1 ‘Good enough’ supervision

The late Donald Winnicott, paediatrician and psychoanalyst, introduced the concept of the ‘good enough mother’ – the mother who, when her child throws the food back at her, does not overreact to this event as a personal attack, or sink under feelings of inadequacy and guilt, but can hear this event as the child’s expressing its temporary inability to cope with the external world. Winnicott points out that it is very hard for any mother to be ‘good enough’ unless she herself is also held and supported, either by the child’s father, or another supportive adult. This provides the ‘nursing triad’, which means that the child can be held even when it needs to express his or her negativity or murderous rage.

This concept provides a very useful analogy for supervision, where the ‘good enough’ counsellor, psychotherapist or other helping professional can survive the negative attacks of the client through the strength of being held within and by the supervisory relationship. We have often seen very competent workers reduced to severe doubts about themselves and their abilities to function in their work through absorbing disturbance from clients. The supervisor’s role is not just to reassure the worker, but to allow the emotional disturbance to be felt within the safer setting of the supervisory relationship, where it can be survived, reflected upon and learnt from. Supervision thus provides a container that holds the helping relationship within the ‘therapeutic triad’.

In choosing to help, where our role is to pay attention to someone else’s needs, we are entering into a relationship that is different from the normal and everyday. There are times when it seems barely worth while, perhaps because we are battling against the odds, or because the client is ungrateful, or because we feel drained and have seemingly nothing left to give. In times of stress it is sometimes easy to keep one’s head down, to ‘get on with it’ and not take time to reflect. Organizations, teams and individuals can collude with this attitude for a variety of reasons, including external pressures and internal fears of exposing one’s own inadequacies.

At times like this supervision can be very important. It can give us a chance to stand back and reflect; a chance to avoid the easy ways out of blaming others – clients, peers, the organization, society, or even oneself; and it can give us a chance to engage in the search for new options, to discover the learning that often emerges from the most difficult situations, and to get support. We believe that, if the value and experience of good supervision are realized at the beginning of one’s professional career, then the ‘habit’ of receiving good supervision will become an integral part of the work life and the continuing development of the worker.

In the last 30 years there has been an enormous increase in the use of counselling and therapeutic approaches in many of the helping professions. This has in part been fuelled by the move away from more traditional forms of institutional containment to ‘community care’ for those needing help and support. This move has led to an ever-increasing demand, not just on families and relatives, but also on the whole range of helping professionals who have had to learn new ways of relating to the distress,
disturbance and fragmentation of their clients. At the same time there has been an increased acceptance by the general public that most people need some form of counselling or professional support at certain stages of their lives.

This enormous upsurge in both counselling and psychotherapy, and in counselling and therapeutic approaches within many of the helping and people professions, has brought in its wake the recognition that such work needs to be properly supervised. The need for skilled supervisors, good training in supervision, and for theory and research in this area has increased much faster than the provision. When we first wrote this book there were very few books on supervision in Britain, and those that did exist were mainly limited to one profession. There was also a dearth of theoretical papers and descriptive accounts by those practising supervision. Only in the late 1980s did the British Association of Counselling start to look at the training and accreditation of supervisors and psychotherapy training institutes started to provide training courses in this crucial area of work. Since the first edition appeared in 1989, there has been an enormous upsurge in both publications and training in this area. This has included important books by Carroll (1996), Page and Wosket (2001), Brown and Bourne (1996), Hughes and Pengelly (1997) Bond and Holland (1998), Carroll and Holloway (1999), Gilbert and Evans (2000), Holloway and Carroll (1999), Inskipp and Proctor (1993, 1995), Scaife (2001), Fleming and Steen (2004), Hawkins and Smith (2006) and Shohet (forthcoming) as well as many others.

