

Cyberwork

# Online supervision

**Sarah Worley-James**

worley-james@cardiff.ac.uk



**I've been thinking about the role that supervision plays in supporting a counsellor to maintain a healthy balance – in giving their energy to others and knowing to refocus on their own needs.**

I'm mindful of how tough it can be to discuss with a supervisee whether it's time to step back from a particular client group, or issue, or to take a break. I've had points in my career as a counsellor, when I've had to have this conversation in supervision, and I know how difficult it can.

If you are already working online, in all its various forms, I am curious how many of you have specific online supervision? You may have ventured into online work, and taken these clients to your existing face-to-face supervisor because that relationship is positive and you value their skills and approach. I've heard counsellors and supervisors state that it is fine to discuss online work in face-to-face supervision because, after all, 'it's all counselling'. But regardless of how experienced the supervisor may be in face-to-face work, if untrained and inexperienced in online working, she may not be aware that she will unwittingly be limiting the support and guidance she is able to offer you with your online client work.

The medium utilised always impacts on the relationship and therapeutic process. A supervisor untrained in online therapy and experienced purely in face-to-face work will not naturally be open to recognising the effects of online disinhibition. She will not be

skilled in the changes that meeting someone online makes to how their presence is felt, and how their identity and style of communication are expressed differently through text-based interactions. The supervisor won't be alert to considering what may be influencing the client's choice of online medium (synchronous, asynchronous, verbal or text based, seen or unseen), and the result this has on the therapy and relationship.

Meeting your online supervisor through online media, and in particular the medium through which you mainly meet your clients, enables them to get a true sense of how you express yourself and communicate with your clients in this way. Talking face to face about a client met with via Instant Messaging (IM), fails to give your supervisor an understanding of who you are with that client, and how the work is progressing. For example, IM is much slower paced, and can therefore be more focused work, with the client disclosing and a deeper relationship developing more quickly. If your supervisor doesn't have the knowledge and experience of working in this way, they are likely to make assumptions and suggestions

that are focused on thinking purely about the content of the work, and considering process and the relationship from a face-to-face perspective. This could lead them to overlook how conducting the sessions via IM is crucial in understanding the process, setting expectations and understanding outcomes; particularly in the time-limited world of workplace counselling.

Online supervisors need to know how to support the online counsellor to manage and work with risk online. I've met many supervisors who state that it isn't appropriate or possible to work with risk online. I don't agree. With suitable support and counsellor skill, it is not only appropriate, but also ethical, as otherwise the client may be left floundering with no support at all. A trained online supervisor will have the skills, understanding and experience to support the online therapist to work with risk safely, effectively and ethically.

Within the wider therapy world, more of us are recognising that supervision is a skilled profession in its own right, and not simply the next step for a counsellor to move into once they

have gained enough experience. This recognition is encouraging those who wish to supervise to see the necessity of gaining a qualification, and for those who do not, that this is not an indication of something lacking in them as a professional.

**'I am curious how many of you have specific online supervision?'**

I recently heard in the news of the increasing numbers of walkers getting lost in the mountains of the Lake District and Snowdonia because they are relying on their mobile phones, GPS and Google maps. Once they lose the signal or the weather turns, they can quickly get into difficulties. Mobile phones, sat navs and Google maps have their uses, but they aren't the appropriate equipment to support a mountain walker. An online counsellor may find a face-to-face supervisor helpful in clear weather, but once it becomes inclement, that therapist may soon find themselves lost without suitable guidance. ●

**Sarah Worley-James** is a Senior Counsellor and Co-ordinator of the Online Service at Cardiff University.