

Cyberwork

Spotting burnout in supervision

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How well do you use supervision now that our profession is mainly working online and experiencing the new phenomenon of digital burnout?

Workplace counsellors are managing the expectations of our clients, our expectations of ourselves (personally and professionally), along with those of our employers. With less physical access to collegial support and managers, and the added personal and professional impact of COVID-19, the burden is not always visible. Indeed, it may be that our employer expects that we continue working at a pre-pandemic level, focusing on maintaining support for the clients, and that this drives us to overlook the impact on our physical and mental wellbeing of working remotely and online.

Supervision has, increasingly, become a more significant part of our self-care. It helps us to identify when we might be beginning to work unsafely beyond our competences, feeling overloaded or nearing burnout. This function is especially pertinent right now, with so many of us still relatively new to working online, perhaps with limited training, and most probably, receiving supervision from a supervisor also grappling with the differences in working online. I have heard several online-trained supervisees say that they are helping their supervisor learn how to use the technology and understand the nuances of online counselling, experiencing a role reversal that unintentionally leaves them feeling less supported, at a time when they need *more* support.

This greater level of support for counsellors new to working online is often about a need for guidance about how to manage the unique aspects of online counselling. Practical issues about using the technology and dealing with technical glitches, recognising and managing online disinhibition, or working effectively with the limited visual cues of counselling via video and telephone, are common. Our profession may have become more familiar with working online, but if it's not the medium of choice for the counsellor, there is a greater risk of overload and burnout.

And here's a question for those of you who are also supervisors: Is your supervisor familiar with online counselling and supervision? If not, you are managing your own client work and supporting your supervisees, with a supervisor who is unfamiliar in the process, which can lead you closer to burnout, as you focus on your clients and supervisees.

What are the signs of burnout in ourselves, and our supervisees, when working online?

- Cancelling or regularly rearranging sessions, citing technological difficulties
- Lack of eye contact or looking offscreen
- Difficulty seeing a wider perspective with clients and considering the impact of the relationship being online
- Being regularly late for supervision, stating technological issues as the reason
- Not giving enough time for supervision and squeezing it in between clients
- Focusing on the content of the client's story, and moving on quickly without giving the supervisor time to respond. This is easier to do online as the supervisor has to more consciously interrupt.

- Being disorganised, unprepared for counselling and supervision
- Bringing 'light' material and no longer bringing challenging or risk issues
- Having a strong emotional response, or ignoring the question, when encouraged to pause and reflect about a different approach. (Being irritable, impatient, overwhelmed, stumped for a response)
- Appearing numb, distracted, distant on the screen or exhausted.

How can we respond and support ourselves, and our supervisees to take the additional care needed to avoid burnout?

- Self-care needs to be built into your day.
- Take regular screen breaks. Manage your diary, but put longer gaps between clients to allow for a few minutes away from the screen and to move the body.
- Ask for more regular team meetings and connections with colleagues, to gain formal and informal support. Use the chat function as the equivalent to knocking on a colleague's door for a quick chat.
- Find a buddy in work to connect with weekly, as a support and safe space to offload informally.
- Create a peer support group, not necessarily formal supervision, as, when struggling with burnout, we need support, not more formal meetings.
- Increase case management meetings to monitor the amount and type of client work. Are you working with more trauma-based or complex issues or clients than anything else?
- Find an online-trained supervisor, by visiting: www.acto-org.uk ●

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