In the United States they have been concerned with this core area of practice for much longer. There has been a great number of American papers and books on supervision. However, much of the work has been within the discipline of ‘counselling psychology’ and has mostly centred around one particular model – namely ‘the developmental approach’ (see particularly Stoltenberg and Delworth 1987). Although this offers a significant contribution (see Chapter 5), it attends to only one of the many important aspects of the supervisory process. Holloway has done important work synthesizing American approaches to supervision and creating an integrated approach (Holloway 1995; Holloway and Carroll 1999).

The supervisor has to integrate the developmental role of educator with that of provider of support to the worker and, in most cases, quality oversight of the supervisee’s clients. These three functions do not always sit comfortably together (see Chapter 5), and many supervisors can retreat from attempting this integration to concentrate on just one of the roles. Some supervisors become quasi-counsellors or coaches to their supervisees; others turn supervision into a two-person case conference, which focuses on client dynamics; others may have a managerial checklist with which they ‘check up’ on the client management of the supervisees. It is our intention in this book to help the supervisor develop an integrated style of supervision. We are not only advocating integration of the developmental, resourcing and qualitative functions, but also a supervisory approach which is relationship based.

Sometimes, even in the best supervisory relationships, there will be times of being stuck, of wariness and even of avoidance. For one reason or another, fear and negativity can creep in and it is useful for both parties to be able to recognize this and have tools for dealing with it. This book is addressed to both supervisor and supervisees, for we think that both have some responsibility for the quality of supervision; both form part of the same system geared towards ensuring quality of work. As part of taking joint
responsibility for the supervisory relationship which we are advocating, we have given
guidelines to check out the process, especially around the initial forming of a contract for
the working relationship. This working contract can be very important as it forms the
boundaries and baseline to which both parties can refer. We also emphasize how con-
tracting is not just something that happens at the beginning of a relationship or even at
the beginning of each session, but is also a process that needs constant revisiting.

Before entering this relationship, however, we believe that supervision begins with
self-supervision; and this begins with appraising one’s motives and facing those parts of
ourselves that we would normally keep hidden (even from our own awareness) as hon-
estly as possible. By doing this we can lessen the split that sometimes occurs in the
helpers, whereby they believe they are problem free and have no needs, and see their
clients as only sick and needy. As Margaret Rioch (Rioch et al. 1976) says: ‘If students do
not know that they are potentially murderers, crooks and cowards, they cannot deal
therapeutically with these potentialities in their clients.’

Our experience has been that supervision can be a very important part of taking care
of oneself, staying open to new learning; and is an indispensable part of the helper’s well-
being, ongoing self-development, self-awareness and commitment to development. In
some professions, however, supervision is virtually ignored after qualifying. We think
that lack of supervision can contribute to feelings of staleness, rigidity and defensiveness,
which can very easily occur in professions that require us to give so much of ourselves. In
extremes, the staleness and defensiveness contribute to the syndrome that many writers
have termed ‘burn-out’. Supervision can help to stop this process by breaking the cycle of
feeling drained, leading to a drop in work standards, which produces guilt and inade-
quacy and leads to a further drop in standards. Supervision is also not just about pre-
venting stress and burn-out but also enabling supervisees to continually learn and
flourish, so they spend more time working at their best than would otherwise be possible.

Supervision, like helping, is not a straightforward process and is even more complex
than working with clients. There is no tangible product and very little evidence whereby
we can rigorously assess its effectiveness, although in recent years more research on
outcomes has been carried out (see Chapter 6). One person brings to another a client,
usually never seen by the supervisor, and reports very selectively on aspects of the work.
Moreover, there may be all sorts of pressures on either or both of them from the pro-
fession, organization or society in which they both work. So, as well as dealing with the
client in question, they have to pay attention to their supervisory relationship and the
wider systems in which they both operate. There is a danger that both the supervisees and
the supervisor can be overwhelmed by the degree of complexity and become like the
centipede who, when asked which foot it moved first, lost the ability to move.

