

Seminar Series

Using your Journal as a Supervision Tool

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British grammar and punctuation style is used throughout this paper.

Using your Journal as a Supervision Tool

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What is Supervision?

In this modern world where pressures to act decisively conflict with a fear of being blamed, supervision can provide a much needed time to reflect. I personally think that all workers, not just those in the helping professions, would benefit from this space. (Shohet 2008, p.13)

Supervision, sometimes also called consultation, is a process intended 'to maintain adequate standards' of work, to protect the client and 'to widen the horizons of an experienced practitioner' (BACP 2008). It is a space for exploration and reflection of the work within boundaries of time, place and relationship(s).

The supervisor's first responsibility is to the client rather than the supervisee. All practicing therapists in the UK are required by their professional bodies to have supervision throughout the period of practice (this is not the case in other countries). Supervision provides safety and boundaries for therapist and client allows the sharing of good practice. Other professions can benefit from this kind of formative space and increasingly it is 'part of the repertoire for most of the helping professions' (Shohet 2008, p.13).

In this context, clinical or practice supervision is a benevolent and supportive relationship and should not be confused with managerial or quality control supervision. Although most of the examples here are drawn from therapeutic situations, they may also be taken as applicable to other settings, and in this context are particularly applicable to therapeutic writing groups. Where mention is made, for simplicity's sake, of 'client' or 'clients' this could equally be applied to students or group members. The term 'practitioner' is used to encompass all facilitators of professional groups.

Supervision, coaching, mentoring are all process relationships and overlap with each other. Coaching is more often seen in the corporate world and mentoring is particularly in favour in education. '...what supervision, coaching and mentoring have in

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common is a desire to improve practice through some kind of reflection.’ (Shohet 2008, p.13)

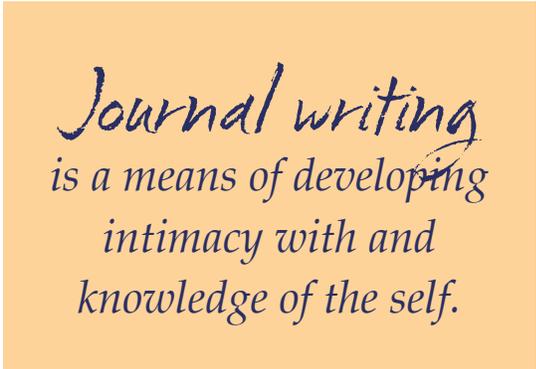
Since writing is both a creative and a therapeutic act, it inevitably means that there are times when difficult, painful or surprising things arise for clients or practitioners. Writers and educators who work in health settings, prisons or even education find themselves working with vulnerable populations; it is therefore not surprising that emotional issues can arise in what might seem the most benign of exercises. Supervision is the place where these occurrences can be explored, and journal writing can offer a valuable addition to the other types of supervision. Supervision can take several forms, all of which fulfil the criteria for the professional requirement for therapists and can be used in combination:

- Individual supervision
- Group supervision
- Peer supervision

These can take place face-to-face, on the telephone and, increasingly, via the internet in various ways. Online supervision is a natural development for practitioners whose practice includes writing. In addition to supervision by others, self-supervision is a valuable addition to a repertoire of methods of support and maintenance. Journal writing offers a form of self-supervision and can be integrated into other kinds of supervision. It can also provide the basis or structure for supervision via the internet.

Journal Writing as Self-supervision

Patrick Morisette, talking about self-supervision, makes a distinction between autobiographies and journals: ‘the purpose of the autobiography is to allow counsellors to



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examine the influence of the intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics within their families of origin and their current functioning’ (2001, p.70). Whereas, he suggests, ‘journaling is an effective way to identify and track issues that arise’ (2001, p.74). I would argue that both of these are suitable tasks for the journal in supervision. Ellen Baker says: ‘The journal is the ideal place to examine sources of and

