

Professional Supervision of Bodywork Practitioners

A presentation of my personal principles, understanding and style
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This article puts forward the things that I think are important for me to remember as a supervisor. I presented it as part of the Chiron assessment criteria for massage supervisors. Making the most of supervision is as valuable to the supervisee as it is as a safeguard for the client. I am looking forward to offering supervision to bodywork therapists in my new practice in North Yorkshire.

Principles of Supervision

I see supervision as a passionate joint enquiry by two professional people into the dynamics of a client/therapist relationship. I do not personally work as a massage therapist from the 'medical model' and my intention as a supervisor would be to work as an ally with supervisees for this joint voyage of discovery. I believe that through establishing genuine mutual respect and rapport within the supervisor/supervisee relationship a forum is created that makes this voyage and enquiry possible. Clues can then be found within the supervisor/supervisee relationship that will cast light on what is happening in the supervisee/client relationship (i.e. parallel process.)

Massage therapy is an intimate process and is taxing in a variety of ways. I believe that the welfare of the therapist is of paramount importance if they are to work well and safely. I would insist that supervisees not take on too much, both as regards the number and type of clients that they see. I also believe in the importance of allowing a period of six sessions to assess the appropriateness or otherwise of massage for a particular client. It is also a safeguard that enables the therapist to decide whether or not they are willing or able to continue to work with a client. As a supervisor I would stress the value in making critical judgements on the type of client that the supervisee engages with. The potential for personal and professional harm in not making such judgements is very great.

Personal Experience of Supervision as a Client.

I have experienced two very different styles of supervision. One style has allowed me to blossom and develop and the other has undermined my confidence and ability. Stressing the knowledge of the therapist and working with their positive work and insights can make supervision a validating experience. Bringing in wider and more critical insights needs to be done carefully as it can easily undermine the therapist's confidence in their own style and ability. This is why I am personally so convinced of the value of the 'passionate joint enquiry' model. Because of my different experiences of supervision I am deeply aware of the need to look after the interests of the supervisee as well as safeguard the interests of the client.

My Approach to Supervision

Practical issues about codes of conduct, ethical decision making, advertising, building up a practice and boundaries etc. are part of supervision. Supervision also allows the supervisee space to talk through their goals and achievements. We may develop haphazardly, and not realise that we have lost sight of our core values and ideals.

I would see my role as a supportive ally who allows the supervisee to develop confidence in their own style of working as a professional person. Central to this would be the validation of their thoughts and perceptions of their client. They know the client better than I, but I will have had more experience of working with massage. Challenging and deepening the supervisee's understanding of the process needs to be done sensitively.

Supervision should allow the supervisee the space to stand back and get a different perspective on their client - exploring the way they work and their difficulties and successes within this; becoming more aware of the way they affect and are affected by their clients. A systematic reflection on how parallel processes are at work can also give insight into their relationship with the client.

In the supervision of a body therapy it is vital to include the supervisee's physical response to their work with the client. The physical transference needs to be recognised as well as the emotional and psychological. It too can give useful information about the unconscious processes of the therapist and the client.

(Because of my insight and awareness in this area, I would also like to offer supervision to bodywork therapists in fields other than Biodynamic Massage. They inevitably experience transference and countertransference and need the support of supervision to deal with them.)

Talking about therapeutic work in supervision is an exposing and risky exercise, as we are all aware. There is a great temptation for supervisees not to be open with their doubts and fears. However, major difficulties arise when countertransference issues and personal difficulties are not talked about honestly and openly. I would keep this in mind in supervision and challenge appropriately.

It is also important to reinforce areas of massage practice and theory that have been overlooked or not utilised fully. Using supervision as a practical teaching arena can be pertinent and helpful. Feedback should be given on the overall quality of practice to help validate what is good and point out what could be improved.

Using supervision to discharge negative feelings about the client and their own work is a valuable safety valve. Helping to keep things in perspective and grounded in reality is sometimes necessary. Supervision is an opportunity for recharging energies and ideals and to help prevent burn-out.