In order to encompass the complex interconnecting levels of the supervision process
and yet write a book that is comprehensible, we have divided the book into four parts. In
Part One we have addressed the supervisees with the intention of encouraging them to be
proactive in managing to get the support needed to do their work. Helping organizations
and managers have an important responsibility to attend to the well-being of their staff,
but it is only the workers themselves who can ensure that they get the particular type of
support that is most appropriate for them and their work situation. There is a danger that
workers may see support as coming only from higher up in their organization and to fail
to see that it can arrive from many different directions. Even within the supervisory
relationship it is important that supervisees can find a way of being active in ensuring that they make the most of the relationship. In this section we have also included a chapter on the motives for being a helper, which is relevant for supervisor and supervisees alike. Also, we have written a new Chapter 3 on continuing to learn and flourish at work.

In Part Two we look at making the transition from working with clients to becoming a supervisor, the different roles and functions that are involved, and the maps and models that we have found useful. Some of the same ground as Chapter 3 will be covered, but from the point of view of the supervisor. Chapter 7 is an in-depth exploration of the various aspects and levels of the supervisory relationship. This is addressed particularly to those supervisors who supervise counsellors, psychotherapists or other professionals who are working in intensive therapeutic relationships (such as psychiatrists, psychologists, nurse therapists, etc.) but has also been used to train supervisors of coaches, teachers, parent educators and those far from the therapeutic world.

Chapter 8 is on supervising difference which addresses issues of power both from one’s own role as well as from the cultural differences that can exist between supervisor and supervisee and client. These cultural differences may be rooted in such areas as ethnicity, nationality, gender, class, sexual orientation or professional background.

The section ends with a chapter that explores the training needed for different types of supervisors – for beginning supervisors; those who supervise students or trainees; those who supervise teams and those who supervise departments or whole organizations. This chapter is both for those supervisors who want to think about what training they need for themselves and also for trainers, heads of training and others who are responsible for providing training in supervision.

In Part Three we look at forms of supervision other than the one-to-one, such as supervision in groups, peer groups and in work teams. This section explores the advantages and disadvantages of supervising individuals in a group setting and some of the ways of managing the group dynamics. It also explores how to supervise teams in a way that recognizes that the team is more than the sum of the individuals contained within it.

In the final part we focus on how to help an organization develop a learning culture where supervision is an intrinsic part of the work environment. We have found that the organizational context in which supervision occurs has a major influence on the supervisory relationship.

Focusing on this wider context helps in understanding the wider system in which supervision occurs. This understanding can be useful in not over-personalizing a problem, which is also a symptom of the organizational dynamics and in realizing that it is not just individual workers nor indeed just work teams that need supervision, but whole helping organizations. In Chapter 12 we also look at the need for supervising situations where a number of professional helpers and organizations are involved, and the specialized skills that this requires.

We end with a chapter that pulls together the various themes of the book, keeping our hearts and minds open, with the theme of Chapter 3 on learning and flourishing at work. We viewed the four parts as increasing in complexity, starting with one person, the helper, followed by the supervisory relationship, then groups, and finally, organizations. However, we recognize that looking at our internal processes can be as complex as
looking at the organizational dynamics, it just involves fewer people. This choice of topic and order has been meaningful for us, but our hope is that the actual topics become less important in themselves and become triggers for your own experience and action.

A notion that we take from Winnicott is that learning is most creative when it emerges in play. In the supervision that we give we try to create a climate that avoids the sense of expert and student both studying the client ‘out there’, and instead creates a ‘play space’ in which the dynamics and pressures of the work can be felt, explored and understood; and where new ways of working can be co-created by both supervisor and supervisee working together. Likewise, in this book we have shared our experience of the feelings, issues and possibilities of supervision in order to create more choices and options for both supervisee and supervisors, rather than provide set prescriptions.

We also recommend that you choose your own order for reading the chapters, for as we have indicated above, each part (and indeed each chapter) is addressed to a slightly different audience. However, we suggest that all readers start with Chapters 2, 3 and 4 as, no matter how experienced you are as a supervisor, or even as a trainer of supervisors, we all commonly share the need to look constantly at why we are in the work, how we get appropriate support and how we continue to learn and develop.