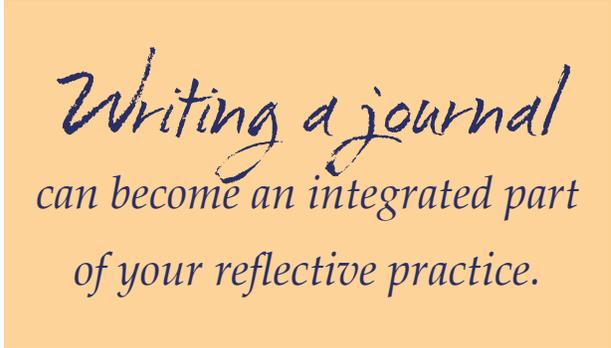
possible proactive responses to professional distress. The material can then be explored further in supervision’ (Baker 2003, p.11)

The relationship with the self is central to self-care; journal writing is a means of developing intimacy with and knowledge of the self. It helps practitioners to stay

connected and grounded in their own experience and practice. Journal writing enhances self-awareness, that is, it allows for the benign self-observation and reflection which are essential to maintaining the self-in-relationship.

Keeping a journal of a writing or therapeutic practice is a way of witnessing the work and becomes an integral part of reflective practice. It differs from any formal record-keeping in that it is not focused on content or process but rather is a free space in which to notice connections, delve deeper into the relationships, reflect on and explore the group process. In this way a practitioner narrative develops and can be referred to in the future. Keeping a supervision journal, separate from any case notes or process notes, has been advocated by various people as a response to the increasingly litigious society in which we practice. However, it is also known that personal journals can be subpoenaed as evidence in legal cases and anonymity or coding references to people is strongly recommended.

The classic *Journal to the Self* (Adams 1990) techniques can be adapted for use in self-supervision and provide opportunities to see things differently, develop perspective and help clarify thought.



*Writing a journal
can become an integrated part
of your reflective practice.*

Writing a journal of your practice is a way of witnessing your work with clients; it can become an integrated part of your reflective practice. It differs from client notes in that it is not focused on content or process but rather is a free space in which to notice connections, delve deeper into the relationship and look at what is going on for you. It is a place where the practitioner can develop a narrative and a professional/personal reflective arena. A supervision journal is where work with different clients and groups can be brought into focus together over time — and where they can be separated from each other.

Preparation for Supervision

One way of making the most of a supervision session is to write about it beforehand. Both supervisor and supervisee can track their own feelings and developments about the supervisory relationship through a supervision journal as well as processing the work they want to talk about.

Individual supervision

Cathy wrote about her relatively new relationship with her supervisor:

I do not want to go to supervision: I do not know if it's useful. I do not know what the relationship is like between us. I find her slightly condescending, I feel we do not understand each other. After last time I felt angry and rather upset by the session — I feel a bit resentful for paying money for that hour.

What to say in supervision? I had a little insight last week: in the last session she said something about my client seeming vulnerable: that I was somehow protecting her. I denied this at the time and suddenly realized last week: it was I who felt vulnerable, in need of protection in terms of my relationship with my supervisor.

I felt bullied by her: but I presented this in terms of feeling she was encouraging me to bully my client. The client acts as a shield for what is going on between us. We seem to reach an impasse of lack of understanding where linguistic and semantic fields are no help.

After the session she wrote:

In the end nothing was as bad as I feared: she was much nicer to me, almost warm, encouraging but challenging me to take the thoughts further. We generated dialogue and I was able to talk about my client again. But we didn't explicitly talk about last time. I'm not sure how, or if I need to — I think I can feel something developing which I know to be good for me, challenging but I do not have to be so afraid. I need to ask her what she means by 'co-construct'? is she talking about collusion? What am I colluding with?

Jenny would come to supervision with pages of case notes about her clients. The time would be spent in trying to create a narrative of her clients' lives which somehow seemed to leave her on the outside and not present either in the relationship with clients or with supervisor. Together we developed a range of questions for her to ask of herself before she presented a client and she found that writing the answers gave her a more coherent approach. The questions included:

- What do I want from presenting this client?
- What are the significant points in our relationship?
- What is she for me?

