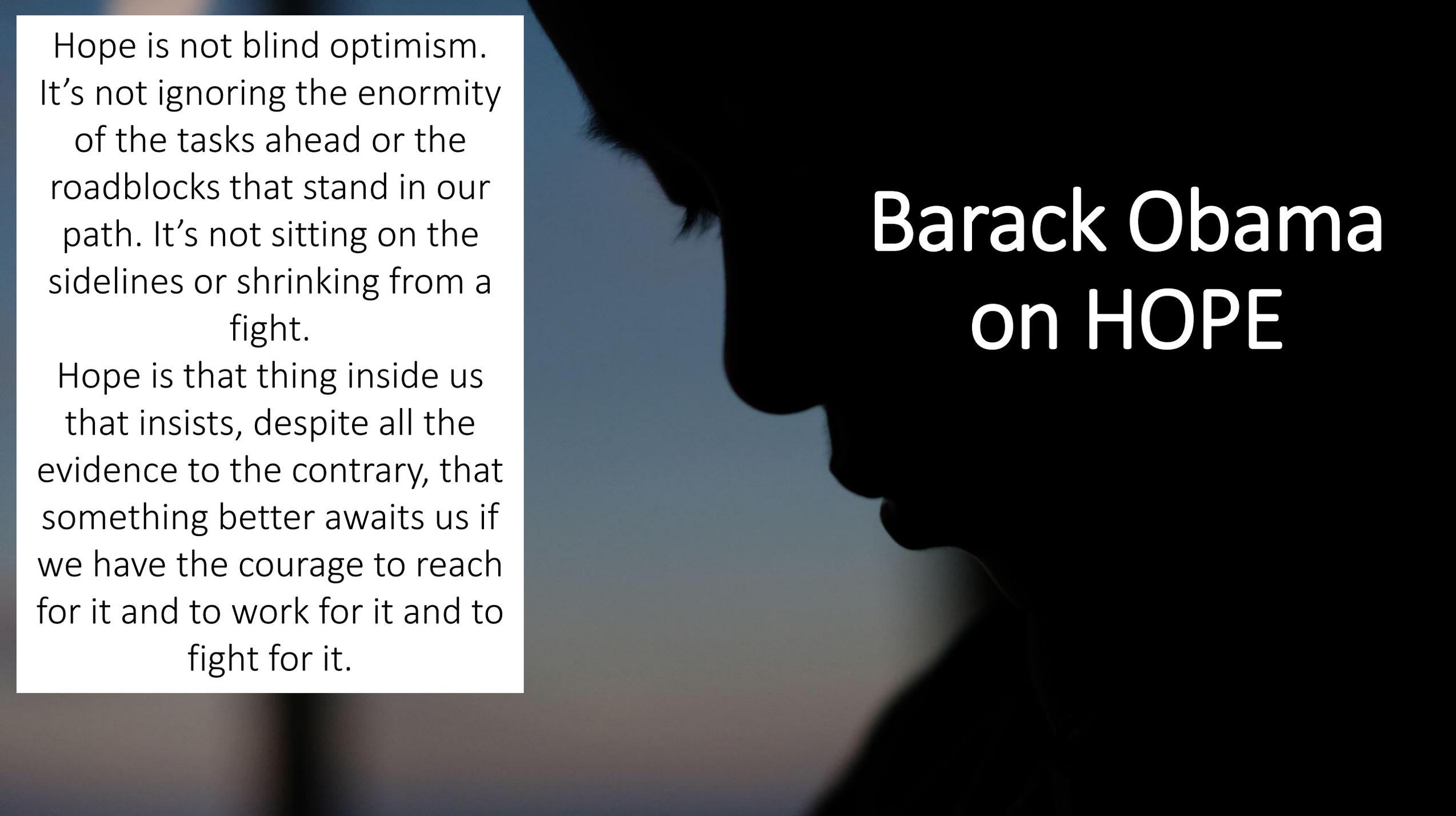
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The single most
important word in
social work for me is
HOPE







Hope is not blind optimism. It's not ignoring the enormity of the tasks ahead or the roadblocks that stand in our path. It's not sitting on the sidelines or shrinking from a fight.

