

## SUPERVISION

## JIM HOLLOWAY

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Working well is fully noticing and getting genuinely curious about what's happening when you feel you're 'off'



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**H**ow do I know I'm working well?' A newly qualified counsellor asked herself this in a session recently and it threw me a little. She knows I see her as an engaging and creative practitioner, but her sincere question seemed to reach beyond that. What exactly does it mean to work well? How do any of us – keen novices and old hands alike – know for sure that we are doing good work?

You might immediately say that our clients are always telling us, or showing us, in one way or another, directly or indirectly, how we're doing. After all, they're the only people who see us working. Not only are we working with them, they are the work. And, more prosaically, they're the paying customer, which means their view of things matters most. So the quick answer is: ask the client. But let's take a moment to pause here, and think about what might be inside my supervisee's question.

What's internal to a good query can usually be transposed into an 'I-statement'. In this case, it could be: 'I don't feel I'm working well very often'; or 'I can't trust my own judgment about how well I'm working'; or 'I find it difficult to ask for feedback from my clients.' None of these rang true for my supervisee (though she did acknowledge she could perhaps invite feedback more frequently). We talked a bit more about the timing of the question (why now?), and about two or three current clients who came to mind. Then she rendered her implicit statement as: 'I'm almost constantly aware that I don't yet know how to truly believe I'm a good-enough counsellor.'

As we discussed this positive clarification (I'll come back to that valuable but possibly misused term 'good enough' later), we created an image of supervision as a sort of testing ground, a reliable and robust space in which we practise the art of authentic self-questioning just as much as the craft of doing therapy and supervision. She also accepted a reframe I offered her: the question was prompted by her budding internal supervisor, not by her longstanding internal critic. In relation to the notion of 'working well', her internal supervisor was becoming increasingly interested in *what* she was doing, while her internal critic was only ever interested in *how* she was doing. Paying too much attention to the latter is almost always more discouraging than motivating.

Any trainee practitioner whose self-belief is hesitant and slow to grow is very likely to need evidence of their supervisor's genuine belief in them. This dynamic may be so obvious that we take it for granted. Who would want to

work with a supervisor who didn't find them credible? I believe the mentoring aspect of supervision must be based not only on the supervisor's ability to see the supervisee's true potential, but also on their ability to give explicit credence to what the supervisee can't yet see clearly in themselves. I can still recall the plain, but precise words of encouragement spoken by my first supervisor when I was a beginner. Significantly, none of what she said felt like bland reassurance or mere praise. (To read about the specifics of giving encouragement in supervision, see the article by Anthea Millar, Penny Henderson and me in *Private Practice*, Spring 2014.)<sup>1</sup>

Most supervisors, it would seem, don't have much of a problem with their own credibility. We reckon we've paid our professional dues over many years in varied settings and can speak from wide experience, hopefully without grandiosity or false modesty. But a strong level of self-belief doesn't preclude useful self-doubt. For example, I notice feeling a bit fraudulent from time to time. When this happens in a session, I take it as a likely indicator of a new learning edge appearing in the field, or at least a sudden sign that I've forgotten what I'd assumed I still knew. Or it's reminding me that the 'fake it to make it' strategy, which has its merits, is less than ideal and doesn't always come off. And sometimes I'm just not mustering enough trust in myself, and it shows. In any case, that silent inward shift from self-belief into self-doubt tells me not to be complacent about how well I think I'm working the rest of the time. The paradox here is sharp: you really don't know you're working well until you're not. Working well is fully noticing and getting genuinely curious about what's happening when you feel you're 'off'. Furthermore, you're working well when you respond to your 'offness' by taking it honestly to supervision and figuring it out.

Returning briefly to the phrase 'good enough', here's a question to consider: is believing yourself to be a good enough practitioner truly satisfying for you? There's an enticing challenge here. It's to do with your readiness to raise your game – to go beyond 'working well' – not just when an unusual situation demands it, but in everyday practice too. The same point has been put differently, and in no uncertain terms, by Michael Carroll: 'Good enough is at times not good enough, and can become a lazy catchphrase for mediocrity and low expectations.'<sup>2</sup> Ouch! He's addressing supervisors, but I think these words can serve as a benign kick in the pants for anyone in our profession. ●

## REFERENCES

- 1 Millar A, Henderson P, Holloway J. Becoming an encouraging supervisor. *Private Practice* 2014; Spring: 27-29.
- 2 Carroll, M. *Effective supervision in the helping professions*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd; 2014.