These helped her to mature as a practitioner and reflect more effectively on her own work rather than being carried away by client stories.

Group supervision

Many supervision groups open with a bid for time. A pre-session journal entry can help

to prepare you and indicate what are the cases/issues you might want to bring to the group and what you are looking for as a response from the group. As so often a little journal work can help us to clarify what we know and what we don't know — in other words, the supervision journal can help us to identify the questions we need to ask.

June wrote:

Supervision group this afternoon. I wonder if I should ask for some time for P:

I'm finding it difficult to like her but I'm not sure how the group can help – it feels too unimportant. I wonder if the group would think so too. I wonder if I'm afraid of exposing my 'not liking' a client. Aren't we supposed to like them?

We only have one more session — if I don't take it to supervision I think I'm just wanting the contract to end, to disappear, to forget her.

I do need to take this — I do want to bid for some time — I think P needs me to do it.

Later she said: *'It was only when I wrote that that I understood that I needed to take this to supervision — it brought to consciousness some of my resistance. If I hadn't written I would have let myself off and let P fade away, thankful not to have to think about her.'*

Peer supervision

Where the members of a peer supervision group or in pairs are also open to journal writing, it can be adopted as part of the session with an agreement to share and take turns. This is similar to the idea of writing buddies (Goldberg 1986) where both parties can support and encourage each other in their writing and in their work.

Identifying/working with countertransference

Countertransference is when thoughts and feelings from previous relationships or situations in the practitioner's life become revived in the present therapeutic relationship. Learning to work with this is useful in different settings for many practitioners. Using a journal to explore these themes and occurrences can be a powerful way of working through this material so that it does not intrude into the work or overcomplicate relationships in a group.

Lily, a 36-year-old therapist working in Primary Care, had been aware of strong feelings in a session with her client, a 60-year-old depressed woman. Lily wrote in her journal:

I was suddenly aware that I was feeling quite helpless and even a little scared. I was talking about her daughter and how her lifestyle was not one she could approve of, I found she

was quite disapproving. We'd been building up quite a good alliance, had identified goals, discussed the contract which I'd explained quite clearly. I sensed her to be a bit resistant, and thought that maybe this wasn't going to be a big transformation for her but it had seemed worth contracting. She was older than me, had worked in the health service all her adult life so there were expectations. I recognized this as my stuff but not paid it much attention — it's happened before and things turn out ok. But the sudden sense of helplessness and some fear...

Where does that come from?

And suddenly I know — it's that old mother-daughter stuff which I'd dealt with in my own therapy in great detail. I was suddenly again the daughter who wanted her mother's approval...up it comes again. Oh mother, I can see a bit in J the cost of withholding your approval.

And I know that J is not my mother and my feelings about my mother belong elsewhere — in my journal, in my therapy and not in J's therapy sessions.

Her journal allowed Lily to process the countertransference and so proceed with J's therapy knowing that she had work of her own to do. In some cases it can tell us that perhaps we need to go back into therapy or take a particular issue to therapy. Self-supervision and journal writing is not psychotherapy even though it undoubtedly is therapeutic — it is however helpful in showing us where we need to pay attention and perhaps do more work on our own issues. Some models of supervision will allow a greater space for personal issues of the practitioner than others which will only deal with their own issues insofar as they impact on the client work.

Journal writing as a way of keeping client stories (and clients) separate

There will be times when two clients evoke similar feelings in us, or when they become enmeshed in our minds and hard to separate between sessions. This can happen with two members of the same group or two people separated by time and context.

Writing short character sketches about people can help to fix their separate identities, as can writing physical descriptions or pen portraits.

As someone with a poor visual memory but a good memory for words I find it helpful to write a short description or mnemonic to identify clients. This is true in both group and individual settings. Sometimes acrostics are the perfect *aide memoire*:

Dark-haired
Angular
V-shaped brows bent
Inclined to loud ties
David

Captured Moments

Captured Moments allow you to notice and reflect on particular times, moments and interactions. They can bring into focus relationships or stories which may otherwise escape or evade conscious memory. They also offer an opportunity to re-visit particular times and reflect more deeply on different elements of practice.

