

How to choose a supervisor

Good Practice in Action 008
Commonly Asked Questions

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Context

This resource is one of a suite prepared by BACP to enable members to engage with the *BACP Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* in respect of supervision.

Purpose

The purpose of this resource is to enable practitioners to consider what they need to think about when choosing a supervisor for their work.

Using Commonly Asked Questions resources

BACP members have a contractual commitment to work in accordance with the current *BACP Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions*. *The Commonly Asked Questions* resources are not contractually binding on members, but are intended to support practitioners by providing information and identifying questions and observations practitioners may need to ask themselves as they make ethical decisions within their practice in the context of the core ethical principles, values and personal moral qualities of BACP.

Specific issues in practice will vary depending on clients, particular models of working, the context of the work and the kind of therapeutic intervention provided. As specific issues arising from work with clients are often complex, BACP always recommends that you discuss practice dilemmas with a supervisor and/or consult a suitably qualified and experienced legal or another relevant practitioner.

In this resource, the terms 'practitioner' and 'counselling related services' are used generically in a wider sense, to include the practice of counselling, psychotherapy, coaching and pastoral care. The terms 'therapist' or 'counsellor' are used to mean specifically counsellors and psychotherapists and 'therapy' to mean specifically counselling and psychotherapy.

Introduction

This resource is intended for practitioners, whether trainee or experienced, who are seeking to work with a new supervisor. It is acknowledged that practitioners are not always free to choose their own supervisor; for instance, you might be allocated a supervisor within a placement or organisational context. The information in this resource is intended for therapists who are free to choose their own supervisor. For those whose responsibility it is to choose a supervisor for a service, more information can be found in Good Practice in Action 009 Fact Sheet: *How to choose a supervisor for your service*.

The Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions (2018a) states that:

Supervision is essential to how practitioners sustain good practice throughout their working life. Supervision provides practitioners with regular and ongoing opportunities to reflect in depth about all aspects of their practice in order to work as effectively, safely and ethically as possible. Supervision also sustains the personal resourcefulness required to undertake the work. (Good practice, point 60)

And commits practitioners to demonstrate accountability and candour by:

monitoring how clients experience our work together and the effects of our work with them. (Commitment 6d)

The section on good practice goes on to state that supervision should be undertaken by:

...anyone working in roles that require regularly giving or receiving emotionally challenging communications, or engaging in relationally complex and challenging roles. (Good practice, point 73)

It follows, then, that choosing your supervisor is an important task that requires research, reflection and a robust awareness of your own professional needs to ensure the safety of your clients and the integrity of your practice.

1 What is supervision?

Defining supervision can be challenging, partly because the structure and content of supervision can vary between clinical settings, therapeutic orientation and professional groups. According to the *Ethical Framework, Glossary*, supervision is:

A specialised form of professional mentoring provided for practitioners responsible for undertaking challenging work with people. Supervision is provided to ensure standards; enhance quality, stimulate creativity, and support the sustainability and resilience of the work being undertaken.

Inskipp and Proctor (2001) propose that supervision is 'a working alliance between counsellor and supervisor in which the counsellor can offer an account or recording of her work; reflect on it, receive feedback and, where appropriate, guidance'.

BACP has produced additional Good Practice in Action resources, in respect of supervision, which you may find a useful accompaniment to these commonly asked questions. See: www.bacp.co.uk/gpia.

2 What kind of supervision might I need?

Your supervisory needs may change as your experience develops. Proctor (1987) suggests three primary functions of supervision, *formative*, *normative* and *restorative*. So, for example, as a trainee practitioner you may require much more guidance on skills development and theoretical learning (formative) than is needed by a practitioner who has been providing therapeutic services for a number of years.

As your experience grows, however, you could find that the time spent with your supervisor focuses more on accountability, best practice and ethics (*normative*), together with *restorative* elements where you look to your supervisor for psychological and professional support. The balance between these three elements is continually shifting, depending on your particular needs as a supervisee and the nature and breadth of your caseload.

In choosing a supervisor, therefore, it makes sense to assess your situation and needs carefully. Are you a trainee seeking your first supervisor? Perhaps you are newly qualified and seeking a change? Or are you an experienced practitioner looking for more of a challenge? Will your supervisor be expected to perform a dual function such as line management and, if so, will this create potential conflicts of interests? For more on this, see the *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions*, which makes the point that:

Good supervision is much more than case management. It includes working in depth on the relationship between practitioner and client in order to work towards desired outcomes and positive effects... (Good practice, point 61)

You may also wish to consider your therapeutic modality and philosophy when choosing a supervisor. For instance, if your work is primarily CBT-focused, would you benefit more from a CBT-oriented supervisor or from the experience of a practitioner with a more integrative approach?

