

Dr Jodi Mullen Podcast episode

SPEAKERS

Dr Jodi Mullen, Dr Mish

Hello and welcome. You're listening to the Craft of Supervision. My name is Dr. Mish and I'm a psychotherapist and supervisor, and I have a real passion and enthusiasm for all things clinical supervision. So, I thought I'd bring my enthusiasm for the subject to this podcast. And here I'll invite you to come on a bit of a journey with me to explore this wonderful world of supervision, through looking at the different models, through the research, the debates, and any issues that come up when we're practising supervision. I'm really glad to be here and I hope it will be useful for you too. So, let's go.

Okay, so this is a wonderful, wonderful episode. I had the absolute pleasure of sharing this space with Dr. Jodi Mullen. Dr. Mullen is I mean, wow, what a load of experience, not only is she a licensed therapist in New York State, she also teaches so she's professor at university. She's a director of integrative counselling services in New York, she's a speaker and author, play therapist and play therapy supervisor, she provides global support and is just a wonderfully enthusiastic person. I really hit it off with her, it was such a joy to share the space, I have to say I came away from the conversation really inspired, absolutely buzzing. And I'm sure this will come across in our conversation. So, enjoy this one, all the details about Dr. Mullen will be in the show notes, and I'll put links to where you can find her and the books that she's written and the training that she does in case you want to find out more about her. So do go and check her out. But enjoy this one. I know I did.

Hello, welcome to the podcast.

Thank you Mish, I'm so glad to be here.

I was so thrilled that you reached out to me, and we've had this back and forth conversation about you being a guest. And we've already started talking before we press record and realised that we've got so much to talk about. So, I wonder if you could start by introducing the area of supervision that you're interested in Jodi and just, yeah, take us through it.

Okay, so there are really like two areas. First of all, I'm just generally interested in and super dedicated to the area of supervision anyway, because it's just so important for our, not just our professional growth and keeping us doing what we're doing, which is even more important now than in the past, because there are so many of our colleagues that are suffering with compassion, fatigue, and burnout and just wanting to check out of being clinicians anymore. So, I'm generally like super interested in supervision. But even more so is in the supervision of child counsellors and play therapist. And from that I've really learned, I think the children that I work with clinically and the teenagers I work with clinically and then doing the supervision of people who work with youth, they've all been my teachers in some way, how important it is to bring the expressives, the playfulness that we bring into the therapeutic relationship into supervision, and then branching that out into supervision, even with people who are only or primarily working with adults is that you can still bring that in because you're just hitting

other parts of self and other parts of how we understand sense of clinically conceptualised things. So, I don't know if there's a super easy answer. Supervision in general, but even more specifically about bringing our own playfulness and expressive selves into the supervision relationship.

Yeah. And you encourage a real creativity in your work anyway, that you do, obviously, but also, particularly in supervision. And I think that's quite unusual that happens. Yeah. And that's a good thing. It's a good thing, that this is something that I feel those that work creatively in their therapeutic work, need to have creative supervision, and I can't find it a little bit weird if that isn't happening really?

Well, I think one of the things that I think about constantly is our roles as supervisors and that they're constantly shifting, just the same way that they shift in the therapeutic room, and that parallel process that exists there. So, if I am working with clinicians who are struggling, right, in terms, or even excelling with their clients, patients, it doesn't matter. But I am encouraging them to also look at other sensory experiences beyond verbal base counselling, then should I be modelling that in supervision? I actually lean into the parallel process?

Yeah!

Yeah, that there's the potential for so and I think in some ways, one, certainly that normalises it, but it also makes it more safe and comfortable. If we can do it in the context of supervision, if we could do a role play in the context of supervision, if we can use sand tray, in supervisions, any of this symbol metaphor kinda expressing.

Yeah, the storytelling element in there.

Yeah, then I think supervisees have an opportunity to even try that on in both their experience of it. And then also see how we incorporate that as supervisors, how do we pull them, you know, into those worlds and create that safety and credibility so that they can go there so to speak.

Yeah, and you mentioned the word safety in there, and, and therapists feeling safe? And I think that's really interesting, what would you say that... Why is that important in doing that in supervision, and also in the work?

Well, I'll start with that, I think counselling is an incredibly intimate relationship, right. And so if I am working with a supervisee, who is sharing with me about that intimacy, that relationship that they have, I want to honour that, and I don't think that's automatic, I think I have to honor that trust and safety for them, you know, for my supervisee, to be able to say to me, I feel really uncomfortable with this child, I feel really triggered by this teenager, whatever it may be. I think the other thing I'll add to that is a lot of the supervision that I do, and I actually require it of my supervisees whether they're working with children, adolescents or adults, is I want to see your work. So...

