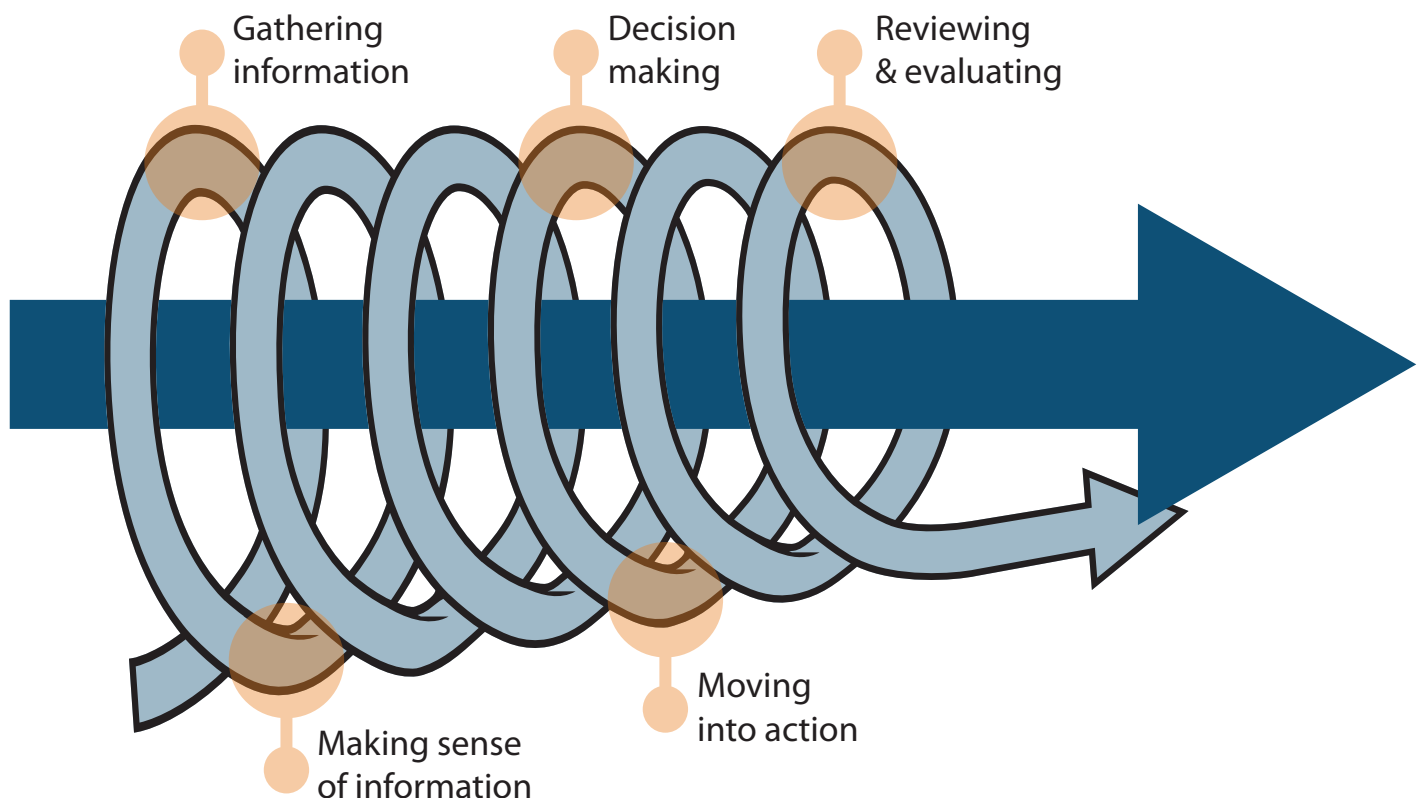


Handout

The cyclical process of assessment



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Process of assessment

Research on assessment practice has demonstrated that assessments have too often been static and have been viewed by practitioners as one-off events. More recent models (for example Raynes (in Calder and Hackett 2003) have suggested a series of steps within the process of assessment. This has been very helpful in beginning to break down the complex process of assessment so that the individual parts of the process can be seen and understood more clearly.

Research has demonstrated that assessment should be viewed as a cyclical process. Many of the assessments considered in serious case reviews suffered from 'start again syndrome' where insufficient attention was paid to historical information and a 'clean sheet' approach was taken to each referral (Brandon et al 2008). Due to the chronic and cumulative effect, such weaknesses in assessment have led to agencies failing to address the impact of neglect and not intervening at an early stage to prevent the child's difficulties from escalating (Ofsted 2008).

Continued ↘

Process of assessment

H14₁

Neglect requires particular attention in assessment practice because it is rarely, if ever, that one incident will provide proof (Munro 2008). This means that information needs to be gathered from all relevant professionals and family members (Horwath 2007). We need to be able to recognise when information is significant for judgement and decision-making (Cleaver and Walker 2004). We need to pay attention to written information as this can be overlooked as our attention is caught by vivid and recently gathered information (Munro 2008). Finally, there is the challenge of knowing when we have enough information so that we do not end the search too early (Helm 2010) or get stuck in 'assessment paralysis' (Reder and Duncan 1993) where we can not move on from analysis to action.

All practitioners carry out assessment activity. Some of this activity is quick and informal assessment. For example, a police officer called out to a disturbance at a house will have to make a very quick judgement about the welfare of the children in the house. A school nurse may make an informal assessment of a young person's needs during a routine contact. If there are some nagging doubts they may spend a bit more time with the young person or seek further advice from a colleague. Whether the assessment is quick and impressionistic or lengthy and formal, it requires a level of skill and understanding on the part of the practitioner. If we can think of all this assessment activity as assessment, then we can view the professional networks around us as huge potential sources of relevant information.

Failure to revise assessments

Research into human judgement has revealed that humans are prone to error in some predictable ways (Plous 1993) and these human frailties are very important considerations when assessing neglect. In an effect known as 'anchoring' practitioners can find that deep-seated values about neglectful families can impact on their individual thresholds (Helm 2010). Although we may believe that the circumstances that we are assessing may not be acceptable for our own child, because our aspirational levels are so low for neglectful families (often characterised by intergenerational poverty) we do not reach a point where we recognise the benefits of intervention.

Conformational bias or verificationism (Helm 2010; Munro 1999; Scott 1998; Sheppard 1995) is widely recognised in the phrase 'you find what you go looking for'. We are all prone to accept and discard pieces of information depending on whether they support our implicit beliefs. It is possible to weigh information selectively in assessment to support your inherent beliefs about children and families. This can result in a failure to recognise or accept the steady accumulation of evidence which might provide the basis for intervention. This failure to revise our risk assessments (Munro 2008) in relation to neglect could result in a failure to act right across services. If a teacher does not see the rising tide of difficulty they may miss the opportunity to speak to the child's family or offer further nurture and support. If a public health nurse does not view the family as in need of additional services, they may attribute health needs to organic causes and not neglectful parenting. If a social worker does not understand the impact of neglect on the 15 year old girl they could interpret behaviour as a feature of adolescent development.