



Solution-Focused Supervision

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Introduction

The Solution-Focused approach builds upon clients' resources and aims to help clients achieve their preferred outcomes by evoking and co-constructing solutions to their problems (O'Connell 2001).

Solution-Focused (SF) Supervision

SF supervision validates the competence and resources of the supervisee, emphasises the importance of clear incremental goals and identifies pre-existing solutions and exceptions to problems in the supervisee's work. It focuses more on the supervisee than on the client. It attends to process from an interactional perspective, rather than from an intra-psychic one.

Wetchler (1990) describes the role of the supervisor as concentrating on what the supervisee is doing effectively, and assisting him or her to continue to do those things.

RESPECT AND CURIOSITY

A solution-focused approach emphasises the collegial aspects of the supervisory relationship. The supervisor fosters an atmosphere of mutual respect in which both parties celebrate skills, creative ideas, personal qualities and therapeutic successes. Thomas (1994) describes supervision as an 'inventive art'. Curiosity prompts the supervisor to find out how best to co-operate uniquely with this supervisee. This exploration covers the supervisee's own preferred learning styles; use of language; prior experience of effective and ineffective supervision; stage of professional development and personal qualities and circumstances.

SF supervision is essentially a collaborative partnership in which both sides take responsibility for negotiating the goals and options available. In practice, the balance of collaboration will vary, according to the level of expertise and experience of the supervisee. Resistance is viewed, not so much as a defence mechanism used by the supervisee, but rather as evidence that the supervisor needs to 'do something different.' e.g. facilitate further problem talk or increase empathy.

ONE DOWN POSITION

The supervisor, while conscious of ethical and professional responsibilities, adopts a 'one down' position in order to learn from the supervisee how to act as supervisor. The supervisor, in Cantwell's (1995) phrase 'leads from one step behind.' In practice, this means that the supervisor does not assume the role of expert in all matters, but seeks to validate expertise in the supervisee. In fact the supervisor acknowledges and celebrates skills and strengths the supervisee has which the supervisor does not have! Being a supervisor does not mean you have to be the best at everything!

The solution-focused approach does not pressurise the client or the supervisee, but instead employs creative, reflective silences in which both parties can explore possible ways forward. Such encounters develop a respectful partnership in which the central role of the practitioner receives full recognition.

The 'one down position' also helps reduce the chances of oppressive practice which is always possible, given the range of differences potentially present between supervisor and supervisee: age, gender, class, race, beliefs, sexual preference or disability.

LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

From a SF standpoint, supervision is a mutual social construction in which the meaning of language is negotiated within a specific context (Anderson 1995). There is an understanding that there is no 'one truth' about either the counselling or the supervision. There are multiple realities, voices to be heard, contexts to be respected. The supervisor will draw the worker's attention to the way he or she uses language to describe realities 'out there' as if they had independent objectivity. This sensitivity towards language can help to make the supervisee think carefully about the ways in which he or she shapes the client's problem and deals with it. It can also open up rich possibilities for understanding the many meanings that clients attach to events in their lives.

Supervision can be seen as a 'parallel process' to the work itself. If for example, a practitioner is having a problem in moving a client forward, the supervisor will use interventions such as the miracle question, to help the supervisee move on. Supervision becomes a form of reflective experiential learning for the supervisee. The supervisor models good practice.

This solution-focused template will include values, attitudes, expectations and techniques. The techniques will include - exception seeking, the miracle question and scaling.

EXCEPTION SEEKING

In this example, the supervisee had succeeded in gaining the confidence of an initially suspicious and cautious client

Supervisee: It was very hard going for the first few weeks. There were long silences that didn't feel very productive. I felt as if she was testing me out. When I started to offer suggestions, she always had some reason why she couldn't do anything.

Supervisor: You mean things got a bit easier after the first few sessions? How did that come about?

Supervisee: I stopped making suggestions, so I felt less frustrated. I told her that many people would not have coped as well as she had done. I began to compliment her on the way she was thinking about the problem and said that she would know when to do something about it.

Supervisor: It sounds as if once you made less demands on her and took a more positive view, you began to get on better with her.

Supervisee: It was really strange how the less I tried to push, the more she seemed to come out of her shell. I think she was amazed at me complimenting her.

Supervisor: Your approach seems to have opened a few doors for her. Some counsellors might have been tempted to batter the door down, but you seemed to sense it was better to back off and give her some space. Is that something you intend to continue with or even do more of?

The supervisor invites the supervisee to recall those times when, he or she managed, if only temporarily, to do something different with the client which worked. Exception seeking follows the SF principle of finding solutions more in solution, than in problem talk. Rather than analyse why things may have felt stuck (which could lead into a long speculative exploration), the supervisor helps the supervisee to reflect on those exceptions when the 'stuckness' was not there, or not there to the same degree. What was happening on those occasions? Who said what? How? What made the difference? How did it make a difference? Could this be developed? In the above example, the worker had learnt to give the client space and genuine positive feedback. This was the key that opened the door for the client.

