

Introduction to supervision (public version)

Good Practice in Action 064
Commonly Asked Questions

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Context

This resource is one of a suite prepared for BACP members to enable them to engage with BACP's *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* in respect of supervision within the counselling professions.

Purpose

This resource is intended primarily for non-clinical professionals and provides a general overview about the professional activity of *supervision*.

Using Commonly Asked Questions Resources

BACP members have a contractual commitment to work in accordance with the current *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 general information on principles and policy applicable at the time of publication, 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 discussion of practice dilemmas with a supervisor and/or consulting a suitably qualified and experienced legal or other relevant practitioner.

In this resource, the word 'therapist' is used to mean specifically counsellors and psychotherapists and 'therapy' to mean specifically counselling and psychotherapy. 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.

1 Introduction

BACP recommends supervision for *'anyone working in roles that require regularly giving or receiving emotionally challenging communications, or engaging in relationally complex and challenging roles'* (Ethical Framework, Good Practice, point 73).

These roles may include (but are not limited to) counsellor, psychotherapist, supervisor, coach, pastoral care worker, trainer, educator, researcher and anyone who manages them.

A practitioner acting in such a role and who is a BACP member or registrant, will have made an ethical commitment (promise) to take part in regular and continuous supervision.

Extracts from BACP's *Ethical Framework for Counselling Professions* (BACP 2018) have been shown throughout to illustrate ethical points.

2 Commonly asked questions

2.1 What is supervision?

Supervision is a formal activity during which a supervisor and practitioner work together to help that practitioner provide a safe, ethical and effective service to his or her client.

BACP states that supervision *'is provided to ensure standards; enhance quality, stimulate creativity, and support the sustainability and resilience of the work being undertaken'* (Ethical Framework Glossary).

Supervision is based on honest and open discussion. It does not involve 'checking up' on the practitioner. However, a supervisor will have an overview of the practitioner's work to make sure clients are safe and have the best possible service, particularly when working with trainees and newly qualified practitioners. As supervision is an ethical requirement for all practitioners, having supervision does not necessarily mean that a practitioner is not qualified or lacks experience.

2.2 How much supervision does a practitioner need?

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. (Ethical Framework, Good Practice, point 60)

BACP requires a practitioner to have at least a minimum level of supervision. The amount depends on the practitioner's membership category (student member, registered member, registered accredited or senior accredited member and retired member) and whether supervision takes place individually or within a group of practitioners. The amount of supervision can be increased if a practitioner's work becomes more difficult in any way or if stressful events happen in the practitioner's own life e.g. bereavement. Many practitioners pay for their own supervision. Financial difficulty is not an acceptable reason to reduce the amount of supervision below the minimum required by BACP.

2.3 What happens in supervision?

Practitioners can discuss during supervision meetings, anything that relates to their therapeutic practice and work with clients e.g. an ethical dilemma or point of theory that they would like some help to understand. Practitioners who work in organisations may take workplace concerns. Trainees sometimes discuss matters from their training organisation or practice placement.

2.4 How is supervision delivered?

Supervision can be delivered on a one-to-one basis or in a group, via a face-to-face meeting, secure video conferencing or telephone.

2.5 Does a supervisor 'sit in' on a practitioner-client session?

No. A supervisor does not usually come to a therapeutic session. You may hear the phrase 'taking a client to supervision', but this means the practitioner's work with the client, not the client themselves.

2.6 How does a supervisor know that what the practitioner tells them is an accurate account of their work?

The relationship between practitioner and supervisor, sometimes called the 'supervisory alliance' relies upon straightforward and honest discussions held within a shared trusting and respectful relationship. In addition to talking about their work, some practitioners share audio (and more rarely) video recordings of their work with their supervisor. If a practitioner uses these methods, this should always be discussed fully with a client beforehand and permission sought to make a recording. A client should never feel put under pressure for their voice or image to be recorded. A client has a legal right to access the content of any recording made in accordance with current data protection requirements (including the General Data Protection Regulation, GDPR). You can find details of this from the Information Commissioner's Office at: Information Commissioner's Office (2018b): *Security*. <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/security/>.

2.7 What skills and knowledge does a supervisor need and must they work in the same profession as the practitioner?

Supervisors require additional skills and knowledge to those of practitioners who provide therapeutic-type services to clients.

'All supervisors will model high levels of good practice for the work they supervise, particularly with regard to expected levels of competence and professionalism, relationship building, the management of personal boundaries, any dual relationships, conflicts of interest and avoiding exploitation'. (Ethical Framework, Good Practice, point 63)

This means that although they have expertise in the kinds of therapeutic intervention they supervise, in many cases they also have the skills to offer supervision to practitioners from various helping professions, not just their own.

