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Who helps the helpers?

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*Who do the people who help others during the course of their daily work turn to for help?
SYLVIA THOMPSON reports on a cross-professional support system*

OFTEN, PEOPLE who work on the frontline dealing with other people's problems every day have nowhere to turn to for their own professional support and development. And while teachers, nurses, social workers, counsellors and even the Gardaí work under supervision while training, once they are qualified, the opportunities to talk through difficulties of the day are few and far between.

It was for these reasons that a group of professionals came together to form the Supervisory Association of Ireland (SAI). Some came from psychotherapy and counselling backgrounds and were already supervisors within their own profession, but others came from academic and other disciplines.

"This new form of supervision helps people process the stresses and strains of their work so that they don't burn out and so that they don't take their work home with them at the end of each day," says John Doherty, a member of the SAI who works as a supervisor and also attends a bi-monthly supervision group to support his own work.

"It can be so challenging for teachers and those in the gardaí to deal with situations and people day in, day out. Often, they are trying to hold different problems while staying focused on their role. Either people can become very clinical in their approach, or they can become overwhelmed.

"Supervisory work gives them the chance to unpack their experiences and become centred and solid even when facing difficult situations," says Doherty.

While self-care and work/life balance are definite areas that supervisors will look at, the supervisee will also be encouraged to look at the learning aspects of their jobs. “I work with yoga teachers, employment mediators and people working in the HSE. Part of the supervisory work involves people observing what they are learning and drawing from their work,” says Doherty.

Bríd Cummins is a psychotherapist who does supervisory work in business, healthcare and teaching professions. “It’s important for people to realise that supervisory work is not about assessment or judgment.

“Neither is it about passing on skills and knowledge. It’s a support system for people, a collaborative, consultative relationship between professionals that facilitates learning,” she says.

Martina Dunne is a drama therapist who works cross professionally as a supervisor. “The difference between supervisory work and psychotherapy is that the focus is on the work in supervision even if personal issues need to be looked at as well. Whereas psychotherapy is more about dealing with personal issues,” she explains.

Dunne says that a lot of psychotherapists, counsellors, clergy and chaplains work in isolation so having a separate space to come to talk about problems they have encountered in work is helpful. “It helps people gain insights and be more effective,” she says.

Dunne works with two other supervisors – Bríd Cummins and Debbie Moore – in a supervisory consultancy in which they offer either individual or group sessions. “People come for a session or two and see how they work with the supervisor. If there isn’t a clash of personalities, they contract to have six sessions. Sometimes, people go on to stay with the same supervisor for years.

“For others, a facilitated supervisory group offers them more insight and expertise of the other members as well as the chance to observe the group dynamics,” she explains.

Some professions such as career guidance and marriage guidance counsellors have a mandatory obligation for supervised practice. However, others choose to self-fund supervision. “It’s something that is growing in popularity, especially cross-professional supervision. We are finding more teachers and social workers contacting us,” says Dunne.

“In the past, people may have sought out someone when they were in a crisis. But, supervision is not just for times of struggle. It can prevent a crisis situation from developing,” she says.

Supervision is also being used in the corporate world. Bríd Cummins argues that while the majority of professionals have skills and knowledge necessary for their work, they lack emotional intelligence or maturity.

“Most people ignore the emotional issues or pretend they aren’t there until they become big issues and then they have strategies for them. But if they were able to experience, understand and empathise with the emotional issues, they will find ways of dealing with them better,” she explains.

“Supervisory consultancy gives business people a supportive space to reflect on what I call the symptoms of organisations – boredom, fatigue, absenteeism, lack of confidence in workers – and see what’s behind them.”

How it works

Production manager: A production manager comes to see a supervisor because he is irritated by a worker who doesn’t listen to instructions and acts like a know-it-all. He feels disrespected in his management role and needs to reflect on his work. He discovers that the worker, in fact, is behaving in a defensive manner because he feels inadequate when he is asked to do certain things and needs to be encouraged to participate more.

When the manager begins to see the situation from the worker’s perspective, he learns to empathise with him and the worker in turn becomes more open to new suggestions.

School principal: A school principal has a relational style of leadership and uses a consultative approach with his staff. However, he is struggling with one staff member who is using bullying tactics with others at meetings to go against the principal. Through work with a supervisor, he learns that his belief system has prevented him from being more authoritative due to his authoritarian upbringing. He learns that he needs to access different styles of leadership in different situations.

Psychotherapist: A psychotherapist becomes irritated by a client who she describes as aggressive and pushy. Her feelings derive from anger towards her father and patriarchy in general. Through work with a supervisor, she discovers that the client too was put down and marginalised which has resulted in his behaviour. Through reflection, she returns to deal with the client with a better ability to empathise rather than react.

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has been working as a reflective supervisor for a number of years in a variety of work contexts supporting social workers, employment mediators, counsellors, health care workers, yoga teachers, managers and many others.

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John is a registered founding member of the Supervisory Association of Ireland