



Supervision: A Brief Overview

For many people, the word ‘supervision’ may conjure images of a yearly review with their boss, when they are given targets to achieve, told what training they must attend, and informed whether or not they get a pay rise. But in the world of counselling and psychotherapy, supervision is very different from this.

Types of Supervision

While one-to-one clinical supervision is the central type of supervision in counselling and psychotherapy, therapists may also engage in:

- managerial supervision – referring to how they relate to the counselling manager if they work in an agency setting
- group supervision – referring to clinical supervision that is conducted with more than one supervisee
- peer supervision – when two or more peers work together reciprocally to help their practice and development.

The rest of this article relates to one-to-one clinical supervision.

Three Functions of Supervision

Supervision has three main functions:

- formative (in which the supervisor shares their experience to teach the counsellor)

- normative (in which the supervisor asks the counsellor to account for and justify their work)
- restorative (in which the supervisor offers support if the counsellor is struggling with an ethical issue or an aspect of their practice).

Ethical Aspects

Ethics must always be at the forefront of both the supervisor's and counsellor's mind in supervision. Indeed, ethical bodies state that for a counsellor to work ethically, they must attend regular supervision, to review and justify their work.

For example, the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) states that one of our commitments to clients is to 'demonstrate accountability and candour by ... reviewing our work with clients in supervision' (2018, p. 7). Similarly, the National Counselling Society (NCS) writes: 'Regarding supervision, all practitioners undertake to ... have formal one to one supervision in place' (n.d., p. 8). And the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP) notes: 'As a practitioner, you must ... ensure continuing ability to practise by securing supervision' (2019, pp. 1, 3).

Frequency and Length of Supervision Sessions

Each ethical body has its own guidelines on how much supervision each practitioner should have, often depending on the volume and complexity of their practice, and on their level of experience. Typically, a minimum of 1.5 hours of one-to-one clinical supervision per month is required, with students often requiring more, depending on how many client hours they are accumulating.

Some ethical bodies may allow members to count other types of supervision too, but these are unlikely to be accepted as complete alternatives to one-to-one clinical supervision.

Nature of Supervisors

Supervisors must be qualified counsellors, with additional qualifications in supervision and with more practice experience than their supervisees.

A supervisor must also have a good understanding and experience of the supervisee's modality. For this reason, some therapists may have two supervisors, using one to supervise their work in their core modality (e.g. person-centred counselling or CBT with adults) and the other to supervise their specialist work (such as the trauma treatment EMDR, or working with very young children).

Supervision versus Personal Therapy

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 access their own therapy to look at these.

References

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UKCP. (2019). UKCP Code of Ethics and Professional Practice [online]. *UKCP*. [Viewed 18/1/23]. Available from: <https://www.psychotherapy.org.uk/media/bkjdm33f/ukcp-code-of-ethics-and-professional-practice-2019.pdf>