

# Supervision in counselling



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Supervision is the practice where a counsellor can talk to a professional who is trained to identify any psychological or behavioural changes in the counsellor that could be due to an inability to cope with issues presented by clients. A supervisor is also responsible for challenging practices and procedures, developing improved or different techniques, and informing clients of alternative theories and/or new practices, as well as industry changes. The supportive and educative process of supervision is aimed toward assisting supervisees in the application of counselling theory and techniques to client problems (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009).

Supervision is usually a regular, formal arrangement for counsellors to discuss their work with someone who is experienced in counselling and supervision. The task is to work together to ensure and develop the efficiency of the counsellor/client relationship, maintain adequate standards of counselling and a method of consultancy to widen the horizons of an experienced practitioner (ACA, 2009).

### **Aim of Supervision**

Generally, supervision has two primary goals: to monitor client care and ensure clients are receiving appropriate therapeutic counselling, and to enhance professional functioning (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009).

Supervision provides benefits for counsellors such as support, an opportunity to discover new ideas and strategies, as well as personal and professional development. Another benefit in addition to counsellor support and development is learning across the professional lifespan of counsellors – life long learning (Borders & Usher, 1992).

The intention of supervision is to provide a means of support, and ongoing learning and professional development for counsellors who frequently work with difficult and stressful cases. This serves to prevent excess stress and burnout (Haynes, Corey, & Moulton, 2003).

The educational and encouraging role of the supervisor focuses on creating a secure setting where the supervisee can reflect on their work, get feedback, direction, reassess their capabilities and gain greater understanding about their work, clients and themselves with the aim of protecting the client and offering best possible counselling practices (Powell, 1993).

In order to promote counsellor development supervision needs to take place in a safe and appropriate environment. To achieve this, as in a counselling session, empathy, openness, and positive regard are essential (Egan, 2007). Both parties must also trust in the integrity and honesty of the other.

An ethical framework is necessary to promote this trust, and there should be an appreciation of the importance of the supervision process, which reduces the pressure on the counsellor to produce an outcome at the cost of the process and the working relationship.

The ethical principals of counselling are intended as a guide and framework for the responsibilities of counsellors: showing consideration for the trust of participants, respecting their independence, committing to the promotion of the well-being of all participants and at a minium, to do no harm, to respect each individual and treat everyone justly and without bias, and seeking professional development (Egan, 2007).

The obligation to work ethically will improve provision and the reception of services, and allow opportunities for development for both parties to take place. The supervisor has a responsibility to ensure that confidentiality is maintained, and any information obtained in a clinical or consulting relationship is discussed only for professional purposes and only with persons clearly concerned with the case (ACA, 2009).

Different ways of evaluating the supervisory process can be important both for the supervisor and the supervisee. Establishing a contract for the supervisory relationship makes evaluation easier. The contract should include the student's developmental needs, the supervisor's competencies, and supervisory goals and methods (Stoltenberg & Delworth, 1987). Ground rules set up at the start are important to clarify the expectations of the supervisor as well as the supervisee, and that the responsibility for success of the process rests with both parties. As part of the contract it is important to discuss what can and can't stay confidential. Throughout the supervision process, the supervisor is responsible for evaluating the quality of the supervisory relationship (Powell, 1993).

Occasionally things happen between a supervisor and supervisee that has nothing to do with the individuals themselves, but with what and who the person reminds them of. Feelings can be transferred from other associations onto the supervisor. Also the feelings a supervisor may experiences towards a supervisee can be linked to experiences and associations in the past. In order to ensure the safety of both parties the practitioners must subscribe to a set code of practice and ethics (Powell, 1993).

**Personal Experience**

My personal experience of supervision has for the most part been very general, discussing casework and looking for feedback, ideas and strategies, and wide-ranging discussions concerning my personal experiences. My practicum has involved spending three hours a week at a local men's hostel, with some time set aside for discussion, coffee, and exchange of ideas. This time has been most helpful in dealing with feelings of frustration that arise, that can be very challenging for me and could present difficulties if not addressed. The assistance can come in the form of a reminder that it is not really about me, that change cannot be forced from the outside, or just a comment that things move slowly, and a positive outcome may take years.

Unfortunately, there are few unique cases at the hostel, even if these cases are challenging and complex. Many of the individuals in residence present with dual diagnosis, and are well known to staff. There are no quick fixes or easy solutions, and staff cannot indulge in irritation or frustration over lack of resolutions. Sometimes, there will be no resolution or positive outcome. One resident was feeling very positive and looking forward to work one week, but was unable to return in subsequent weeks due to drug and alcohol use. I still that he will be able to return at a later date.

It is also very distressing to see such young people with permanent impairment from drug and alcohol use, and realise that no amount of counselling or medical treatment will be able to provide them with a standard type of existence. Supervision can be used as a place to debrief, to share experiences, and brainstorm alternatives. It can be very reassuring to have someone to fall back on, and gain support from, in challenging or

complex situations. I find it very useful to be able to talk things through, and then come to an individual understanding and acceptance of any given situation.

Seeking a second opinion, background information on a resident and discussing approaches seems to make up most of supervision time, and some other functions of supervision have also happened more informally, over a cup of coffee in the staff room, particularly in relation to future employment.

Unsurprisingly, as graduation draws nearer, it is also the career development aspect of supervision that has taken up a great deal of my thoughts – where to go next, what sort of work would I best be suited to, what type of educational opportunities do I see coming up. This has for me been very valuable, as I can seek advice and tips from people in the field, and get a genuine appreciation for what it means to work in this field.

