

## The Importance of Counselling Supervision

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Supervision in counselling is when a professional counsellor uses the services of another counsellor or psychotherapist to review the way they work with their clients. Supervision is a key requirement by many reputed professional counselling membership and regulatory bodies such as the BACP (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy) to ensure all counsellors in practice are keeping their skills up to date and that they work in a safe and ethical way. Supervision in counselling therefore also forms part of the counsellor's continuous professional and personal development. Supervision is therefore what makes counselling a managed and professional activity.

The BACP Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions (2018), goes on to provide a full section devoted to supervision, starting as follows (paragraph 60):

"Supervision is essential to how practitioners sustain good practice throughout their working life. Supervision provides practitioners with regular and ongoing opportunities to reflect in depth about all aspects of their practice in order to work as effectively, safely and ethically as possible. Supervision also sustains the personal resourcefulness required to undertake the work."

The BACP state that for a counsellor to work ethically, they must attend regular supervision, to review and justify their work.

Geldard and Geldard in their book Basic Personal Counselling (2001) further state that:

"Supervisory relationships are a complex blend of professional, education and therapeutic aspects".  
(Geldard, & Geldard, 2001, p.377)

As such, it is now widely accepted that all counsellors, whether experienced or just starting out, will benefit from having regular professional supervision. A supervisor acts in a mentoring role, providing emotional support as well as information and guidance.

Counsellors working within helping agencies will hopefully have supervision sessions built into their work schedules, but it may be overlooked by those working in other organisations or in private practice. While recognising its value, some beginning counsellors may feel threatened by the idea of someone "judging" their effectiveness and avoid seeking supervision if it is not part of their work situation.

Geldard and Geldard in their book Basic Personal Counselling (2001) also state that all counsellors need supervision to help them resolve their own issues and to avoid burnout in what is an emotionally draining occupation. As well as providing a sounding board for the counsellor's concerns, a supervisor is in a good position to spot the onset of any symptoms of burnout and to assist the counsellor in dealing with them.

Supervision is perhaps the most important component in the development of a competent practitioner. It is within the context of supervision that trainees begin to develop a sense of their professional identity

and to examine their own beliefs and attitude regarding clients and therapy. (Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 2007, p.360)

A good counsellor will be fully aware of his or her own values, beliefs, attitudes and biases; being aware of them lessens the danger of their impacting negatively on the counselling relationship. We all operate within a personal belief system, but counsellors need to remember always to work with their clients in a way which is consistent with the client's values, not their own.

As in all professions the counsellor needs to be constantly upgrading their knowledge and skills: there is ongoing development of psychotherapeutic techniques, strategies and models and it is incumbent upon us to keep up to date. If we neglect to pursue this continuing learning process we are short changing our clients.

“As practitioners, we can never know all that we might like to know, nor can we attain all the skills required to effectively intervene with all client populations or all types of problems”. (Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 2007, p.360)

Discussing counselling sessions with a supervisor and getting feedback enables practising counsellors to gain an objective insight into their own performance and skills. It provides an opportunity to learn and practise new skills and to find better ways to help clients. Debriefing is also an important element of the supervisory relationship, enabling the counsellor to look objectively at the issues raised in the counselling session and their response to them.

Due to the sensitive content of many client issues it is easy for a counsellor to become over-involved and for professional boundaries to become blurred; a supervisor will quickly spot this tendency and can intercede to stop it becoming problematic.

Counsellors will be challenged by many ethical dilemmas along the way and the correct path is not always clearly marked; discussing these issues with a supervisor will ensure that professional ethical standards are maintained.

“...professional competence is not attained once and for all. Being a competent professional demands not only continuing education but also a willingness to obtain periodic supervision when faced with ethical or clinical dilemmas”. (Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 2007, p.360)

Counselling can be a very stressful occupation. A supervisor who is looking on will notice symptoms of undue stress which could lead to burnout. Burnout is an ever present danger, particularly for beginning counsellors and those working in agencies with large caseloads. A supervisor can help the counsellor put prevention strategies in place.

