

SUPERVISION

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...we need to be active in examining the state of the supervisory relationship and undertake regular reviews to ascertain its health



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It may not have escaped your attention that I'm not Jim Holloway. I'm Dr Mish and I share Jim's enthusiasm about supervision, so I hope to continue this column with Jim's curious approach, but with my own twist. So, just as this column is evolving, as a keen gardener, I'm reminded at this time of year of nature's ability to evolve and grow. This also leads me to reflect on the idea of growth and evolution in supervision.

Picture, if you will, a plant in a pot, to represent supervision; with the supervisor as the pot and growing medium, providing containment and the nutrients for growth; and the plant, the supervisee, establishing their roots and developing emerging, new shoots. How has supervision provided a container for growth and evolution for you? I see it as offering the potential to encourage a blossoming of skills, but also a possible danger of stifled growth, if the conditions stay the same and don't evolve.

Growth in supervision reminds me of tending to the new shoots that appear, which need the right conditions to thrive. To nurture progress requires delicate handling, a keen eye on the conditions of the supervisory relationship, and the ability to adapt to suit the developmental needs of the supervisee. I wonder to what extent the supervisor, as the 'pot', helps to nourish and encourage the supervisee's development or restricts their growth - whether that's as a result of staying with the same supervisor for too long, or focusing on the familiar, more comfortable areas of practice and potentially neglecting other more challenging parts of our work. So, the plant may grow, but not thrive.

Equally curtailing of growth is the potential for complacency in supervision, resulting in a dynamic that doesn't evolve, that becomes formulaic or doesn't reflect the lenses through which the supervisor or supervisee are viewing the work. I'm curious about how supervision encourages growth as we develop, and whether supervisors and supervisees proactively adapt their approach to supervision as they both hone their skills? I hope that supervisors would initiate conversations with their supervisees about how their needs and understanding of the work have developed since starting their work together, or since training. If we stick to the plant metaphor, when do we know that the plant needs repotting to continue to thrive? I would suggest we need to be active in examining the state of the supervisory relationship and undertake regular reviews to ascertain its health.

Attention should also be given to how supervisors grow in their practice and what their commitments are to developing their work, so that the container they provide reflects the optimum growth conditions for the supervisee. We know that supervision has been a requirement of our profession for decades, and yet, there's so much we still don't know about supervisors and the developmental process they go through. Perhaps, if we give too much attention to how supervisees develop, we risk missing the supervisor's professional development. While I'm certainly grateful for the supervisory space to reflect on my practice, and offer this space to my fellow therapists, I also wonder whether we really know what 'effective supervision' is, how we define it, or who might decide this for us? I suppose I'm asking: how has the overall practice of supervision evolved from its origins to reflect contemporary work?

In some respects, we could say that little has changed: supervision remains the same, reliable container that encourages supervisee growth; we hold supervision up as a key element of our professionalism; we usually agree that everyone in practice needs to receive it for a minimum amount of time, at regular intervals. But I'm a little sceptical. Who made these 'rules'? What are they based on? Why do we all seem to agree without challenge? What do we do in supervision that makes it so useful?

If we return to the metaphor, I suppose I'm asking for the pot to be scrutinised as much as the plant. To this end, if we focus on the pot, we need to examine the motivations for becoming a supervisor, as well as acknowledge the wear and tear that happens to supervisors. We cannot ignore that it's both joyful and challenging work to provide the container for growth, so our own professional and personal needs must be monitored.

In practice, this would mean that I'd suggest both supervisor and supervisee spend time having intentional, deliberate conversations that should address how supervision has evolved to meet the needs of the supervisee, and what must be put in place to encourage growth. In addition, I would hope that supervisors should feel able to reflect on their own needs and access support, so that they can continue to provide good-quality supervision. Let's not sit in a comfort zone within our supervisory relationships. Instead, let's scrutinise, question and challenge the status quo. I invite you to look at the process of supervision and to be curious as to whether the current conditions encourage growth or risk stagnation? ●