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In a busy life it becomes increasingly difficult to give complete attention and remain fully present in each session. Journal writing can help with the attempt to recover that attention and to keep the different stories separate.

Cathy wrote:

You are my last client on Tuesday. The room is filled with the imprint of previous sessions and I am ready to go home. Usually you come and we talk and you go and it's not clear that anything much happens. But now something does.

I watch you and listen to you as you pour out your sadness. We are enveloped in it. You are dressed in your normal smart pleated skirt and twinset but your face has lost its well-pressed, immaculately made-up appearance. It's a bit shocking, I'm seeing you naked. I'm momentarily distracted by thinking about where you can go to repair and recover your façade before returning to your world. I think I wanted to go, to escape — which of course I can — the sadness was so raw and so unexpected — for a moment it was unbearable. Your eyes hold me as if you want to be sure I stay there. I realize we have moved to another level of our work and relationship and your relationship with your pain.

Unsent letters

Learning from our clients, students or supervisees can be consolidated in a Supervision Journal. As a clinical supervisor, writing Unsent Letters to a supervisee can help me understand what I wish to communicate. It can also help to understand where the supervisee is. As a supervisee I have used unsent letters to process supervision sessions, particularly when there were difficult moments which I couldn't process in the session.

Unsent letters to clients enable us to look at the relationship and the issues and reflect from outside the room. Writing Unsent Letters can be done either after the contract with a client has finished or whilst it is ongoing. I wrote the following unsent letter after a few sessions with a client with whom I was feeling increasingly stuck and I was aware

of a level of frustration whose source I couldn't identify.

Dear Anne

I've been thinking about our session this afternoon. You seemed down again today. This felt different from the last time we met (which I know was a while ago — you cancelled our last meeting — you left a phone message for me earlier that day.) I suppose a lot of time had elapsed — plenty of time for things to change or not to stay the same.

You were very angry again — angry with brother, angry with sister and especially angry with mum. I felt a sinking feeling as the anger filled the room. Does your anger cover your own despair? There was no room for me.

I felt drained by the end of our session. Drained and a bit hopeless. Is that how you felt? How do you feel after our sessions — is this it — is this why you cancel some? Does it feel unsustainable?

I wonder if I can say some of this to you — perhaps that would help.

I remember your energy of the previous session — that was what felt different.

I hope to see you next week.

All good wishes, Kate

Writing this helped me to realize that I was feeling rejected (that 'poor me' sense) — *there was no room for me* — said a lot. Later I was aware of a similar feeling with a client in another practice and in my supervision journal I was able to explore the similarities and differences within the two cases. In the second case I was able to identify my own process of being tempted into a stern but caring mother role. Reflecting in my journal I could

see that my frustration was about how he was 'wasting his life'. I also noticed that I felt both clients were rejecting what I had to offer as a therapist. I could then take this to supervision and with my supervisor look for different ways forward.

After a contract with a client has ended, Unsent Letters can be a way of reviewing the work and processing any ambivalence or

unfinished business with it. Where we may have lingering uncertainties about how we managed a case, Unsent Letters allow us to look again and think things through in a different way.

The following are examples of how people used Unsent Letters as self-supervision to increase their understanding of the relationships with clients past and present and to reflect on their practice:

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In Wendy's first therapeutic writing group there was a woman whom she experienced as particularly demanding and judgemental. She wrote her an unsent letter in which she was able to express her feelings and then to come to see the student in a more compassionate way. She recognized that she was projecting some of her insecurities of being a beginner facilitator and allowing herself to feel criticized and defensive.

Andrew wrote an unsent letter to a client with whom he had ended the work and subsequently experienced what he thought might be unseemly relief. Despite having talked about it in supervision he was left with some doubts. The letter allowed him to see that the client had not been able to accept what he had to offer and was suffering from chronic loneliness which was not treatable with counselling.