There are several different models of supervision which fall into three main groups: the supervisor is present during the session; the session is recorded; and the counsellor reports on the session. It is important to note that the first two models require client consent; the third can be done without disclosing client details.

Direct observation of the session by the supervisor can occur in three ways:

- the supervisor is actually present in the room for the counselling session; this would only be appropriate in an agency situation.
- the supervisor watches the session through a one-way mirror
- the supervisor watches the session via closed circuit television (CCT)

While the second and third methods are much less intrusive than having the supervisor physically present in the room, it is likely that all three will change the nature of the session. Both counsellor and client may be nervous with a third party present, also the client may choose to withhold some information or details which otherwise may have been presented. These variables will impact on the effectiveness of the counselling relationship to a greater or lesser extent.

Session recording may be video or audio which may pose some of the same problems, but possibly to a lesser extent as the participants may find it easier to forget the observer if they are not visible. If using video or audio taped sessions for supervision it is recommended that the supervisor make the time to study them prior to the supervisory session in order to maximise their usefulness. An alternative approach would be for the counsellor to present specific parts of the recording which they want to deal with but this does introduce an element of subjectivity.

Recording the session will also no doubt affect it in some way but the counsellor can help minimise this by themselves being relaxed about the process.

Video recordings obviously provide more information as the non-verbal cues are clear, but they also are likely to make the participants more nervous than an audio recording which is less intrusive.

Self-reporting by the counsellor is a much-used method, due to its convenience; it does suffer, however, from its subjectivity which may lead to inaccuracies: the counsellor's perception and/or memory of the session after the event may be unreliable or biased in some way.

On the other hand the resulting dialogue between supervisor and counsellor may bring about greater awareness and understanding for both parties. Process notes, which relate to case notes taken during the session, may be used; these do allow the supervisor to gain an insight into how the counsellor was feeling during the session but are still subject to the counsellor's own interpretation of the events.

Some supervisors believe that they cannot adequately work with the counsellor without either an audio or video recording of the session; others, however, consider that the self-report model offers them a better opportunity to understand the way the counsellor is working. The supervision model used will be a matter of choice and agreement between the supervisor and supervisee.

One aspect of the supervisory relationship which is extremely important and sometimes difficult to deal with is the issue of client confidentiality and informed consent. As already stated, only the self-reporting

model of supervision can operate without client consent, and then only if the counsellor carefully maintains the client's anonymity which may be difficult in a small community, for instance.

In both the other models the client will need to give their consent, either to the presence of the supervisor in the session or watching through a one-way mirror or CCT or to the audio or video recording of the session. Some clients may refuse this consent, but the counsellor can improve the chances of its acceptance by the client by presenting the issue in a confident and professional manner. If the counsellor seems flustered or nervous the client will certainly pick up on this and probably decline to participate. It is obviously essential that all aspects of the issue are clearly explained to the client and correctly understood by both parties before seeking formal agreement.

Supervisors may work in an educative or training role, teaching the counsellor new skills and even having an ongoing training and assessment role. If the counsellor is working in an agency or organisation the supervisor will often be in a managerial role. Counsellors in private practice need to seek out a more experienced counsellor who will act in a consultancy and debriefing role.

There is also group, peer or team supervision where the supervisor is at a similar level to the supervisee. Group supervision can provide a range of learning opportunities and perspectives but, like any group activity, needs to be carefully facilitated. Peer group supervision is particularly relevant to more experienced and competent counsellors who have established a good support network.

Most supervisory relationships will be a blend of professional, education and therapeutic aspects, but it is of prime importance that the supervisor relate the supervision sessions to the counsellor (supervisee) and not to the issues presented by the clients.

“Supervisors play multiple roles in the supervision process, and the boundaries between therapy and supervision are not always clear. In the literature on supervision, there seems to be basic agreement that the supervision process should concentrate on the supervisee's professional development rather than on personal concerns and that supervision and counselling have different purposes”. (Corey, Corey & Callanan, 2007, p.377)

Counsellors work in a range of different situations including organisations, helping agencies and private practice. Supervision is something which is sometimes overlooked in all three situations. A counsellor working within an organisation is often working alone in an 'expert' position and may find it difficult to be seen seeking 'outside assistance'; agency counsellors often have much too heavy caseloads and time and opportunity for supervision is extremely limited or non-existent; and a private practitioner may experience initial difficulty in finding a compatible supervisor.

