Cyberwork

Creating team health in tough times

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So often a new year brings fresh challenges – and, in all the excitement (and even with everything I know about the importance of endings), I find it too easy to forget to create a proper ending. I say this, as I've recently been appointed as the manager of the Counselling Service at Cardiff University – and, I'm trying to create more conscious endings while I adapt to my new role, responsibilities and workload.

Which is my way of letting you know, that after eight years of writing 'Cyberwork' when online counselling was still a long way from being 'the norm', I've decided it's time to hand over this column to another online therapist. But before I do so, and as a way of consciously ending, I'm going to pop on my manager's hat and write my final three columns.

One of my priorities as a manager is the wellbeing of my team, particularly as they are all working to a hybrid model, spending time working in the office and at home. They are almost all part time, and the opportunities to physically connect with each other are limited – meaning the potential for isolation is increased. Wellbeing can be exacerbated by the nature of online counselling, and the demands of organisations to work to a brief therapy model – focusing the goal of counselling on getting an employee back to work, or to a place of more effective working again, can be additional strains.

There's a recognition that complexity in clients' presenting issues; including suicidal thoughts and attempts, multiple mental health diagnoses, and increased awareness and understanding of neurodiversity, has become the norm. It's a complex picture which can add potential layers of stress for counsellors who are finely balancing competent and ethical practice, within the confines of limited sessions and increased demand. It's likely to impact the health and wellbeing of a counselling team, and their need for support from their managers.

It's my role to respond and to support the counselling team to provide effective, ethical therapy to clients with complex issues within a brief therapy model, while also balancing the expectations and pressure from senior management (who will rarely have a counselling background). While ensuring that the service needs are met, I must also continue to support the career development of the team, staying with the team's CPD needs, all from a core position of robust self-care and wellbeing.

I find it helpful to borrow from my approach in counselling, and I ask myself – What do I have control and influence over to ensure that my team feel valued and supported? Simply put, I check that they are given space for admin, training, screen breaks and self-care, and that these are prioritised, instead of squeezing in an extra couple of clients in a week. As managers, it's so easy to fall into the trap of focusing on the numbers on a waiting list, and to pass this pressure and anxiety onto the team we manage.

And, when managing a team who are working remotely, we can overlook the impact of this on the individual counsellor, missing vital clues that they may be struggling to cope with increasing amounts of admin created by complex client needs, or by the introduction of new case management systems.

This can be exacerbated if the counselling team rarely get to see each other; opportunities to make strong collegial relationships, to share challenges, offload and support each other will be missed. My team have taught me that creating space to connect and share ideas and good practice, in a variety of ways, is of immense value to them. It has a knock-on effect on how they feel about their work, and the client satisfaction that results. It's a win-win, that focuses on the quality of the counselling, not the quantity of clients seen.

While I use the phrase 'win-win', I recognise that as manager, I cannot always meet the desired needs of all the team, all of the time. Instead, I draw on the principles, values and personal moral qualities outlined in BACP's *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* to support me in how I approach my role as a manager. I relate to the team in the same way as I do with clients, demonstrating an openness to hear, striving to understand their viewpoint, value their strengths and individual qualities, being transparent and congruent in explaining my rationale, and having the courage to recognise, and acknowledge, when I have got it wrong.

In challenging times, it doesn't always feel enough – and yet I find, as a manager, it does help the team to feel more valued and when they do, they are able to create room for more self-care. ●

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