

SUPERVISION

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Our capacity for acting with real integrity is tested and strengthened where fear and shame are felt



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Who can say they're totally truthful in every supervision session? Probably the answer is 'no one', but that would be too literal-minded, even if it seemed to be true.

Besides, are we sure we know what it means to be honest in supervision? Honesty is more than the absence of dishonesty. I'm not necessarily being honest with someone when I'm not lying to them. Likewise, in supervision, we're not necessarily being honest with each other just because our professional contract obliges us to avoid mendacity and deception.

I'm assuming most of us are aware of our ability, when talking about our work, to censor what we say, both knowingly and subconsciously. While some of this selective editing is inevitable and necessary, and therefore honourable, I believe we tend to exaggerate things too, which could be dishonouring the story. I doubt if any of us are ever tempted to get creative with the truth. So, there's a further question to ask: what keeps us from being dishonest in supervision? That may sound irreverent, but it deserves a conscientious answer.

When the *Ethical Framework* mentions 'honesty', it's always linked to 'integrity' – one of the personal moral qualities to which we all agree to aspire. The words 'coherence' and 'probity' are both used just once in relation to honesty. Surprisingly, 'authenticity' doesn't appear at all. It looks like the key ethical term to engage with in a discussion about the meaning of honesty in supervision is integrity.

I don't think we can say anything useful or convincing about integrity without employing some active verbs. It's derived from the Latin *integer*, meaning 'whole', so we could speak of 'wholing' – but we don't. We do speak of integrating (becoming whole) and disintegrating (becoming unwhole). How does this happen? In a court of law, by swearing to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth, people are in a sense integrating themselves. In supervision, less solemnly but no less seriously, we're committed to integrating ourselves not only by giving honest accounts of our work, but by being open to receiving and reflecting on honest responses to those accounts.

Let's illustrate this earnest-sounding business of integrating – of practising with integrity – with some examples of issues that counsellors find difficult to bring to supervision, or fear being brought up in supervision, and therefore might not be completely honest about. I'm using research summarised in an article¹ published by BACP in 2001, but I don't suppose things have changed much over the years.

There are four main areas of difficulty: 1) Very strong negative feelings (hatred, revulsion) towards clients or very strong positive feelings (sexual desire, yearning for close friendship): counsellors may find such feelings so uncomfortable to talk about that they are never openly declared. 2) Very strong feelings about supervision: supervisors evoke emotional reactions in counsellors that go unspoken; a supervisor may be perceived as incompetent, critical, demanding and controlling; the counsellor is unable or unwilling to confront the supervisor's power and authority. 3) Clinical errors: when a counsellor makes a serious mistake, either through omission or inappropriate action, when there is a significant boundary transgression. 4) Personal issues: when aspects of a counsellor's private life or identity that could significantly affect the counselling relationship are not disclosed to the supervisor.

Those areas may not always be intrinsically 'disintegrative' or 'unwholesome', but they are likely to go that way if never attended to with honesty within supervision. We could say the supervisee is practising dishonestly by not raising these matters, but if we do make that judgment, we must surely seek to understand why they're keeping silent. The research describes several explanations. Here are three that stand out:

1) Fear of negative evaluation: trainee and novice counsellors face a tricky dilemma in wanting to present themselves as competent while having to engage in a process that requires them to be transparent. 2) The impact of an audience: for some counsellors in group supervision, the presence of several people can feel such a threat that sensitive material is purposefully avoided, due to shame and embarrassment. 3) A defective working alliance: a poor supervisory relationship means that counsellors feel too unsafe to disclose all aspects of their work.

These descriptions tell us that when fear and shame are active in the supervisory space, honesty is inhibited. But let's be clear: to become fearful and ashamed in supervision does not somehow make you dishonest. Your individual capacity for integration, for acting with real integrity, is tested and strengthened precisely in the places where fear and shame are felt. None of us can avoid encountering this challenge in supervision, if we're truly seeking to integrate ourselves. It's undeniably tough to be faced with the task of being honest about our ability to be less than honest, but we learn how to put ourselves through this without dying of shame. It's honourable work, and it regularly reinforces our integrity – perhaps far more than we realise. ●

REFERENCE

- 1 Webb A. Honesty in supervision. *BACP Counselling and Psychotherapy Journal* 2001; June: 24-25.