That immediately puts fear in people.

Yeah, and I think I'm fair about it. And part of the way that I create safety and comfort and credibility is, I very much will say like, if you show me yours, I'll show you mine. And I, so I will show them a session of mine, a recorded session of mine, so that they can see that my sessions aren't perfect, is they can see the difference between style and substance so that they have an idea about that. But one of the reasons that I require that they show me at least a portion of, of a session in order to work with me in supervision is, it is very different. And I've learned my lesson after being a supervisor for over 25 years, what people say happens in session, and what actually happens in sessions. And you miss that whole dynamic, if you don't have a sense of how a person shows up in a professional role.

Yeah. And is that recording the sessions across the board? Because obviously, you're based in the US, I'm in the UK. So, there may be different elements there is that something that's expected that supervisees will come and bring their recordings of work?

I don't think so.

This is a you thing! I love that you're like, you want to work with me, I need to see your work.

Yes, and I work with people like all over the planet. So my supervisees are not all US based supervisees. And they're also you know, I think even more so. And this really came from doing quite a bit of play therapy-based supervision in that. I mean, if a child doesn't verbalise it all, which is not a thing for those of us trained in play therapy, but if a child doesn't verbalise at all, and you want supervision on that session, how would I even do that? Like, if you're just going to tell me the child, you know, and it stood in the centre of the room and you know, stared, well, that was your experience, but let me see what I can catch by viewing that. So, at some point, it was my preference that I got to see what you were up to. And then later on, that developed into, I at least want to see once. I may never, you know, see you do your thing again. But I also think it is like it does create an intimacy also then in supervision. And the way I respond to that I think is really important too. I'm not looking Mish, if you send me a recording that you do for supervision. I'm not looking for what you need improvement on. I'm looking for your style. I'm looking at how we can build on what you already have, yes. That is my role as a supervisor is to do that.

Mm hmm. Yeah. And I suppose the thing that some therapists would fear, is that scrutiny? That, 'Oh, gosh, don't look at my work.' No, you know, often we do recordings of training recordings of sessions when we're in training, then once you qualified, it's not always a thing that happens. So, I think it's a really good idea that you're having that expectation of I want to see your work.

Yeah, as well. And I think too, so my students that I teach at university, and my students are graduate students earning their master's degrees in either school counselling, school psychology, or mental health counselling. And one of the things that my students will frequently say, in their second semester of internship is, 'I'm so relieved, I'll never have to record a session, again'. And I'm like well, it depends. Absolutely required if it's in play therapy, because it is not a verbal based intervention and approach. But even if it's not, I think, and then my experience has been that my supervisees, then want to show me a session, or show me a portion of a session because they'll be like, 'What do you make of this?'

It's such a valuable tool, isn't it? It's almost like you're having a little peek into a dynamic that you, like you say, you can't always, and I think that's the problem in supervision, when it's always verbal, that you can't always find the words. And I think that using creativity in supervision itself is such a great idea. So how do you usually approach that? So, if you've got if you're working with someone, how would you do it?

So, it's somewhat organic, right? In the same way, that it at least for me, and my style, as a clinician is a lot of what I do with teens and adults, because I work lifespan. So, a lot, a lot of what I do with teens and adults in terms of using expressives and play in their sessions has to do with it emerges organically with young children. I'm a play therapist. So, I just start there. That's where I usually end there, too. I mean, certainly they're allowed to verbalise and that just brings another element in, but the way that I think about it is, you know, it's just another form of communication, but it's a form of communication that is less guarded or a were able to, like, manipulate and defend, you know, so I look for opportunities like that. So, when there is a session, where perhaps I think that the therapist is maybe over talking, right, for example, I might say like, 'Let's watch your session together, and mute it and see what we can read in the nonverbals.' Like something like that. That's not like, playful and fun. But it does give like this other element to it.

Yeah, that's quite powerful actually, strikes me as a really powerful way of approaching it. Yeah. Wow.

Because then you're just left with facial expressions and body language and you know, to read what's happening. You know, some other things that I do pretty often are, weave in the sand tray play-therapy elements.

Do you want to say a bit about that? For people who don't know what that is?

