

Supervising the newly qualified counsellor/therapist

How many of you have successfully passed your driving test? I want to take you back to the first time you drove a car after you had passed your test; if you drove home after passing your test then go back to the very next time you drove. Were you in the car on your own? What did it feel like? Would you have liked to have the person who taught you to drive sitting next to you? Spend a few seconds remembering that first journey. What did it feel like?

Now I would like you to go back to the time when you first qualified as a counsellor or therapist – whatever that means to you. Remember when it was and how you felt about having qualified; with whom did you travel that journey? What were your thoughts and feelings about being a practitioner, now you had qualified? What did you want from your supervisor at that stage? Knowing what you know now, what did you need from your supervisor?

Okay – I hope that has helped you reconnect a little with your own experience of what it means to be 'newly qualified'.

For the purposes of this talk I am taking the term 'newly-qualified' to describe the period that starts when a counsellor has successfully completed a two/three year professional training programme and typically 150 - 200 hours counselling, through to when they have recently, or are currently approaching the point of reaching the 450 supervised counselling hours required to be eligible to apply for BACP accreditation. Typically I guess this covers a 3-4 year period from successful completion of counselling training.

This probably corresponds roughly with the level 2 therapists as described by Hogan back in 1964, who wrote; 'at this level, the psychotherapists struggle with a dependency-autonomy conflict. In their quest to find their own adaptation, they vacillate between feeling overconfident and being overwhelmed.' (p139) In more modern parlance, this fits best (I think) into the 'advanced student phase' as described by Rønnestad & Skovholt, in their excellent book *'The Developing Practitioner'* (2013). Please bear in mind they are located in the USA system, which is different to our own.

So what are some of the challenges facing the newly qualified counsellor?

- They are now in a transitional stage – they no longer have the protection afforded by the status of trainee, but neither are they yet fully established.
- At times new client cases may feel overwhelming – how will they ever be able to learn enough to help them all?
- They have probably recently lost the regular contact and support of the other people with whom they trained and the tutors on their programme.
- They may be frustrated by having to continue to undertake counselling on a voluntary basis, possibly alongside having to partially or fully fund their own supervision and (hopefully) therapy.
- They may be ambivalent about continuing to be supervised by the supervisor who they worked with as a trainee. They know this supervisor probably saw them at their least confident and least skilled. At the same time they may also be fearful and reluctant to let go of this one relationship of continuity and move on to a new supervisor for this next phase of their development.

Taking all this into account, what are some of the issues and challenges we need to consider as supervisors when working with a supervisee in this phase?

- They may feel that they have to adopt a professional mask for a while, to compensate for still feeling uncertain whilst now having to shoulder the title 'qualified'. How therefore do we continue to encourage them to learn and be open, whilst respecting they may need defences for a while?
- We need to encourage a growing sense of autonomy and professional authority in their client work, whilst not encouraging complacency or arrogance. This may require us to judge whether to respect them disagreeing with us over areas of practice or whether to exert our authority for the sake of their client, even though doing so may risk undermining their fragile self-confidence.
- We may be wise to tolerate a degree of resentment and acting out behaviour, for example through being a bit late, unprepared or moving sessions, if their own unresolved teenage issues are re-stimulated. How are you around teenagers and young adults?
- We do well to be on the lookout for those moments when we may be tempted to 'put them in their place' if our anxieties are provoked by their growing confidence and professional identity.
- We need to regularly review the length of our supervision contract – they will probably be best served by changing supervisors every 2-3 years in order to experience different supervisory relationships and approaches during this time when their professional identity is still quite malleable. This may not be our preference, but may be an important part of our service towards them and their clients.

It can also be a really exciting time, watching your supervisee grown in confidence and stature as a practitioner, perhaps developing a special area of interest about which they gather knowledge and understanding. Their enthusiasm can be contagious and it is important to let it blossom.

References:

Hogan, R.A. (1964) 'Issues and approaches in supervision', *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice* 1: 139–141.

Rønnestad, M. H. & Skovholt, T. M. (2013) *The Developing Practitioner: Growth and Stagnation of Therapists and Counselors*, New York: Routledge.

Notes:

1. BACP Counsellor/Psychotherapist Accreditation Scheme

This is for individual counsellors and psychotherapists who have successfully completed 450 hours of professional counselling/psychotherapy training with an integral student placement element, have been in practice for at least three years, and have accumulated a minimum of 450 hours of practice covered by at least 1.5 hours of supervision per month. Applicants must be Registered MBACP Members. *Downloaded from BACP website, 11th February 2015*

2. First presented to the Yorkshire Supervisors Forum, 14th February 2015