Core Competencies of Marriage and Family Therapists
Introduction

Following the recognition of the profession by the government of Québec in 2001, and in light of the evolution of the profession itself, marriage and family therapists must now be able to identify, master, and update the competencies that constitute the foundation of their practice. For these professionals, who practice psychotherapy primarily within the context of the family system, professional competencies must extend beyond the mere ability to provide clinical services of quality. For example, their code of ethics encompasses duties and obligations, not only to the client, but also to the profession and the public. This core competencies reference document will enable marriage and family therapists to evaluate their professional practice on their own, with a view to constantly improving its quality.

The modernization of the professional system, and more specifically, the measures related to professional practice in mental health and human relationships, implies that the field of expertise for the professions in this field, as well as their respective professional activities, must be adjusted in order to take into consideration the realities of current practice.

The Ordre professionnel des travailleurs sociaux du Québec has undertaken the drafting of a core competencies reference document that reflects the current context of the professional practice of marriage and family therapists. This document will enable the Order to reflect on the development of ongoing training for marriage and family therapists, and to develop the standards for practice and professional inspection. The core competencies reference document is also a credible work tool that Québec university institutions can employ with a view to launching degree programs in marriage and family therapy that will provide access to the permits issued by the Order.

Mission of the Order

According to the Professional Code (R.S.Q., c. C-26), the primary mission of the Order is to ensure the protection of the public. To this end, the Order “must specifically monitor the practice of the profession by its members.”

The Order relies on several measures to ensure that its members provide quality services:

- Professional inspection;
- Professional development;
- Development of guides and standards of practice;
- Mandatory training for certain specialized professional services;
- Publication of a scientific journal;
- Professional advice to members;
- Information intended for the public concerning the services provided by members.
The legal, ethical and regulatory framework governing the practice of marriage and family therapy

As a member of the Ordre professionnel des travailleurs sociaux du Québec, the marriage and family therapist operates within a legislative, regulatory, and ethical framework, and is subject to the Code of ethics of the members of the Ordre professionnel des travailleurs sociaux du Québec, the Regulation respecting the keeping of records and consulting offices by members of the OPTSQ, and other regulations of the Order.

Marriage and family therapists are also subject to the provisions of the Professional Code with respect to professional secrecy and misrepresentation. Furthermore, the Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms (R.S.Q., c. C-12) requires the professional to safeguard professional secrecy. The Youth Protection Act (R.S.Q., c. P-34.1), requires marriage and family therapists, by virtue of their professional status, to immediately report to the Director of Youth Protection, any situation that they have reasonable cause to believe may compromise the health or safety of a child. Marriage and family therapists must also respect the laws of general application that apply to them as citizens.

Professional activities of marriage and family therapists

Section 3 of the Decree respecting the integration of marriage and family therapists into the Ordre professionnel des travailleurs sociaux du Québec describes their professional activities as follows:

Holders of a marriage and family therapist's permit may engage in the following activities, in addition to those otherwise permitted by law: providing marriage and family therapy services to couples and families with a view to helping them to function better, by evaluating the dynamics of the relational systems and by intervening.

Section 5 covers the use of the professional title of marriage and family therapist:

The following titles are reserved for holders of a marriage and family therapist's permit: “marriage and family therapist”, “marriage therapist” and “family therapist”.

The following initials are reserved for holders of a marriage and family therapist's permit: “T.C.F.”, “T.C.”, “T.F.”, “M.F.T.”, “M.T” and “F.T.”.
Explanatory notes

Acquisition of competencies

This reference document describes the minimum core competencies that marriage and family therapists must acquire in order to practice their profession. These competencies must be present at the time of admission to the Order and integration into the labour market. Consequently, we can presume that a marriage and family therapist who has practiced the profession for a number of years will have acquired additional competencies.

Field of competence

A field of competence refers to a major responsibility within a job, trade, or profession.

Client

A person, a couple, a group, or the members of a family that benefit from the professional services of a marriage and family therapist.

Personal competencies

Personal competencies represent “generic” competencies that marriage and family therapists demonstrate in the practice of their profession, including the following: analysis, organization, ability to integrate information, adaptability to change, stress management, judgment, and thoroughness. This reference model presumes that the marriage and family therapist, like any professional, has already acquired these generic competencies. For this reason, this document does not present a summary of personal competencies or their occurrence in the course of practicing the profession.

