

What are we up against?

In these troubled times, our work is more powerful than we realise



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Sometimes I imagine supervision sessions as subversive cells of invisible activity, as if we're creating remedial pockets of resistance to the madness and destruction going on around us. If you've ever thought of your supervision as an oasis of sorts, or a kind of safe haven, you'll probably know what I mean. Such a restorative space isn't necessarily 'subversive' in the revolutionary sense, but I often get a feeling there's something we're seeking to overthrow or turn upside down.

To push against anything requires firm footing. When supervision provides a holding field with solid ground to stand on, it strengthens our connection to our foundational values. The benign, fair, inclusive and equitable world evoked by BACP's *Ethical Framework* is hopefully what we're pushing for – and all the while an uncaring, unjust and oppressive world 'out there' inevitably pushes back. And still we continue to push on through, as best we can.

In supervision, the individual stories we recount from people's lives constitute something far greater than 'case histories' in the clinical sense. With each person, at each session, through each therapeutic encounter, we're dealing with the human struggle to overcome suffering. We want to make sense of how our clients suffer and to help them help themselves find a way to suffer less. This is what we're good at. And because we habitually reflect on what we do, we keep getting better at it. Our supervisory skills in collaborative sense-making and appreciative enquiry can make the process of supervision itself feel like an antidote to suffering, even if only partially and temporarily. The truth is, we know we all suffer, and because we're all in this together, we press on.

It's this pressing on that heartens me every day in the role of supervisor. Practitioners in supervision often say how deeply some of their clients inspire them. I hope that supervisors never overlook how often they are in turn moved and inspired by their supervisees. Clients, service users, patients, clinicians, supervisors, pastoral carers – whatever our role, we're all people who learn from each other. It would be grandiose to place supervision right at the heart of this

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collective learning, but it does perform a vital role in keeping our professional body alive.

All heart metaphors are bloody ones. I'm reminded of a recent conversation with a colleague about what it means to be truly whole-hearted when supervising. She talked vividly about trusting herself to get her blood up in supervision when she needed to, pointing out that real passion is rarely polite. For myself, I know I sometimes take advantage of the robust confidentiality of the space to spout things about my working life I might never let loose anywhere else. How about you? If an issue within or around your professional practice makes your blood boil, be sure to let your supervisor know about it. The same goes for what you might perceive in yourself as 'bloody-mindedness': if you find it applicable, that curious term probably says less about your stubborn ways than it does about your steady resolve and fortitude in adversity.

The sheer effort we frequently put into supervision isn't always obvious, even to ourselves. While we engage in our somewhat specialised dialogue, focused on finding meaningful language and imagery to create more understanding, our bodies are also busy making sense of the wide-ranging and often richly metaphorical conversation. Embodied experience in supervision can be more intense than we appreciate. Sensations of physical tiredness, for example, may arise after a session which at the time did not feel at all tiresome or draining. Conversely, I often feel mentally and physically 'charged up' following supervision, despite having been sitting down in largely reflective mode for an hour or more.

As our psychosomatic states ebb and flow, they may be only partly traceable and explicable, yet we owe it to ourselves to notice the changes as they occur and ask ourselves what they could

mean. What might be identified as vicarious trauma or second-hand shock is very likely to affect any of us in some way at some time. Supervision reminds us we're not superhuman. We persevere with our fine sensitivity because we've also learnt what to do to restore ourselves. You know your supervisor really cares about you and your work when they gently and persistently check to see if you're practising effective self-care. Almost no other profession applies this crucial ethic as part of regular and continuous support.

We would be extraordinary creatures if we never felt pulled out of shape or unpleasantly disturbed by our client work. Talking about these experiences in supervision fulfils our ordinary human need for recognition and understanding. This process is commonly called resilience, but I think there is something else going on, which is not usually acknowledged.

When I referred to 'subversive cells' and 'pockets of resistance' earlier, the associations with underground liberation movements were intentional. I'm not suggesting that by engaging in supervision we become militant protagonists in some kind of covert insurrection, but I am saying we are involved in a movement against the established order of things. I'd like us to say this to ourselves more assertively and more often. The processes of supervising and being supervised are not carried out with the purpose of keeping everything just the way it is. ●

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