Overall, I think it is generally expected, and helpful, for those who receive supervision to do some preparation before starting supervision, and to build up an awareness of what the supervision is to achieve. Not to consider it an obligation but as an opportunity to develop as a more effective counsellor

Reviewing and reflecting on casework is a good way to think through what has happened in the past week, and where it will take us. Preparation can also help with bringing concerns and questions to ask supervisor, with seeking confirmation and clarification, and start the thought processes about what I need from the supervisor.

**Evaluation**

Fundamental to developmental models of supervision is the theory that as people and counsellors we are continuously growing and maturing; like all people we develop over time, and this development and is a process with stages or phases that are predictable. In general, developmental models of supervision define progressive stages of supervisee development from novice to expert, each stage consisting of discrete characteristics and skills (Bradley & Ladany, 2000).

Stoltenberg and Delworth (1987) depict a developmental model with three levels: beginning, intermediate, and advanced. In each level a counsellor may begin in an imitative way and move toward a more competent, self-assured and self-reliant state for each level. Beginning supervisees would find themselves relatively dependent on the supervisor to understand or explain client behaviours and mind-sets and establish plans for intervention. Intermediate supervisees would depend on supervisors for an understanding of more complex clients, but would be irritated at suggestions about more simple cases. Resistance is characteristic of this stage, because the supervisee's sense of self can feel easily threatened. Advanced supervisees function independently, seek consultation when appropriate, and feel responsible for their own choices.

For example, at my current beginner stage, I am expected to have limited skills and lack confidence as a counsellor, as I am only starting out as a trainee. With more time on the job, I should develop more skills and confidence, and perhaps conflicting feelings about perceived independence/dependence on my supervisor. In a later developmental stage,

I would be expected to show high level communication abilities, good problem-solving skills and be reflective about the counselling and supervisory process (Haynes, Corey, & Moulton, 2003).

An awareness of these development stages can be very comforting, as I am not expected to be perfect on the first day on the job, or know everything about the field immediately. Rather, the expectation is that I have a capacity to learn, grow and improve, and each day be a little bit better.

Supervision and professional development is important as it assists in the maintenance and improvement of my standard of practice. It can incorporate self directed and assisted learning, on the job training and coaching, include education through case discussions and presentations, and learning from our successes and mistakes (Powell, 1993).

It is very encouraging to know that supervision can be something in addition to just making things clearer or providing a fresh approach to casework. Something more than focus and insight from a third party, or a sign that I am on the right track, or the opportunity to vent my frustrations concerning clients.

In counselling, it has been put forward that supervision be entrenched into a broader discussion of lifelong learning, where supervision is viewed as one of a range of support and learning tools that counsellors may be encouraged to access (McMahon and Patton, 2002).

Lifelong learning is being seen as essential for everyone, and, just as supervision is focused on preventing burn out and promoting personal



development, lifelong learning is also primarily focused on sustaining longevity and endurance within working life (Holmes, 2002).

Learning is the process of “ individuals constructing and transforming experience into knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, beliefs, emotions” (Holmes, 2002), all of which are also sought after outcomes of supervision, and of practical use in counselling.

Supervision encourages counsellors to reflect on their knowledge, skills, values and beliefs in order to bring to supervision an account of their experience, and through supervision transform it in such a way that it is significant and substantial, and able to be transferred into their work and personal learning (McMahon and Patton, 20002).

Assisting and promoting the supervisee’s learning and professional development is primarily a matter of providing appropriate teaching and learning environments (Stoltenberg & Delworth, 1987) and may involve the supervisor in providing students with opportunities to reflect on their values and to examine the influence of such values in the counsellor’s work with clients.

The aim is to take full advantage of and recognise growth needed for the future, continuously identifying new areas of growth in a life-long learning process (McMahon and Patton, 20002).

## **Conclusion**

Administrative supervision is something I am very familiar with after working in the public service for a dozen years. More often as peer supervision due to

availability of personnel and cost, but also group and one-on-one supervision applied to different kinds of tasks. It was an activity that I found very helpful for my work, as it allowed me to be more efficient, effective, provide a more professional output, and to promote information sharing concerning best practice, improvements and innovations.

This kind of supervision was strictly impersonal, and all about work.

Unfortunately, there was little attention paid to the workers, and their well being, growth and development.

Counselling supervision, on the other hand, has an extra dimension that is not considered when dealing with purely administrative matters. It takes a more holistic view of helping others, and acknowledges that we cannot help others unless we also help ourselves. Counselling supervision acknowledges that the counsellor is a part of the dialogue, and cannot be removed from the equation, and so takes steps to limit harm for all parties, to ensure that prejudices or preconceptions of the counsellor do not impact on any therapeutic relationship. Counselling supervision takes it that extra step to look at supporting the counsellor in their work, and in their development.

Egan focuses very well on this when he looks at a certain level of self-knowledge, self-awareness and maturity as an essential requirement to being an effective counsellor (Egan, 2007). Supervision provides a space where counsellors can acknowledge and challenge any blind spots, overcome biases and become better counsellors.

An appropriate supervisory relationship can help broaden therapeutic skills. It can be used to develop interventions and provide insights for assessments.

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Supervision can be used to focus on relational issues in order to cultivate patient/client resources, and to build up and support a counsellor's own therapeutic influence. Supervision should enable counsellors to acquire new professional and personal insights through their own experiences.

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