Yeah. So just very simply, in the sand play therapy, and sand tray play therapy, these small little figures or miniatures are used to create scenes in the sand that then give us entry. It depends on your training into the unconscious, or just, I mean, it just gives us another way to communicate and understand a person's perspective. And like you just said, Mish, it's just like, sometimes there aren't words. And so rather than look for the word, I might say, to a supervisee, you know, if let's say they they're struggling with a particular client, or the opposite, they like, adore this client, like love them and I don't feel very helpful with them. That's a pretty common theme is I might say, like, could you choose a couple of figures that get at this internal experience that you have? Or could you create a sand tray and get at that? Or is there a song that pops into your head? You know, to just extend the invitation, maybe that's the best way to say it. extend the invitation for that to happen.

And how's that received? How's that received by your supervisees? How do they react?

Well, I think if I've already done my due diligence, and they do feel safe, and trust me is that they're like, 'Oh, yes!'

Well, it's a gift, isn't it? You're offering a gift of learning and reflection that is a different way in, so yeah.

Yeah. It's like, 'Oh, I get to go in the sand', 'I get to do this', and I think that sometimes in our adult centric, verbal centric world is that we long for that we long for an alternative. And there was something you said a few minutes ago where you said, 'And this is one of the ways...', that I think you weave it in, as you said, you know, sometimes they're just, they just aren't the words. And as soon as I hear that, in supervision, that, for me is a trigger of like, well, what are there? If there aren't words? Are there images? Can you pop some images off your phone even weave in technology too? Or could you look for images and send them to me later that really capture what you were looking for when you were looking for the words, right? Image comes before word for all of us. So, whether that's in something tangible, like a miniature or a little figure for sand tray play therapy, or that's, you know, something you take a picture of out in nature, or it could be anything, is the invitation, because that in and of itself allows for permission?

Yes. So, I think it sounds like what you do is you set the scene for that being a possibility in the supervision that you offer. And then when you catch those signals, that the words aren't quite capturing a dynamic or an understanding of someone's client, that's when you do the offering of, 'Is there an image?' Is there a piece of music is that so then you invite them into that creative space? Within supervision?

Yeah, and then I think another like, way that it emerges organically is sometimes, a lot of times, maybe most of the time, supervisees come with a particular question. What do I do when this person does, right? And so, for me, that's like, let's do a roleplay. Right? Which you can be a little silly in the roleplay. So, we first we decide who's going to be who. Are you going to be your client? Are you going to be yourself and want me to be the client? And then to take some of the anxiety away from that dynamic that they're challenged with in session? A question they bring is, I might use a silly voice or I'm a, you know, just be kind of goofy about it, in general, just to bring in a little, a little bit of that levity that also allows for creativity to emerge.

Yeah. And do you have anyone not necessarily specific but are there any challenges that you think to bringing that more creative edge into supervision? Or is there any, I don't know, is the word resistance, right? I'm not sure it's as strong as that. But is there anything though, where you're butting against someone's awkwardness with playing? So, I think one of the things that certainly I notice is we almost forget or move away from that playing element, and some therapists find it quiet, even if they're working in that way to do that themselves. It's almost like when they're in the work, it's fine. But actually, in supervision, is there any challenges to that?

But one of the things that I frequently say in my trainings that are related to the expressives in play-therapy are, the more educated you are, the more difficult this becomes? Right, because it's exactly what you're saying. And then I also think, you know, certainly there is this, like myth about like, the work, certainly the work we do is serious, but that we are always taking ourselves seriously, I think it actually gets in the way of the work. So, there are people that I've worked with in supervision, who are, and I do think resistant, would be, the correct word. And so, in some ways, I think that that's where bringing in playfulness, bringing in the expressive and creativity actually work really well because they get under that. And I mean, you and I both know this, under that is just fear, right? And they're afraid that they're not going to be competent and helpful and all of those things that are incredibly important to

the work we do. So, I think that that's actually a way to do it. But in the same way that I would do that in the therapeutic relationship, I need to titrate that. I need teeny tiny, you know steps at that, and I need to model it right so both ends have to happen so that we can really do the important and difficult work of supervision.

Yeah, yeah. And it is important and difficult. You know, I can imagine if you're face with someone who is more guarded against about being playful, that's communication, isn't it that guardedness might you say underneath is that fear, and I think it takes a skill to go around that in little baby steps, I suppose in eaking your way towards it. And I'm also curious with you because you work obviously you work across the planet, as you describe, so how do you do your creative supervision? When you're online? Is there a certain thing? Certain things you would do? Or wouldn't do? Or how do you approach it?