In this resource you will find a set of questions and points to consider when seeking a new supervisor. By giving careful thought to the process from an early stage, you will ensure that you find a supervisor with whom you can work safely, ethically and happily.

3 How do I start?

Before you begin your search, draw up a list of essential and desirable elements you would like your supervisor to offer (see Table 1 as an example of what 'Alana', a trainee, thinks of as 'essential' and what she considers 'desirable'). Think carefully about the way you work, your personal philosophy and your current limitations and level of competence. Be realistic: remember, the longer your list, the harder it will be to find your ideal supervisor.

Table 1 What I am looking for from a supervisor? (fictitious example)

Essential ('must')	Desirable ('preferably')
• Offer evening appointments	• Located within 10 miles of home
• Be accustomed to working with trainees	• Offers discounts for low income
• Be a Gestalt practitioner (or whatever your modality is)	• Has experience of Gestalt (or whatever your modality or client group is)
• Have a minimum of 10 years' post-qualifying experience	• Will offer online appointments

4 Where do I look?

The BACP website offers a comprehensive search facility for any practitioners who are seeking a supervisor. You can find this at www.bacp.co.uk/search/TrainersAndSupervisors?q=

BACP's monthly journal, *Therapy Today*, also has a supervision section in the classified advertisements where supervisors can advertise their services. There are also other sources, such as the Counselling Directory at www.counselling-directory.org.uk, that advertise qualified and practising supervisors across the UK. Therapists who advertise their services are usually paying to advertise. Remember that entry in any 'paid-for' directory is not an endorsement of good practice. It is therefore also well worth asking other practitioners in your area for recommendations.

Using your chosen criteria, draw up a shortlist of two or three prospective supervisors. Read their directory entries carefully to see how closely they match your needs and check out their websites and any other publicity they have produced.

5 Making contact

Working through your shortlist, contact each prospective supervisor by email or telephone to arrange an initial chat. It is generally unwise to rely solely on a phone call: 'gut feeling' based on a face-to-face meeting is far more likely to leave you with an accurate impression of whether or not you can successfully work with an individual. Meeting potential supervisors at their place of practice also means you can check out the location, privacy and any access issues.

6 What type of questions should I ask?

Choosing a supervisor leads usually to a long-term commitment so the more information you can gather from your initial conversation, the better equipped you will be to make your final decision.

It is worth bearing in mind that the *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* commits us to build an appropriate relationship with clients by:

- a. *communicating clearly what clients have a right to expect from us*
- b. *communicating any benefits, costs and commitments that clients may reasonably expect*
- c. *respecting the boundaries between our work with clients and what lies outside that work*
- d. *not exploiting or abusing clients*
- e. *listening out for how clients experience our working together* (Commitment 4a–e).

This kind of clarity about the nature of the relationship is also appropriate in respect of supervision. Depending on your specific needs, you may also wish to consider asking some or all of the following questions to help you choose your supervisor.

6.1 What experience and qualifications do you have as a supervisor (and a therapist)?

This will give you some guidance on the supervisor's breadth of knowledge and expertise. By asking about their experience as a therapist, you will also be able to gauge how well their theoretical approach(es) fits with yours. The general rule of thumb is: the less experienced you are as a practitioner, the more experienced a supervisor you need.

6.2 Are you a member of a professional body?

If you have drawn your shortlist from the BACP directory, you will already have the assurance that your chosen supervisors are – at the minimum – registered members of BACP and adhere to BACP's *Ethical Framework*. All practitioners who are BACP registered members also have an obligation to engage in their own regular continuing and professional development (CPD) and supervision.

If in doubt, ask. Remember the application of the *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* to the work with clients '...will be discussed in supervision regularly and not less than once a year' (Good practice, point 69) and this would possibly be more challenging to undertake with a supervisor who works to a different ethical framework or code of practice.

6.3 What do you charge and is your supervision contract negotiable?

Remember to ask if fees are fixed for a minimum period, how often they are reviewed and what methods of payment are acceptable. Check out cancellation policies and notice required. Most supervisors have a standard contract but offer the flexibility to negotiate around certain terms such as days/times of supervision and contact between sessions, in case you need to make emergency contact.