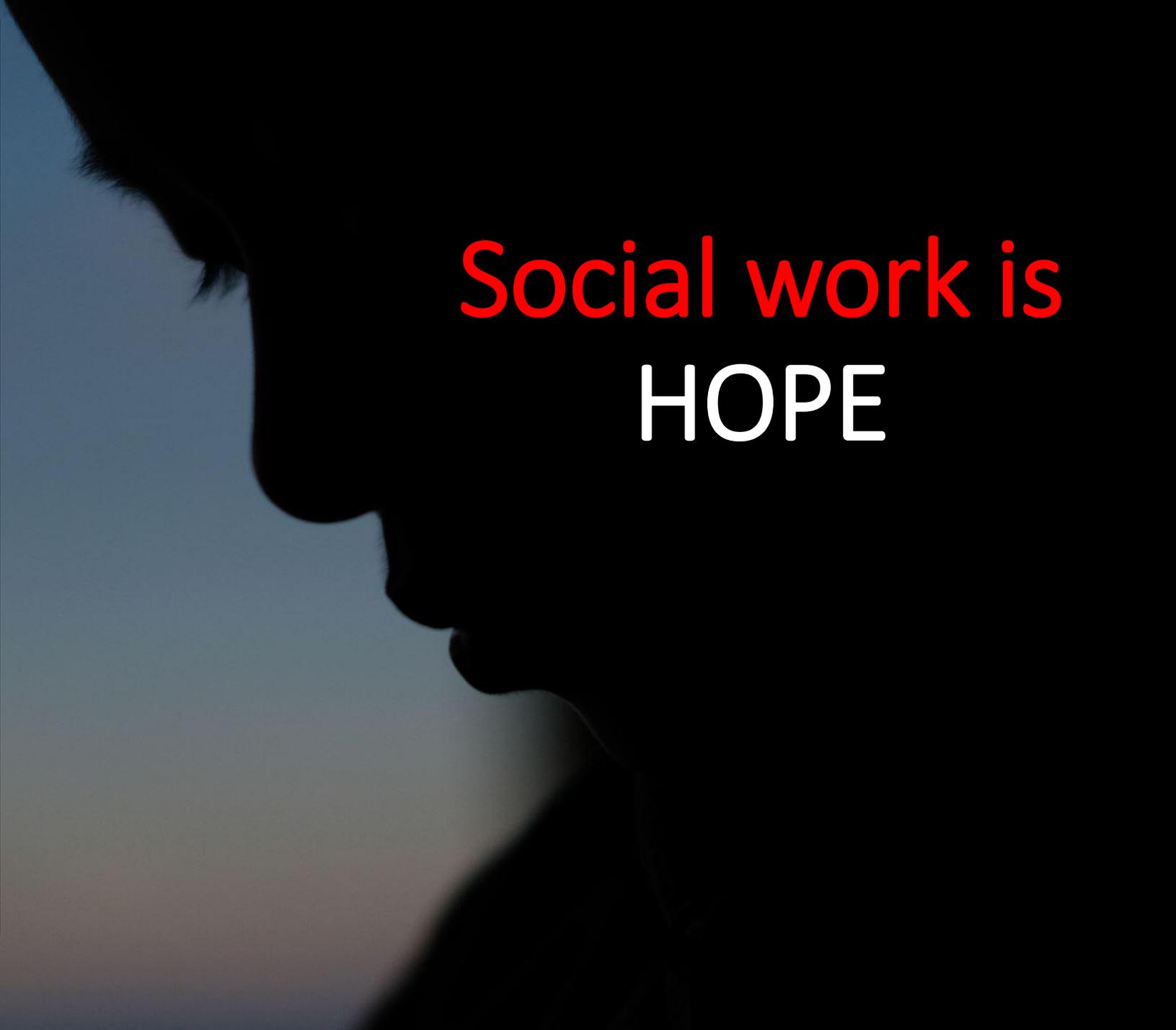
Hope is that thing inside us that insists, despite all the evidence to the contrary, that something better awaits us if we have the courage to reach for it and to work for it and to fight for it.

