

Supervision

The purpose of supervision is to help you be more effective in meeting the client's needs. Supervision is primarily for the benefit of the client. Regular ongoing supervision is one of the ways in which a practitioner meets the BACP ethical requirement to act in the client's best interest.

What goes on in supervision?

Gaie Houston (1995) identifies three aspects to supervision – policing, plumbing and poetry.

Policing is the term coined to describe the aspect of supervision concerned with boundary-monitoring and the maintenance of a framework in which counselling and supervision can take place. It is concerned with ensuring that the counsellor is adhering to the ethical guidelines and working in the client's best interest.

Plumbing refers to the educative aspect of supervision in teaching supervisees how-to be more effective and competent in their therapeutic work. It includes knowledge of counselling and psychotherapy, understanding of human psychological development and competency in psychotherapeutic methods and skills. The supervisor's attitude, patience and mind-set will also have an implicit impact on the learning of the supervisees.

Poetry in supervision is the creation of a space where supervisees have the freedom to tell back and explore their experience with the client. It involves the imaginative collaboration of supervisor and supervisee in gaining insight and empathy for the client. Where there have been difficulties in communication it allows for the supervisee to regain compassion and thereby work more effectively with the client.

The Focus in Supervision

The focus of supervision can cover a range of aspects of the counselling process, such as the client content, the counsellor's interventions and the dynamic of the counselling relationship. A supervision session might have a focus on just one of these aspects or it may consider a number of them. Hawkins and Shohet (1994) identify six foci divided between what they see as the two matrices of supervision: the counselling matrix and the supervision matrix.

In the **counselling matrix** the focus can be on,

1. Reflection on the content of the therapy session
2. Exploration of the counsellor's interventions
3. Exploration of the counselling process and relationship

In the **supervision matrix** the foci are,

4. The counsellor's countertransference
5. The here-and-now of the supervision process as a parallel of the counselling relationship
6. The supervisor's countertransference to the material from the counselling matrix

Development through Supervision

Supervisees can expect to go through a number of stages of development over the years ranging from beginner to becoming supervisors themselves. An indicator of progress is the degree to which a supervisee uses his own **internal supervisor**. This concept of Patrick Casement (1988) refers to the supervisee's capacity to reflect on the work with a client and to use

this thinking to inform further work. Another useful concept formulated by Casement is **trial identification**, which simply means reflecting and imagining how the client might have felt in receiving the communications you have made. This could be described as a retrospective form of advanced empathy or inclusion as we say in Gestalt. When a supervisee is functioning at a high level the supervision session becomes a dialogue between the internal supervisors of both supervisor and supervisee. This does not happen overnight and it only comes about through many years of reflective practice.

Making Use of Supervision

In the beginning stages supervisees tend to be dependent on their supervisors.

Trainee counsellors despite being highly motivated to improve their knowledge and skills will inevitably experience some anxiety and insecurity about their role. When it comes to presenting client work it is possible that they may fear supervision to be a very exposing and potentially shaming space. The causes of anxiety arise not just from having their work externally evaluated by others (supervisor, peers), but also from their own internal assessor and the expectations they have of themselves.

When you are beginning you do not have a body of experience to draw on to help you get an overview of the counselling process. This is compounded by the fact that most trainee counsellors are working in placements that only offer short term counselling to their clients. This tends to exacerbate the tendency of beginners to feel they are under pressure to 'fix' and come up with solutions for their clients. It is important you do not allow yourself to fall into the trap of becoming the 'change agent' and that you maintain the position of neutrality or creative indifference.

When it comes to supervision I would encourage you to approach it with humility and self-compassion, accepting that you are here to learn and the best way of learning is from experience. If you are reluctant to share all your experience of working with a client then what you get from supervision will be limited. Here are some pointers on how to get the best from supervision:

- In group supervision be aware that it can feel very exposing to share your work with clients and to bear this in mind when giving feedback to peers on their work. Aim to be constructive without sacrificing authenticity and honesty.
- Adopt the frame of mind, which instead of viewing a particular intervention as a mistake, looks on it as one of a number of possible interventions and be willing to explore what else could have been done.
- Prepare yourself in advance in terms of who you are going to present and what is it that you would like help with in your work.
- Come with notes so you can give as full an account as possible of your work with the client. When writing your notes you might give thought to foci 1 to 4 mentioned above in the notes on the focus in supervision. This does not mean you have to write detailed notes on each aspect, but you need to hold in mind that supervision does not just focus on content. The dynamic or process between you and the client are of equal importance.

References

- Casement P. (1988) On Learning From The Patient Routledge (First pub 1985 by Tavistock Pub. Ltd)
- Hawkins P. and Shohet R. (1994) Supervision in the Helping Professions Open Univ. Press
- Houston G. (1995) Supervision and Counselling The Rochester Foundation