6.4 Do you offer video conferencing, telephone or online supervision?

While options such as video conferencing may seem accessible and attractive, it is important to consider whether they are secure and the level of confidentiality they can provide. Further information about using video conferencing, telephone or online media for therapy and supervision can be found within the Good Practice in Action resources 040 and 047 in respect of online media for therapeutic work. See www.bacp.co.uk/gpia for further information. If this way of working appeals to you, it would be good practice for you to read the appropriate resources and meet with your chosen supervisor in their virtual environment, to see if you are fully comfortable with it. Ask if they have any specific qualifications or training in working online, check for contingencies in case the session is interrupted by technological failure or power cuts, and make sure that you are comfortable with the confidentiality of the session and suggested method of payment (such as PayPal or BACS transfer).

6.5 Do you keep notes and can I see them? What about confidentiality?

Your supervisor should already be aware of the legal aspects of record keeping and your rights as a supervisee to see any notes under the Data Protection Act (2018). Ask where they keep their notes: are they in a secure and locked cabinet; or, if online, is the location password protected? If you are working with children, young people or other vulnerable client groups, you will need to check out the supervisor's familiarity with child protection and safeguarding legislation.

Data protection can be a complex area to navigate and you can find further information at The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) website; see <https://ico.org.uk> and in Good Practice in Action 105 *The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) legal principles and practice notes for the counselling professions* (2018, updated 2020).

6.6 I prefer to work within the normative/formative/restorative supervisory model. Are you able to support my needs here?

As stated earlier, your supervisor's ability to work at a level appropriate to your professional needs is vital to the safety of you and your clients. Be sure to check that your prospective supervisor feels comfortable and has sufficient flexibility in their approach to take on a variety of roles (e.g. mentor, educator and consultant) within the supervisory relationship.

6.7 How often will we review our work and our supervisory relationship?

You may feel that an important aspect of supervision is to set goals and review your progress on a regular basis. Perhaps you would like your supervisor to provide evaluations of your strengths and weaknesses or point out potential areas for self-development. Bear in mind that some supervisors may be more comfortable with these aspects of the supervisory role than others, so it is worthwhile checking out the views of your chosen supervisor at the outset. More information about monitoring the supervisory relationship can be found in Good Practice in Action 010 Fact Sheet: *Monitoring the supervisory relationship from the supervisor's perspective* and Good Practice in Action 011 Fact Sheet: *Monitoring the supervisory relationship from the perspective of the supervisee*.

6.8 Will you charge me extra to write supervision reports and references?

This can often prove a contentious issue between supervisor and supervisee. Be clear about what you expect and about what is offered from the beginning, and throughout your working contract; you will then be less likely to encounter conflict later on.

6.9 What are your expectations of me as a supervisee? For example, do you need me to bring audio recordings of my sessions?

Some supervisors require trainee counsellors to bring audio recordings of their work to supervision to ensure they are practising safely and ethically, others expect their supervisees to bring detailed case notes to supervision, while many allow personal choice and flexibility in the presentation of caseloads. It is wise to clarify your potential supervisor's expectations from the outset, to avoid misunderstandings.

6.10 What happens if you have a concern about my fitness to practise? Or if I have a concern about you as a supervisor?

The most successful supervisory relationships are the ones where honesty, empathy and collegial respect flow seamlessly – and apparently effortlessly – between two practitioners. However, robust working alliances of this kind do not happen overnight; it takes a great deal of energy, effort and time. In an ideal scenario, you as a reflective practitioner and supervisee will already be aware of your areas for improvement and will present these in supervision without any need for your supervisor to bring them to your attention.

Sometimes, however, the process needs a nudge, and it is down to you and your intended supervisor to agree a way of approaching the issue sensitively and with compassion, preferably at the outset while drawing up your contract.

More information on fitness to practise can be found in Good Practice in Action 078 Fact Sheet: *Fitness to practise in the counselling professions*.

6.11 And finally, a question for you, the supervisee, do you ‘like’ the supervisor as a person?

Never underestimate the power of ‘gut feeling’. A practitioner might have all the right qualifications, practise in your desired approach and appear the perfect supervisor on paper, but somehow you just don’t seem to gel when you meet. If this happens, reflect on the experience and continue your search.

Supervision is an essential element of your professional practice and relies on a mutually trusting and collegial relationship in order to succeed: don’t sell yourself short on it.

About the author

The late Jill Bamber was the original content author for this resource. Previously a Registered BACP Member, Counselling Lecturer and Supervisor, Jill also ran a busy private practice and was director of her own communications company for 10 years.

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