

Reflection on supervisor relationship in placement



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My placement was with Cruse Bereavement Services and, having completed their training and successfully passed their acceptance interview, I was told to let them know when I was ready to take my first client.

This was to be my first 'real client' and I was nervous and apprehensive, but also fairly confident that my training from both Cruse and from the college had provided me with the skills and abilities that I would need.

My initial contact with my supervisor, Deborah, came from her telephone call to me, advising me that she had been allocated as my supervisor, if I had no objection. I had no reason to object, at that stage, and simply accepted her as fait accompli, despite that I was obviously being given a choice. I think that I was still somewhat in awe of the whole process, at that stage, and was simply accepting what my 'betters' were telling me, until I felt that I had enough information and experience to make my own judgements.

She told me that she was initially wanting to make contact with me and wondered if I felt that a preliminary supervision session before my first client might be helpful. I think that I felt some relief, at this point, I felt that I was supported, that I was not being left to 'just get on with it'. I very much welcomed this approach. I asked whether I should accept a client in the meantime and arrange for my first client session to take place after my first supervision session - in essence, I was seeking her permission. Despite my training, somewhere within me, I was treating the relationship like a manager/employee relationship, rather than a working alliance at that stage.

Nevertheless, there was one issue that I needed to deal with immediately. In her own private practice, Deborah was counselling a friend of mine and I felt

that I needed to be open about this from the outset, in case there should be any perceived conflict of interest. This was dealt with openly and without fuss.

I arrived for my first supervision session a little early, (being early is one of my 'things') and after the initial meeting and greeting, Deborah set a boundary on timekeeping. If I am too early, then I should wait down the road in case I meet clients coming out. (In fact, that is exactly what happened at a later date - I saw my friend coming out.) I felt mildly chastised, reinforcing the manager/employee relationship that I was feeling.

The first part of our first session was exploratory as we (mainly I) talked a little bit about ourselves. I gave an abbreviated history of myself covering my own previous experiences of counselling, the issues that I had taken to counselling, why I had chosen to follow counselling as a vocation, what I thought of the college, why I had chosen Cruse. At her prompts, I also spoke a little about how I was feeling as I approach my first client. I talked about my preferred ways of working.

This part of the process had a warm feel to me. I felt valued, respected, supported and I trusted my supervisor.

Although part of me had expected a formal contract (despite my previous experiences with counsellors where no contract was offered), Deborah took an informal approach. There was no written contract - I cannot recall that the word 'contract' was mentioned at all - but she did take me through most issues that I would have expected her to raise, for example frequency of supervision, duration of sessions, costs (free, except for the report that she

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must submit to the college), that our relationship was an alliance between peers (rather than between teacher/pupil) – up to a point, it was beginning to feel like that already, but in other respects I felt like a child on my first day at school. We also covered 'emergency' telephone calls.

I do not recall any discussion about her ways of working...I did not ask and she did not say. Reflecting back, this may seem odd to an outsider looking in, but it did not feel out of the ordinary. I had already mentioned to Deborah my negative personal experiences of working in a psychodynamic way and, as evidenced by my account of my feelings above, I had also already decided that she worked in a humanistic way and was comfortable with that. I was ready to trust my judgement of her and to gain new experiences.

It might be relevant, here, to reflect briefly on how that trust has been rewarded. Over the past twelve months of my supervision relationship with Deborah, I have observed elements of at least three models of supervision used by Deborah: Driscoll's (2000) WHAT? Model of Structured Reflection, Hawkins and Shohet's (1989, 2000) model and Page and Woskett's Cyclical Model. This suggests to me that Deborah has a fairly eclectic approach to supervision or that there is considerable overlap between the models. It is an approach that is well matched with my own counselling philosophy and suits me very well, at least for my first supervisor. As I become more experienced, I expect that I may be drawn to supervisors who use different models, in order to further my ongoing personal and professional development.

Reflecting back on that first session, now, I can see one, potentially important, aspect of the supervision contract that was missing and this

concerns the resolution of conflicts. I find it interesting that this only now occurs to me. I suppose that this 'oversight' might be attributed to lack of planning and foresight on my part, but it doesn't feel like that. I am fortunate to have an excellent working alliance with Deborah and have immense trust in her abilities, her experience, her integrity and her focus...and in our joint ability to negotiate solutions to conflicts between ourselves. We have had differences of opinion, over the past year, in we have both striven to see the other's viewpoint and a solution has always been found. I think, too, that I also have in the back of my mind that I was offered a choice (to refuse Deborah as my supervisor) at the outset and that I have assumed that this will still be the case. Perhaps it would be sensible for me to check this assumption, but I am comfortable to continue to rely on my trust in my supervisor, which has grown throughout my relationship with her.

References

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