2.8 Does a supervisor work within an ethical framework or code of conduct?

Yes. A BACP member (whether they are a practitioner, supervisor or trainer) will work within BACP's *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* (BACP 2018). BACP also has a Professional Conduct Procedure, which means that a supervisee, or client can make a complaint if things have gone wrong. More information on this can be accessed at: http://www.bacp.co.uk/prof_conduct/.

2.9 Do supervisors have supervision too?

Yes. The *Ethical Framework* states that '*...supervisors will also ensure that they work with appropriate professional support and their own supervision*' (Ethical Framework, Good Practice, point 62).

2.10 Is what a practitioner tells a supervisor kept confidential?

Yes, most of the time (see below). Information given is protected under a contract of confidentiality made between supervisor and practitioner '*All communications concerning clients made in the context of supervision will be consistent with confidentiality agreements with the clients concerned and compatible with any applicable agency policy*' (Ethical Framework, Good Practice, point 64). Clients are not identifiable by name and sometimes are given a code number. People who, as part of their work, have access to confidential information about a client are said to be within a 'circle of confidentiality'. This means that a supervisor and their supervisee are within this circle (*Ethical Framework*, Good Practice, point 55c. See also, *Ethical Framework Glossary*).

2.11 Would a supervisor ever be required to give away confidential information (to 'breach confidentiality')?

Possibly. However, any decision to do so should, wherever possible, have been discussed with the practitioner and their own supervisor.

However, there may be a legal duty, for example when acting under a Court Order or other 'exceptional circumstance', when to breach confidentiality, would be the correct legal or appropriate ethical action for the supervisor to take.

2.12 Should a practitioner tell a client they have a supervisor and why?

Yes. This information should be given to a client when discussing working arrangements at the start of the practitioner-client relationship. This aids transparency and can help avoid dual relationships (see below).

2.13 Can I ask a practitioner the name of their supervisor?

Yes. Whilst the identity of the supervisor is not usually discussed, it is not a secret. Sometimes it is necessary information for a client to know such as when wishing to avoid a dual relationship (*Ethical Framework, Good Practice, point 33b*). For example, Sam, who works as a psychotherapist, is having some personal problems and seeks therapy. Sam becomes a client of Tom, another psychotherapist. Sam asks for the name of Tom's supervisor because he is concerned that as they are both psychotherapists, the supervisor may be someone Sam has close professional links with.

2.14 Does a supervisor ever contact a client?

Not routinely. However, some practitioners and supervisors have a contracted arrangement, whereby clients will be made aware, that in exceptional circumstances, the supervisor will contact the client on the practitioner's behalf. This might happen if the practitioner were unexpectedly unable to do so themselves; for example, following sudden illness, an accident or if a practitioner dies.

2.15 Do supervisors have a responsibility to monitor and support practitioners in areas of equality, diversity and inclusion?

Yes. A supervisor will support the supervisee to work ethically, legally and effectively with general, individual and group differences, diversity, discrimination, prejudice, stereotyping and concerns about access (see *Ethical Framework*, Good Practice, points 22-24).

2.16 At times, clients disclose thoughts, feelings and information to practitioners of a very personal or sensitive nature. Can a client make it a condition of the working relationship that particular subjects are not discussed with a supervisor?

No. BACP practitioners make an ethical commitment that they are prepared to discuss any part of their work with their supervisor and that they will do so in an 'open and honest' way (*Ethical Framework*, Good Practice, point 72). However, with regard to personal or sensitive client material, practitioners only disclose information that is required to help the supervision process and therefore, the client. If you are concerned, it is important to discuss this with the practitioner when you first meet.

2.17 I'm worried about the service being provided to me by a BACP member practitioner. Should I contact his or her supervisor?

Not usually. If you feel able, you are advised to talk to the practitioner about your worries. In most cases problems can be resolved. If you are unable to do this or still feel concerned afterwards, BACP provides 'Ask Kathleen', a confidential, unbiased service for members of the public to discuss concerns, ask questions about any therapeutic-type service being provided by a BACP member practitioner and seek guidance and information (details below).

2.18 Where can I find out more about supervision?

BACP publishes online material:

BACP (2018) *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions*. Lutterworth: BACP. http://www.bacp.co.uk/ethical_framework/ (accessed 27 September 2018).

BACP (2018) *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions: Glossary: supervision*. Lutterworth: BACP. <https://www.bacp.co.uk/events-and-resources/ethics-and-standards/glossary/> (accessed 27 September 2018).

You can contact:

the *Ask Kathleen service*, email ask@bacp.co.uk or call 01455 883300 and select option 3.

For more in-depth information, you could read:

Carroll, M. (2014) *Effective Supervision for the Helping Professions*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Conclusion

Supervision helps practitioners provide the best possible service to their clients and is seen as good practice by a range of different professional bodies. It does this by providing a 'safe space' where practitioners can share, discuss and think about their work in a confidential, ethical setting.

About the author

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