So, one of the things that I was thinking about, as we've been talking is just like the breadth of that, right? And so there are certain supervisees, who I can say that, alright, let's roleplay it right now. Right? Whether I'm doing it remotely, and virtually, or I'm doing it in person, and the same is true with like, is there something in your space, like a figure or something like that you, you know, choose that represents it. So, I think there's things like that, any kind of drawing more, even images, any use of images. But one of the things that I will use with somebody who's more guarded, or I just don't know, as well like, like a person who has randomly contacted me and said, 'You know, I live here in Jamaica, and I'm looking for a supervisor.' So first, of course, I want to get to know them a little bit. But even once we have established that I'm likely to start with the narratives versus the more playful of the expressive, so that might be something is like they feel stuck with a client, could you write a letter to the client? And would you be willing to share that with me, and you can do that at any time, you can pop it in an email to me, you know, at any time, and I will write back, I might write back with me, I might write back as the client. But even playing with that, and like, instead of writing a letter to the client, or patient, could you write a letter about feeling stuck and what that's for you. So, and that's a what I mean by like, titrating, it is, like, certainly writing a letter to the client might be risky, an uncensored one that they're never gonna get.

Of course! I understood that.

But I think like, writing a letter to a sense of feeling stuck or helpless, is a little bit more intimate, is a little bit more daunting. And so, let me be able to titrate that, to be, to be thoughtful in the same way I would be thoughtful clinically, you know, I want to be thoughtful in clinical supervision as well.

Yeah, yeah. And there's something lovely about that way in where you're going, 'Okay, if words are where we're starting, let's use words as the way in to be creative', because actually writing a letter to feeling stuck or, or your patient, is a way of being creative, without it feeling creative? I suppose there's sometimes a lot of fear around the phrasing of creative supervision or creativity. So, it's a way in without it feeling too fearful, hopefully.

And also, we have so much experience with that in the educational process of becoming a clinician, and we have to write notes, and, you know, treatment plans and all that. So, the writing, it's not the

writing itself that doesn't feel like a push, where if I said, you know, what I'd like you to do is draw or create, or, you know, even a sand tray, you know, is, I think a little, it's a little bit more daunting to, you know, to do that. So, leaning in where you can get someone. And I also think to that other part of that is, and this is what I would, the bar that I hold myself to as a clinician, but also as a supervisor is, I want to know why I'm doing what I'm doing when I'm doing it. So, I'm not just going to be like, you know, 'It would be fun!', 'In this supervision, let's do this.' No, it has to make sense for that supervision session, for that supervisee. For whatever they're bringing up that moment. All those things need, I need to check all of those boxes and not just do it because, oh, I have this cool idea.

Yeah, I've tried, I want to try this new thing out. And we're all victims of that I think sometimes we have, we've read this thing... we've attended something, we're like, oh, we've got this new, new thing I want to try out. And actually, what you're saying is to in order to enable that safe environment in supervision to allow creativity, it's about being careful with it, and about really thinking about, 'Why am I making this clinical decision to bring this into supervision and how will it help the supervisee? And in turn, help the client as well?'

Yeah. And then I think that other than, like, sort of like wrap that part up, is then also checking in with my supervisee about like, you know, 'How did that go for you? Like what, like so not just the product? Oh, you created a sand tray. Oh, you did a collage is what was it like? What was it like to write that personal letter an uncensored letter?'

Yeah, yeah. To really check out the journey of it, rather than just the event.

Yes.

Yeah, yeah. And I'm wondering, for anyone who's interested in how they develop this more, as part of their supervision practice, what advice would you have? Or how would you, what would you encourage people to do or look for? Or?

Yeah. Well, one is, you know, just circles back to, you know, something we already, like, illuminated was that when people say they don't have the word, or you can see them struggling with it, offer them an alternative. Like, I feel like that is the simplest and the most organic way to do that is to just say, you know, 'I see you struggling to learn, I'm wondering if there's another way to communicate it? Can you communicate it in your facial expression? Can you communicate it? Would you like to draw something?' Or is, I'm not a musical person. So, I don't usually lean into that. But is there like, even like, a sound? You know, we'll get at that. Like sometimes. Sometimes I will say that my set like a particular session feels like dun, du dun, da duah dah, du dun dah and all that. So, I think that's one way. And then I do think the play-therapy worlds, particularly the play-therapy supervision worlds it really can be adapted to doing supervision, regardless of if you're supervising people who work with children.

Okay.

Play therapy or not, I think there's a lot that can be adapted on there.

Yeah. And do you do that in your work? So even if someone isn't working with, in a play therapeutic technique, you'll still invite them to embrace a creative aspect to supervision if it feels that that's the right intervention at that time?