Professional competencies

This is the demonstration that a person has the skills, knowledge, abilities, and attitudes necessary to accomplish a task in accordance with a standard or another predetermined requirement. All of the statements begin with: “The individual must be able to…”

Reference model

Although several competency reference models exist, the OPTSQ draws its inspiration from the document entitled “Marriage and Family Core Competencies”, published by the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (December 2004). Basing itself on this document, and after consultations with the members of the profession, the Order created a tool that is adapted to the reality of the practice of the marriage and family therapist in Québec.

Dynamic nature of a core competencies reference document

The core competencies reference document is not a static document, but a dynamic tool that must adapt to the evolution of the profession.

Organization of the core competencies reference document

The competency fields numbered 1 to 5 are specific to the profession of marriage and family therapist. Competency field 6 focuses on the responsibilities arising from the professional status in Québec, while competency field 7 addresses responsibilities toward the profession.

Use of competencies

In professional practice, marriage and family therapists must be able to use all of the competencies that are listed.
Table of competencies

The marriage and family therapist must be able to...

1. Establish treatment suitability for psychotherapy

   1.1 Gather data for initial case screening
   1.2 Determine the suitability for therapy given the client characteristics, field of expertise and treatment setting
   1.3 Refer the client to the appropriate professional for an evaluation or for specialized treatment
   1.4 Determine which couple/family members are included in the therapy
   1.5 Obtain informed consent from the client or his representatives
   1.6 Facilitate the participation of all family members
   1.7 Create a therapeutic climate
   1.8 Collaborate with the referring professionals, and other relevant systems (including insurance companies)
   1.9 Establish the treatment parameters

2. Conduct a clinical evaluation

   2.1 Proceed with a client evaluation
   2.2 Use appropriate evaluation instruments, (e.g.: charts, genograms, etc.)
   2.3 Conduct a systemic assessment of family functioning and history
   2.4 Develop individual, relationship-based, and systemic hypotheses
   2.5 Clarify the problem by engaging with each member of the therapeutic system
   2.6 Identify the strengths and limitations of each member of the family system
   2.7 Develop a clinical formulation
   2.8 Discuss the results of the evaluation with a view to establish a treatment contract

3. Develop a therapeutic plan

   3.1 Establish the treatment goals based on the results of the assessment
   3.2 Determine the necessary steps in achieving the therapeutic goals
   3.3 Develop a clear framework of how sessions will be conducted
   3.4 Work collaboratively with other stakeholders including family members and professionals not present
   3.5 Determine termination and aftercare plans
4. Implement therapeutic interventions

4.1 Identify the treatment model and match the treatment modalities to the client’s needs, goals, and values
4.2 Establish a therapeutic alliance
4.3 Reframe the problems into an interactional perspective
4.4 Facilitate the client’s developing and integrating solutions to problems
4.5 Manage interactional conflict during sessions
4.6 Observe/work with the client’s reactions and interactions throughout the therapy process
4.7 Facilitate the client to develop relationship skills
4.8 Integrate the supervisory/team feedback into treatment
4.9 Evaluate the therapeutic progress and treatment difficulties
4.10 Identify the contra-indications to continuing therapy and terminate when indicated.
4.11 Move to constructive termination when treatment goals have been accomplished

5. Ensure collaborative partnerships

5.1 Empower the client to obtain the necessary resources
5.2 Intervene in case of crisis or emergency
5.3 Participate in case-related legal processes
5.4 Participate in case-related administrative processes

6. Respect the legal, moral, ethical, and regulatory provisions for marriage and family therapy

6.1 Work within the framework of the established field of practice and competence
6.2 Make an enlightened choice with respect to issues of a professional, moral, ethical, or legal nature
6.3 Explain the limits of professional secrecy and the parameters of mandatory disclosure to the client or legal guardians
6.4 Convey information concerning the client to the appropriate authorities as required by law
6.5 Develop a security plan for at-risk clients
6.6 Keep a client file
6.7 Invoice the client and third-party payers in accordance with the established legal, moral, ethical, and regulatory provisions
6.8 Take the necessary measures to ensure professional secrecy in accordance with the applicable provisions
6.9 Pursue professional development
6.10 Respect the boundaries of the client relationship

7. Contribute to the evolution of the professional practice

7.1 Respond to opportunities to participate in clinical research
7.2 Enrich/improve professional practice by using empirical data to support clinical practice
7.3 Participate in the validation of clinical research
7.4 Reference evidence-based practice to inform clinical practice
7.5 Promote the profession and the expertise of the marriage and family therapist
7.6 Collaborate on ensuring the future of the profession