

**Title slide**

'Working with Risk' is a phrase I adopted for a set of training and practitioner manuals I published back in 2007... it does what it says on the tin... every day we are identifying risks, managing risks, taking risks... it's a part of who we are... we're always working with risk!

Much of the time we're making risk calculations without conscious effort... walking down the street, crossing the road, taking different forms of transport, judging the timing of different things we need to do... we're always relating to risk at some level or another. At other times it may involve a bit more of a conscious effort, such as when we are in near proximity to someone who is behaving outside of what we normally expect or experience. Then there are the more formal requirements of job roles that expect us to do and record 'risk assessments' on people... or ideally with people! The message I'm putting to you here is... essentially, we're continually 'working with risk'.

**Next slide** (What risks?)

How long is a piece of string? The list of what actual risks we work with on a day-to-day basis is far too long for me to even attempt... it partly depends on your own definition of risk, your threshold of tolerance of certain risks. Whatever your job role is... you will already be able to think of the more common risks you encounter and deal with on a regular basis.

In health and social care we are not dealing just with the occasional banana skins in our path. You will see from this slide a brief range of some of the very serious risks that can blight people's lives... suicide and aggression & violence excite the most interest in the media... and hence receive research attention. However, far more common are the incidences of self-neglect, self-harm in many different ways, problems with communication skills, and relationship difficulties. Then there are the day-to-day challenges of managing our homes, our money, and how we occupy our time. In all of these there will be inherent or unexpected risks to be assessed and managed... and occasional risks to be taken.

**Next slide** (Uncertainty)

The history of risk is relatively recent, with sophisticated risk management systems only emerging, initially through financial management and future probabilities, in recent centuries. But perhaps for our purposes it is probably best to think of risk as being our way of recognising and managing 'uncertainty' in human behaviour. It's about the frequent decisions and compromises we need to be making each day... some based in information and evidence... while some are made in potentially difficult circumstances where we have inadequate, and at times inaccurate information... yet we still need to exercise choices within the decisions we make. So, don't fool yourself that with the backing of risk tools we have somehow conquered risk... that is one trap we all need to avoid at all costs.

However, risk tools are there for a reason... though it is arguable as to whether the way they are used, and the expectations associated with phrases like "Where is the risk assessment?"

or “Have you done a risk assessment?” really does represent a realistic appraisal of what most risk tools can really achieve. But, whatever your take is, on the value of risk tools you’re expected to complete... don’t casually fall into the trap represented on this slide... where, with the inevitable value of hindsight... you wish you had done a risk assessment first!

**Next slide** (image of a key)

Be under no illusions here... a key component that underpins positive risk taking, is a very clear recognition, and a very clear articulation, of what the underlying risks are... that's what we would normally refer to as a good risk assessment!

Whatever your job role is... you will need to make difficult decisions from time to time... and you do require quality information in order to do so... The task that faces all of us, therefore, becomes one of assessing, and also evaluating, the information that is actually available to us... And a message I gave a few moments ago on the previous slide bears repeating... herein lies the problem that we actually operate within an imperfect world... one where we do not necessarily have access to complete, or even on occasions, accurate information... yet we still have to make some decisions.

Risk assessment is a key to supporting our confidence in those decisions. But, let me be clear here... when I say ‘risk assessment’... I’m talking about what you do in real-time... not what forms have you filled in at this stage!

**Next slide** (What is risk assessment?)

As with so many phrases that enter our personal or professional lives... risk assessment is frequently used, asked for, communicated in various ways... but do we stop and think what the phrase means in the context we are using it? Do we stop to think, if the other person, or people, we’re communicating the phrase to, are understanding and interpreting it the same way as we are?

Risk assessments should be an integral part, a daily function, of the practical delivering of what we do... not just seen as some exercise in meeting bureaucratic demands... It should be integrated into everything you do and think... Evaluating and controlling risks effectively will ensure, by and large, that we'll spend less management time firefighting... constantly chasing our heels.