Yes, absolutely. Because words will kind of vacate, especially in an emotionally laden moments. And so, I don't know, one of the things that in working with lots of traumatised people, and then a lot of supervisees, who are traumatised people, is that, like, there's not words, yeah, that there are so few words that really get at those kinds of experiences. And so just I think being able to broaden, that's the way that I look at it is, ultimately, I want both my clients and my supervisees to be able to communicate verbally, non-verbally, you know, creatively, multi-sensory wise. And I do think that sometimes there needs to be an invitation and permission for that. The other thing is, I don't just want them to be able to do that. But I want to be able to be, have like the receptive communication skills, that then I know what to do with that. And so that's the give and take there.

Yeah. So would you advise supervisors to get specialist creativity and supervision professional development or some sort of, they're already practising and think, because certainly, you know, sat here as a supervisor, I'm like, 'Oh, my gosh, I'm, you know, I really need to up my game in introducing more creativity in supervision.' Because, even as going as for supervision myself, I think there's so many times when I go, 'I can't think of the right word', or, so I'd love that as my own personal takeaway. Taking that. Absolutely. But would you think that someone who's a trained supervisor, do they need something specific to elevate their skills in that area?

Well, I think you're going to get an incredibly biased answer, which is like, not only been a clinician for 25 years, but a counsellor educator and supervisor, right? Yes. And I think yes, because even that is like energising about how you might do it. So how I do it, and even, you know, sharing some of that with you today. Sure. That's my style.

Sure. Oh, of course, yeah.

But I think having some authentic learning experiences where you can try it out so that you feel responsible in using it as a supervisor. You're not just like, you say, 'Hey, I went to...' because that does happen to us all right? 'I went to this really cool, you know, attended to this really cool webinar.' So, here's what I want you to do, which is totally different than what we usually do. So, I be able to not just have like the education part of it. But the try-on, so that you're having an opportunity to have, get some direct feedback on what that looks like. So, supervision of supervision.

Yes.

But also, in any kind of training or that you would be doing or any kind of continuing education that you would be doing that it's not just like the synthesis and integration, because I think okay, that makes a lot of sense to us. But okay, the applied part. So, 'How do we apply this, what would that look like? What would it look like? Yeah, you do it? What would it look like when you do it Mish?'

Yeah, yeah, and finding your own way with it. And then also, like you say this, the supervision of supervisors. So, then reflecting on that. So, not only reflecting on it in terms of the work you've done

with that supervisee in drawing out a bit more of a creative side, but also how you're developing as a supervisor and your own reflections and growth in that area as well.

Yeah, it's like so many layers.

I know, it's like, where's the top?

Exactly. Exactly.

Yeah, well, you know, it's, well, for me, personally, I'm just so grateful for having this space with you to be able to talk about all things creativity and talk about supervision, because it's I'm such a supervision enthusiast, and I clearly you are too. So, to get us both in the same space. This has been brilliant.

I agree. And I do think that there, that there's a lot of us out there that recognise the ripple effect that we have as supervisors. So, maybe I'm taking time out of my schedule to do supervision instead of seeing clients directly, the way you know, but I think what we understand is that everybody that I supervise, right, is like, all those people are seeing all these people.

Absolutely, yeah, it really is.

So, it is such an important role and an honour to be able to do that. I don't know where the top is. But I know that the ripple effect, whatever level I'm at, feels, feels pretty magnificent.

Yeah, yeah. And I love that. I love that we recognise that as supervisors the onward effect, and yeah, it's such a joy, isn't it? But I'm certainly going to seek out some more creative focus in the supervision. So yeah, yeah, this this. And if it's made me feel like that, I'm kind of hoping that other supervisors listening will be equally as enthused and go, 'Oh, yes, I want to learn more about that.' So, what I'll make sure I do is, obviously post all of your, where they can find you and all of the details that about the stuff that you've already got out there about it, but also to look widely to in terms of where people can find being more creative in supervision. It's such a such an important part of our work and kind of taps into parts that word just can't reach. So, I love it.

Thanks once again, to the wonderful Dr. Jodi Mullen. Hope you heard how enthusiastic we both were about embracing creativity in supervision. And like I said at the start all of her contact details, where you can find her and a bit more of an in-depth bio are in the show notes for today's episode. Thanks ever so much to Dr. Mullen for being such a wonderful guest. Hopefully, we'll be collaborating over a few things in the future. So do watch out for any of those things that do emerge. And thanks for your time today. I hope this has been useful as always, do get in touch, give me feedback. And if you're interested in being a guest or just joining me to talk about supervision, you know where to find me! Okay, take care.