Andrew wrote:

Dear V

I'm sorry but I cannot remember your name. I can see you, remember the warmth of the room and the noise of your television sets.

I had been warned that I might not understand everything you said. In fact I could only understand about 1 in 4 words. The thing is it was such hard work listening to you, not tiring but boring. By the third session you refused to turn off the television in your living room, you had another on loudly a different station in a nearby room. I was irritated that you would stop focusing on the session and make a telephone call. I got that you were lonely.

By the fourth session I learned that I was as sure as I could be that your main issue was loneliness not bereavement.

You were too much like my father, not in looks, but in a kind of self-contained and unneeding way.

Yet when I left you followed me out and waved me goodbye.

I was so relieved when our sessions ended, and guilty for feeling so relieved that it was over.

The time we spent together I hope was helpful to you. My feelings though are irritation and relief; irritation at your lack of interest and involvement in the sessions, and yes I feel used and manipulated, and relief that it is over.

I want to say to you that I can listen and I can hold silence. Why then do I feel guilty at my very quick agreement with my in-house supervisor that the sessions should end.

Yes I did have a final session and I still remember the pleading look when you realized that I would not be returning.

*I wish you well and I hope you have found companions, it's just I wasn't one of them
Best wishes, A*

Although Annette felt that she always managed to let clients go, she found that this exercise helped her to re-integrate the experience and learning of one particular client who had touched her deeply.

Annette wrote:

Dear Pam

It's many years since I saw you last, but on occasions, I find that you come into my mind.

When this happens a smile comes to my face or I feel it open up within me. I remember how angry you were, and rightly so, with other people and with me. This was new to me in the counselling room, to feel the blade of anger pass over my skin. I remember you said to me that you held the belief that you could only trust family...and yet you trusted me...a beginner counsellor. It was tough for you, so much pain, so much loss and it was tough for me too. I was afraid that you would take a step too far, take your life. I was afraid of the consequences for me and those close to you.

I didn't want you to die. I was and am fond of you.

You taught me so much and you gave it to me straight, 'You're telling me I shouldn't depend on you, but I needed to depend on you! You're telling me I was wrong to do that!' I feel very emotional as I write this. We journeyed together and as separate people. I know that you wanted to stay in touch with me after I left and I have often come back to that question that I never really addressed. I avoided it, perhaps because I felt that I needed to give you an answer in the moment, rather than giving myself time.

We had many things in common but our lives were so very different. You enriched my life and I know that I made a difference to you at that point in your life.

I hold the memory of you with me.

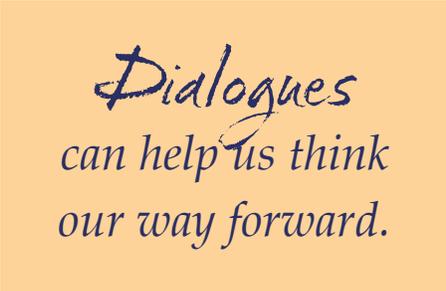
Thank you, courageous Pam.

Love A

Dialogues

Dialogues can help us to think our way forward, to access different points of view and to hear our own thoughts more clearly. In professions such as therapy in which relationships with clients are central, there are inevitable times when the work feels stuck, the practitioner may want to move things on but doesn't know how or why the work feels at an impasse (perhaps the practitioner him or herself has reached an impasse). This is equally true of groups where the relationship may be with the whole group identity rather than the individual members.

Writing a Dialogue with Stuckness can shift it. It can help find the energy in the



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work again and to re-direct our attention. When work with a particular client hits a wall and sessions feel stale and unprofitable, or groups feel lacking in vitality, a dialogue is one way to look more closely at what is going on:

Kathy wrote:

K: Hello Stuckness. You were very present with M today — you've been in this piece of work for a while I've noticed.

S: Why are you so impatient? — when you stop listening properly you leave me no choice, you practically invite me in. I saw you looking out of the window at that magpie on the fence.

K: That was you distracting me.

S: How do you think M was feeling?