Assessing and evaluating risk should be about having a framework... That's an important message... a framework is the way of prompting and guiding you to take account of the usually expected information... while still being open to managing that previously mentioned idea of ‘uncertainty’. It's not about trying to establish the definitive rule book... that would actually spend more time restricting and constraining you...

So, if I'm thinking about a framework... within the framework, we need to be engaged in the problems, or the risks... we don't ignore those. But we also need to be aware of near misses... the things that nearly went wrong. Also, within this framework, we need to try to

anticipate risks that have yet to even happen... So, there's always going to be an element of risk assessment being about trying to anticipate the future... Don't get caught up in the term 'prediction' too much! I'll come back to that... but anticipating what could be, what those risks may be... within our current knowledge of a person and their circumstances, is still an important thing to try to do.

### Next slide (definition)

Let me give you a very detailed definition... you see on the screen here, what risk assessment is... and I'll break this down into three different parts.

If we look at the first sentence... it's about a range of activities that are common sense... like good communicating... persistence is all about vigilance and investigating, and trying to draw in as much of the information as possible... as well as observing what's there in front of us... and the connections of what's there in front of us.

But, here, in my definition, we want to counterbalance those negative factors... So, you'll see in the middle part of this definition... it's also about counterbalancing the negativity of your risk factors, with the presence of protective factors... These, you should think of as being... the personal qualities, or the resources, in and around a person... that help them to reduce or mitigate the potential for risk... So, there's this counterbalance of risk factors on one side... protective factors on the other.

Then there's a timescale issue... so you see towards the end of this definition... this process requires linking historical information, to current circumstances, to anticipate possible future change... from history to current to future!

That last sentence says that risk assessments should be distinguished separately from risk screening! The importance of language will crop up yet again... Risk screening, will be an initial process of determining which risks require more detailed and thorough processes of assessment... So, a risk screen is something, with a series of prompts, that we do very quickly, on relatively limited information... Whereas... a risk assessment takes a lot more time... it's a lot more in depth... it's a lot fuller picture... but, I emphasise again... it takes time!

Those are two very important and distinctive tasks... the number of times that we're hearing the misuse of language... which then guides the kind of misuse of thinking to an extent.

Risk assessment is fundamentally about processing information... It's all about the situational context... the individual triggers... think about the weight that you're giving to specific factors... that will vary, dependent from decision to decision... and even from time to time.

Ultimately, risk assessment is about informing the decisions that we must make... So, *decisions, decisions... it's all about decisions!*

### **Next slide** (prediction)

And then there is the question of prediction... doesn't it just serve to underestimate the human potential for unpredictability? If we are to get caught up in this idea, that we're going to predict the risk... and if we can predict the future, we can prevent a future risk... Well, bear in mind, that one of the positive attributes of humans, is that we're unpredictable! We don't all want to become automatons... all become machines... So, we must exercise a degree of caution when we're focused on this idea... that risk assessment is about predicting the future.

Weather forecasting is a good metaphor for the idea of prediction in our own working with risk! Weather forecasters will claim a very high degree of accuracy in their predictions for only a very short timescale e.g. the next few hours. As they get into forecasts for the next day or week or longer... they quickly refer to patterns and trends... not definite categorical statements of fact. We should do likewise when using risk assessment information in anything that resembles a prediction of behaviour.

Here's the danger... if we really do focus our attention, and put pressure on people, into a kind of pseudo-scientific exactness regarding prediction... Well... don't be surprised, if the result that you get is a far from informative, more banal type of assessment... My risk assessment, in this situation is, well, it could be, yes... it could be, no... it could be, maybe... If you push people too far into a defensive position, that's going to be the level of quality you might well get back as a return.

### **Next slide** (A Structured Approach)

If we're to minimise the growing tendency of the last couple of decades to generate ever-increasing volumes of stifling bureaucracy, we need an alternative idea... which I believe is designing a 'structured approach' to assessing, managing, and taking risks.