Barack Obama on HOPE

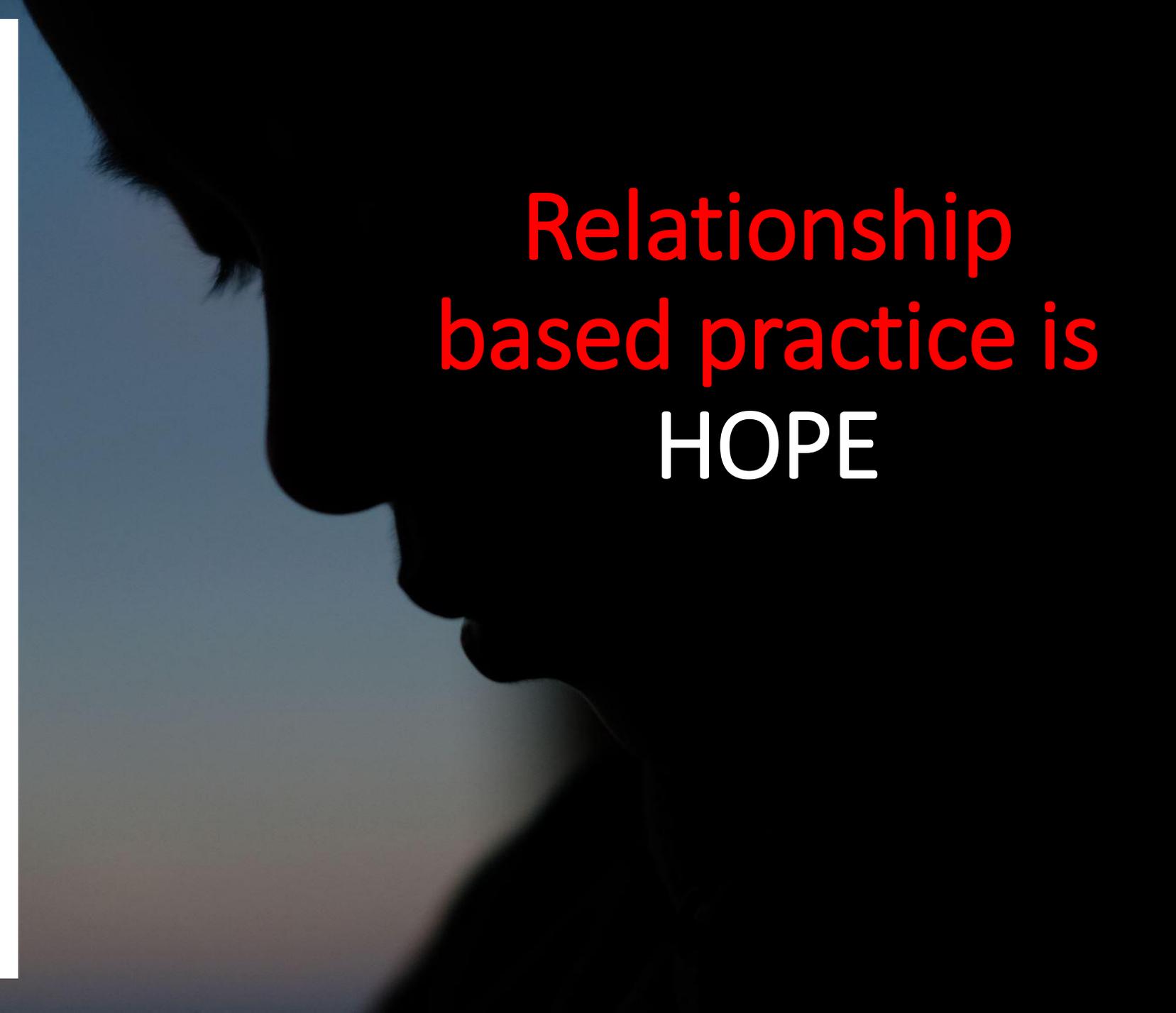
Social work is not blind optimism.

It's not ignoring the enormity of the tasks ahead or the roadblocks that stand in our path. It's not sitting on the sidelines or shrinking from a fight.

Social work is that thing inside us that insists, despite all the evidence to the contrary, that something better awaits us if we have the courage to reach for it and to work for it and to fight for it.



Social work is
HOPE



Relationship based practice is not blind optimism.

It's not ignoring the enormity of the tasks ahead or the roadblocks that stand in our path. It's not sitting on the sidelines or shrinking from a fight.

Relationship based practice is that thing inside us that insists, despite all the evidence to the contrary, that something better awaits us if we have the courage to reach for it and to work for it and to fight for it.

Relationship
based practice is
HOPE



HOLDING HOPE

Clark and Hoffler (2014) argue that social workers can lay claim to be the 'profession of hope'. They describe social workers as the holders of hope for individuals and in many ways for society as a whole. They argue that, in fact, social workers should dispense hope in the way that doctors might dispense medication, or a judge might dispense justice.

According to Clark (2012) there are two types of hope:

Personal hope: which is embedded in a wider social context. A range of issues can impact on personal hopefulness - such as family, culture and personal experiences. Personal hopefulness can be strengthened by effective social networks and diminished by neglect, abuse and trauma.