K: She was talking as usual, I've heard it all before, the husband, the daughter in Australia, the hip pains.

S: Yes, but she doesn't know you've heard it before.

K: I'm sure I've told her.

S: You didn't today — are you turning into a nodding dog?

K: No, I'm not, well, I don't mean to be. So are you saying I wasn't giving her my attention?

S: I sure am. I think you need to come back into the room, not go flying with the magpies that were outside the window (not superstitious are you?) and ask yourself 'Why is M here? What does she want from me?' You might even need to ask her to tell you. Just because she reminds you of your great aunt Hilda doesn't mean she doesn't want to talk to you.

K: thank you — I think I needed reminding of a few things. Let's talk again. Goodbye.

S: Goodbye

Dialogue with client

This is an obvious exercise but perhaps more useful as a review of the work done than as a dialogue with current clients. Although it can help the practitioner to clarify her own viewpoint there is a danger that putting words into a client's mouth can fossilize the work in subsequent sessions. Obvious though it may seem, if dialoguing with current clients the writer should remember:

- Every voice in the dialogue is her own
- The words written in the dialogue did not actually come from the client.

Dialogue with Internal Supervisor

The Internal Supervisor is what, within her own mind, guides the practitioner's reflection on her work. Psychotherapist Patrick Casement says:

the internal supervisor has origins that derive from before the experience of supervision and its development continues far beyond it. (1994)

A dialogue with an internal supervisor offers a way of strengthening that inner reflection which maintains a healthy relationship with the work. Such dialogues will often begin with a question such as:

- What am I missing here?
- What am I really hearing her say?
- I wonder what can be underlying this presentation?
- What in me is stopping me from listening properly?

The Internal Supervisor now represents all the practitioner's previous experience, reading and training and can serve to remind her what she already knows but has allowed herself to forget or access at this time.

Dialogue with practitioner self

Some people find that their professional selves have different agenda from their private selves. Writing a dialogue between the two parts of is a way of understanding this.

This technique can be helpful in making decisions and working through career changes or transitions as well as organizational issues. It is also something to be used from time to time to look at the life/work balance:

Kathy wrote:

K: Are you satisfied by your work at the moment?

PS: What do you think? I wonder why you are asking me this.

K: That's typical of you, isn't it? I ask you a question and you answer with a question — you deflect it away from yourself every time.

PS: It's my job. And you aren't being very helpful when you ask those questions — it's just distracting and I've got too much to do to be distracted right at this moment. The contract comes up for renewal, I have to make a presentation, get the figures, finish the discharge letters, complete the core forms. And you ask me if I'm satisfied. Instead of having this conversation I should just get on with those things.

K: So when are we next going to have time to play together?

PS: PLAY? Are you crazy. I can't play, I don't have time to play. With all this to do play is the last thing on my mind.

K: You are telling me to go away and leave me alone.

Her feedback was:

When I read this I recognize how overwhelmed and rather swamped I am at the moment. I need to really look at what I've got to do and work out a more manageable way of doing it – I also need to work out when I can play.

When I read this I'm interested in the last sentence and know I need to look at what that means.

Supervision is an essential part of reflective practice for practitioners and a valuable form of support for what can often be an isolated role. Journal writing as self-supervision is a way of making supervision available and accessible when there is no one to listen; it provides an immediate way of processing difficult or perplexing experience.

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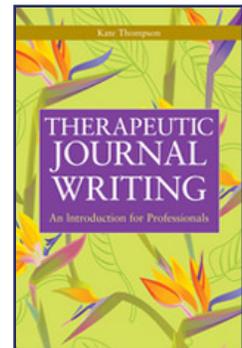
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Her publications include *Therapeutic Journal Writing: An Introduction for Professionals* and, co-edited with Gillie Bolton and Victoria Field, *Writing Works: A Resource Handbook for Therapeutic Writing Workshops and Activities* and *Writing Routes: A Resource Handbook of Therapeutic Writing*.

She lives in the foothills above Boulder, Colorado and enjoys hiking and writing in the inspiring landscape.



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