Firstly, this requires valuing characteristics such as creativity and flexibility... Every person's situation is individual and unique... so our responses to them, need to be likewise.

Secondly, treat the evidence base with caution... regarding risk and risk assessment it is very narrow... focusing almost exclusively on aggression and violence, and suicide... Why? Because those are the areas, the activities, the types of risk... that when they happen, will attract media attention... big headlines... negative statements. Politicians worry about that... because these are the headlines that are informing the public... And so, politicians will put pressure on services to become more restrictive... with wild demands about how this will never happen again! More of a bureaucratic approach will inevitably result... So, the evidence base itself is not necessarily very helpful... certainly not to most of the clients, the service users... because it almost exclusively focuses in on, what I would argue, is the 5% or less of everything that's going on... the rare events! I'm never convinced that policy and procedural arrangements should be built on the rare events alone.

The third consideration is regarding paperwork... whether electronic, or hard copies... record-keeping is only as good as the design of the tools, and the abilities of those using

them. However... record keeping is very important... we do need to document something... but I would argue that we don't need to document everything... There's always a danger of overload... particularly where it is the elaborate bureaucratic system, that is dictating the direction and needs of recording... which can easily feel like pretty much everything needs to be recorded in standardised formats... we can easily get caught up in a tension between a tick-box mentality driven by bureaucratic needs... and the richer narrative experience of an individual's personal circumstances.

So, here's the question... can reality ever be adequately depicted on a form? I have to argue, no... but that's not to say that forms are worthless... It's more that we need to achieve a better balance of priorities, between the time that we allocate to the task, and the time that we allocate to recording the task... The complexities of somebody's life can never be entirely captured in a form... But that's not to say the form doesn't have its role... it still should be able to prompt, guide, and capture, some of those essential elements of the person's story.

The tick-box lists so familiar in most risk assessment formats can have their uses... in my view they are not for ticking... they should act as a frequently consulted aide memoir that can guide your construction of a narrative around an individual's risk assessment.

My consistent argument will be... that we need different tools for different purposes... and we should constantly be focusing on the narrative detail. What this means in practice is that we need a Screening Tool that helps focus our attention on the here & now immediacy of the situation... a brief tool that focuses our attention onto the context of a person's current situation... but reminds us to be aware of any historical details that impinge directly on what is occurring now. Preferably, the language should be engaging rather than repelling the recipient of the assessment. It should be a brief narrative that is flexible enough to be rapidly updated or changed as circumstances dictate (not an administrative directive!).

A full comprehensive risk assessment is something completely different... it takes much more time to build up and represents a detailed risk review in its own right. It should also provide prompts to guide its construction, with a specific emphasis included for developing an accurate history (or chronology) of risk events, what triggered them, and how they were previously managed.

### **Next slide** (Risk Formulation)

This is an idea adapted from the more common concept used by psychologists... that of formulation, or problem formulation... Essentially, it's making sense of the complex information we have put together around a person, and the context of their experience... it can be thought of as shaping the assessment into a coherent management plan... all the time being aware that risk is dynamically changing.

We are attempting to balance the negative risk factors and the positive protective factors. And... despite the caution I previously raised about the idea of 'prediction'... we're still making judgements about the foreseeable risk, to inform our risk decisions. We shouldn't be avoiding these considerations... it's more an issue of being very cautious in how we word and communicate our thoughts.

As far as is possible... we're trying to identify factors that could increase a specific risk... and also those that could help to mitigate, or lower, the risk... We don't have a crystal ball, and we mustn't be suggesting we have 100% accuracy in our predictions... But, we can confidently offer our thoughts about the context in which a person's risk may elevate or decrease... based on our assumptions from the assessment information. It's a kind of 'showing the workings out' ... if I can put into a mathematical analogy, which most of us may remember from dim-distant past school days!