Whatever the difficulties, however, I believe that good professional supervision is a necessity for all counsellors, for learning, for debriefing, for self-development. I also believe that our clients have a right to expect that we do undertake ongoing professional development at all levels, remaining up to date and aware of new trends.

It is also vital that all practising counsellors develop an ability to 'supervise' themselves: to constantly observe, assess and evaluate their work with their clients objectively and truthfully. Perhaps the last word should go to Peter Hawkins and Robin Shohet in their book *Supervision in the Helping Profession*:

"There are many reasons to be proactive in getting supervision for ourselves. First, supervision is a central form of support, where we can focus on our own difficulties as a worker as well as have our supervisor share some of the responsibility for our work with the clients. Second, supervision forms part of our continual learning and development as workers, including eventually helping us to learn how to be supervisors.

A good supervisor can also help us to use our own resources better, manage our work load and challenge our inappropriately patterned ways of coping. We think that, if we are helping clients take more change of their own lives, it is essential that we are doing the same. Finally, there is research to show that good supervision correlates with job satisfaction". (Hawkins, & Shohet, 2000, p.23)

### **What Does Counselling Supervision Entail?**

You might imagine that working with a counselling supervisor would be like having a yearly review with your boss: when you are given targets to achieve, told what training you must attend, and informed whether or not you get a pay rise.

However, counselling supervision is very different. A supervisor is a qualified counsellor, with additional qualifications in supervision and considerable practice experience.

As a student, you would typically see your supervisor for 1.5 hours after 12 hours of client work or after one month (depending on which comes first).

It is important to keep records of when you see your supervisor and for how long; without this, the client hours you have accumulated might not be counted by your awarding body.

### **3 Main areas of Supervision**

Supervision falls into three main areas, with ethics always being in the forefront of both the supervisors and counsellors' mind:

1. Formative (i.e. growth-based): the supervisor shares their experience to teach the counsellor.
2. Normative (i.e. monitoring-based): the supervisor asks the counsellor to account and justify their work.
3. Restorative (i.e. support-based): the supervisor offers support if the counsellor is struggling with an ethical issue or an aspect of their practice.

Supervision is not the place for the counsellor to obtain their own therapy, although sometimes issues in a counsellor's life might impact on their ability to give full attention to the client.

If this is the case, then the supervisor might suggest that the counsellor accesses their own therapy to look at issues in their lives.

### **The Seven-Eyed Model of Supervision**

Understanding models of supervision can help us get the best out of our supervision, informing what we take to our supervisor.

Having a common language can support us to work more cooperatively and collegially together.

One model that is used widely is that by Shohet and Hawkins, as described in their book *Supervision in the Helping Professions* (Open University Press, 2012).

This model is popular not only in counselling and psychotherapy but also in coaching, social work and support work.

The 'seven eyes' refer to seven different ways of looking at the client presentation and related relationships.

These focus on the:

1. client
2. supervisee's interventions
3. client-supervisee relationship
4. supervisee's own experiences
5. supervisor-supervisee relationship
6. supervisor's own reflections
7. wider context

### **Types of Supervision in Counselling**

Most supervision takes place on a one-to-one basis, but you can also have group supervision.

You can't usually count all the time you spend in this.

For example, the BACP allows you to claim half the time if there are up to four people in the group.

For groups of more than four, you have to divide the amount of time by the number of people (so for two hours of supervision, a group of six could claim 20 minutes each).

Peer supervision again involves working in a group, but without the presence of a qualified supervisor.

Peer supervision is usually a reciprocal arrangement involving peers working together to help each other learn and develop.

When individuals lead their own supervision processes in this way, it can be difficult to maintain the quality and effectiveness over time, and so is often seen as supplement to – rather than substitute for – supervision with a qualified and experienced supervisor.

**References**

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