Practitioners need to have their own skills validated and due credit given for good practice, just as they in turn give clients credit for their successes. They need to know what they did well and how they did it, in order to be able to reproduce it. SF supervision sessions are likely to begin with the question, 'What did you feel you succeeded in doing with this particular client?' (Merl 1995) Identifying competence is more likely to increase professional confidence than is a preoccupation with deficits and mistakes. If supervisees can come to believe that they are basically competent they are more likely to be receptive to new learning and more willing to experiment in their practice. They may also accept that mistakes are permissible and present opportunities for valuable learning. Practitioners who are clear about their strengths and their limitations are more likely to work within their competence.

MIRACLE QUESTION

The supervisor will use the miracle question, 'If you were working better with this client and your current difficulties had been overcome, what would be the first signs for you that a miracle had happened?'

Supervisee: My heart wouldn't sink when I saw him in the waiting room .

Supervisor: After the miracle how would you be feeling and what would you be thinking when you saw him there?

Supervisee: I would smile at him the way I do with most clients and sound a bit more enthusiastic in asking him to come in.

Supervisor: What else?

Supervisee: When he starts talking he would let me get a word in edgeways, rather than just launch into the verbal attack he usually does.

Supervisor: What difference would that make to you?

Supervisee: I'd feel I had something to offer rather than just be a dumping ground for all his complaints, without him being willing to let me help him change.

Supervisor: What else would be happening once the miracle has happened?

Supervisee: I wouldn't be feeling so weary and hopeless after seeing him.

Supervisor: How would you be feeling at the end of a session?

Supervisee: I would feel that he had worked harder than me and that it was worth while trying to help him.

Supervisor: If we were talking about this client three months from now and you were telling me things were much better, just the way you've described, how would it have come about? What would have happened to make it happen?

Supervisee: I would have found ways of keeping him on the subject and listening to what I have to say for a change.

Supervisor: I wonder how you will have managed to do that?

Supervisee: I would have an agreed agenda for a session and interrupt him once he goes off on a tangent. I also think I would give him things to do between sessions and start off a session by asking him whether he's done them or not. I think if I could get him to keep to the point most of the time I wouldn't mind if occasionally he went off on a tangent.

Supervisor: So you would have more of a structure to the session than you have at the moment?

Supervisee: I think I would have limited the sessions to less than an hour as well. Then I wouldn't feel so drained at the end of them. I think I could do a better job with him in half an hour rather than an hour.

Supervisor: That sounds as if you are thinking of ways that will help you to be more effective and to look after yourself at the same time. How will you have done this without your client feeling you are rejecting him or can't handle him?

The miracle question encourages supervisees to talk about improving their practice without feeling that they have to defend or justify themselves. The future orientation reduces the possibility of them feeling discouraged or de-skilled by past failures. As long as the supervisor moves at the right pace, the miracle question should not raise unrealistic expectations, but should relate closely to the supervisees' current level of expertise .

SCALING QUESTIONS

Scaling is used in solution-focused supervision to develop answers to the miracle question, but it can also be used at other points.

Supervisor: On a scale of 0 to 10, 10 being your effectiveness with this client after the miracle and 0 the lowest it's ever been, where would you say you are today?

- Where would you like to get to?
- What would it look like when you got there?
- What would be happening that's not happening now?
- What would have stopped happening?
- What would need to happen for that to happen?
- What would be the first thing you would do?
- What would the client notice was different?
- What would you need to remind yourself about?
- If there were set backs how would you get back on track?

The supervisor may ask scaling questions in relation to the supervisee's confidence or motivation to work more effectively with this client.

Supervisor: On a scale of 0 to 10, 0 being the lowest you can get and 10 being the highest, how confident are you that you can improve your work with this client?

- Is that good enough for you to make a start?
- If not, where would you need to get to for that to happen?
- What would be the first step for you to build up your confidence?
- What would your client notice was different about you?

In terms of motivation to change, the supervisor uses the same scale and follows it up with supplementary questions.

- Is that motivation high enough for you to make a start?
- If not, where do you need to get to?
- How could you move one point on the motivation scale?
- How would the client notice your new motivation?
- If things were to improve with this client how would it affect your work with other clients ?
- How would it affect your level of job satisfaction?

CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK

There is a legitimate place for the supervisor to encourage and compliment the counsellor on what he or she is doing well. The restorative function of supervision is very important (Inskipp and Proctor 1989). Supervision should re-charge the batteries, stimulate the brain cells and empower the worker.

GOALS

Solution focused work stresses the importance of negotiating a clear picture of specific outcomes to result from the work. Both parties monitor whether clear and realistic goals are being set with the client and whether progress is being made towards achieving them. Perhaps one of the most useful ways a SF approach can help supervisees is in the focus on endings. It aims to have a clear sight of the ending from the very beginning. This decreases the chances of the work finishing abruptly or drifting. Using a scaling question, for example, might reveal that the client expects the counselling to finish when he or she moves from two to five. In supervision the worker can focus on how they are progressing towards these goals,

how they will recognise the signs they are getting there and how to stop when they have been reached.

CONCLUSION

The solution-focused approach with its emphasis on building a respectful, collaborative relationship, its affirmation of the supervisees' competence and its attention to client goals is a useful addition to the repertoire of any supervisor.

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