Professional hope: this is embedded in the professional value base and a belief in the possibility of change. Professional hopefulness can be strengthened by effective communities of practice and diminished by bureaucratic practice.



High hope and low hope individuals (Snyder, Cheavens and Scott 2005)

Personal hopefulness can be strengthened by effective social networks and diminished by neglect, abuse and trauma

Professional hopefulness can be strengthened by effective communities of practice and diminished by bureaucratic practice



Sometimes you have
to create your own

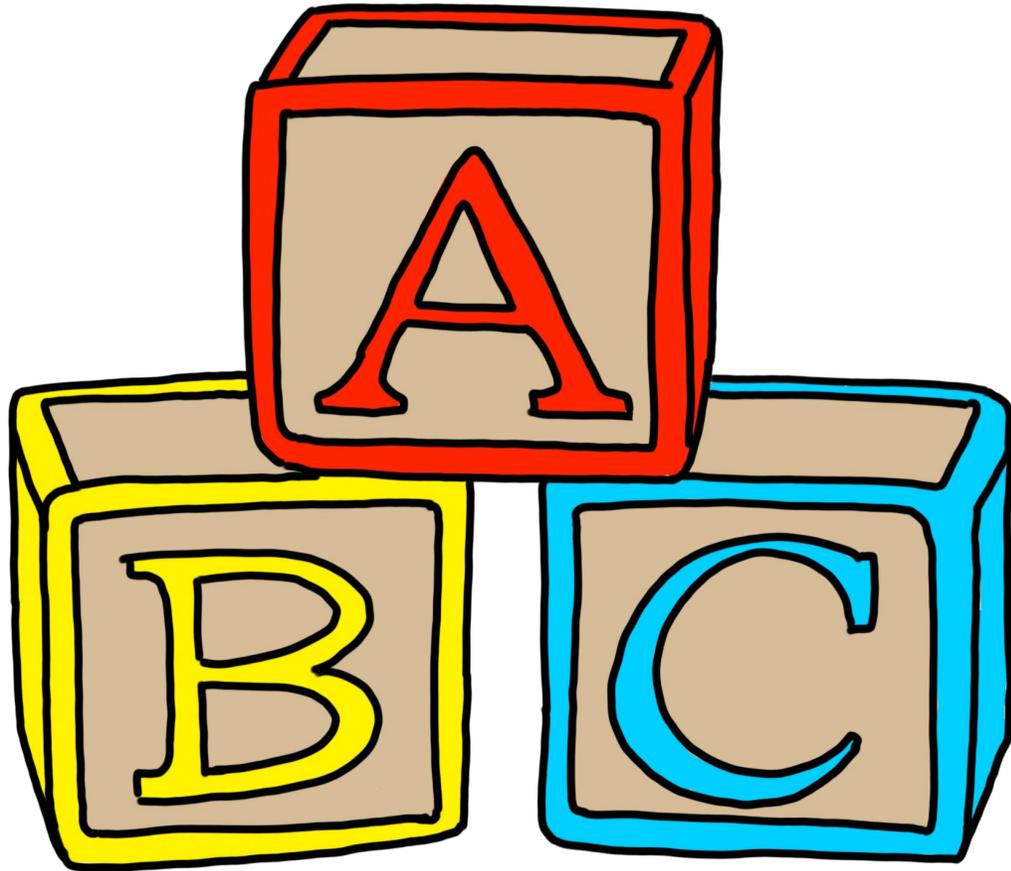
HOPE

A hopeful social work approach involves:

- A positive, optimistic outlook
- Understanding the reality of oppression and how people might communicate their experiences of this
- A belief in the possibility of change
- Commitment to relationships
- Supporting people to feel a sense of 'belonging'
- An awareness of the dynamic nature of hope
- An ability to imagine a different way of doing things
- Skills in supporting people to develop goals and look to the future



(Maclean, Finch and Tedam 2018)



- Relationships are messy
- Love is important but it cannot be commodified
- We need to understand connection – which will be unique in each situation
- Problems are often relationship based
- Solutions are almost always relationship based
- We need a renewed focus on the importance of relationships within the profession – but a meaningful one
- The ‘use of self’ is key in thinking through the ‘use of relationship’

R

Reason

E

Emotions

L

Love

A

Assessments

T

Theory

I

I

O

Obstacles and opportunities

N

Needs

S

Safety and security

H

Head, heart and hands and holding hope

I

Intervention

P

Too many to mention!!!!

Know all the theories.
Master all the techniques.
But as you touch a human soul be just another
human soul.



Carl Jung