

Courage in Supervision

By Elizabeth Kovacs

The author completely rewrote her article after one of the diploma days and having the courage to be vulnerable with her peers. She describes the conditions which create 'fertile ground' for growth, development and the courage to be truly ourselves – so vital for supervision and, indeed, life.

This article has been writing itself in my mind in the last 42 hours. It started to emerge towards the end of the penultimate day of the diploma in supervision course on Saturday 13 July 2019. It appeared to be busily 'typing' in my mind on that same night as I lay in bed, then on Sunday morning, Sunday night and this morning. There seemed to be an urgency to write this down in a way that I have never before experienced, and certainly not as a response to a course requirement for a piece of written work. I had plans yesterday, so it was impossible to start notating the thoughts in my mind.

This experience is all rather new and I'm not sure how it's going to go. I am hoping I can remember all the inspiring thoughts I had as I rested in bed. At this point, I don't even know if I am going to submit this as an article in place of my first article, but find I don't care; I'm going to write it anyway because, as I say, it's writing itself on my mind and I think perhaps, whatever 'it' is, wants this put 'out there'.

Furthermore, I am writing this not with others in mind, though I would be delighted to think that others might be interested enough to read it, find it helpful even, or that it might resonate with

them in some way. If I were to start wondering what others might think of this, what they might disagree with or criticise, it wouldn't be my article, written from my heart.

On that penultimate day I sat listening to my peers voice their worst fears about reading out loud, to the nine other people present, a short piece from their article. Each of us had at least one thing; an old message from childhood, a deeply held belief about ourselves, the memory of a shaming or painful experience, a defining word or statement, a comparison to someone 'better', that seemed to emerge or play out in the background and caused us to feel 'less than', not good enough, unimportant or lacking in some significant way.

I was struck by the courage each of us needed to firstly voice what we feared would happen, and in some cases, express grief, shed tears, face the possibility of shame, ridicule, dismissal or not being heard and, finally, the courage to expose ourselves in our written offerings – for these were not academic pieces drawn from extensive reading by 'experts' or eminent professionals in the field. Each of these articles were written

from personal experiences, innermost thoughts and musings, as I am aiming to do as I write.

Often and understandably, we defend against those painful and shameful feelings by ensuring we avoid any behaviours that might cause a repetition of these emotions, thus closing down a part of ourselves and only presenting those that we believe will be found acceptable by others. Like the moon, we only see the side on which the sun is shining, whilst the dark side remains unseen.

I went to bed that night with a smile on my face having had a lovely and satisfying day. At least one other person expressed similar sentiments as they were leaving. This has led me to think about the conditions that led to this intimate sharing. I've concluded that *safety* was a significant ingredient. I would go so far as to say safety is a *necessary* factor in creating an environment in which a person, be they a therapy client or supervisee, will risk showing their vulnerable side, voice innermost thoughts, admit to fear, and be truly and fully themselves. In such an environment, true and honest psychological or emotional contact can be made. Surely this is something we all long for, are 'hard-wired' for. We pursue friendship, partners, the company of others, join clubs, social and religious groups to satisfy this need and to gain a sense of belonging.

When we lived primitive lives, being rejected from the tribe would mean certain death since we were dependent on others to meet our basic needs for food, shelter, clothing etc. – in other words, our survival. We will do anything to remain in contact with others. In childhood we fear abandonment, and so we adapt to the needs and demands of those we are dependent upon and may deny our natural selves, believe the lies we are told about ourselves, and adapt to fit in and survive.

Last Saturday triggered memories of my six years in therapy with a particularly skilled therapist, Fran, who would occasionally run 3-day 'marathon' group therapy weekends with her husband. Having already established a strong therapeutic bond with Fran, and with whom I felt accepted me, didn't judge me, offered unconditional positive regard and frequently demonstrated empathy, I found myself willing to take the risk of putting myself in the middle of the group and do the sometimes 'messy' cathartic

work I needed to deal with my 'stuff' and to move towards healing and growth.

As a supervisor of counsellors-in-training and those who have not been practising very long, I am wondering how I can create the conditions where they feel able to bring their whole selves to our sessions, where they can admit to mistakes, vulnerabilities, gaps in knowledge, doubts, lack of confidence and being 'stuck', feeling de-skilled and just not knowing what to do.

One volunteer counsellor-in-training and supervisee of mine comes to mind – D, a 37 year old woman who will qualify this summer having spent two years as a bereavement counsellor seeing two clients a week. Each fortnight, she reports on how everything is going very well and her client is making progress. To listen to her you would think she had been doing this for decades and never makes any mistakes or has any doubts. It's as if she is always in a state of 'conscious competence'.

After 25 years as a counsellor, I have a handful of issues I want to discuss and explore and get my supervisor's thoughts on, as well as dipping in and out of 'conscious incompetence', and 'conscious competence'. I believe my growth and development as a counsellor have been as a result of both counselling experience *and* supervision. Yet D only reports on some content and progress. I suspect she may be quite defended, possibly against criticism, being seen as not fully competent or not good enough, or perhaps she fears that if she admits to any difficulties, she'll be asked to leave. I have been wondering and seeking advice on how to approach this with D, and feel an amount of trepidation in doing so.

I can remember as a student counsellor feeling scared of being seen to make mistakes, and being told I was not good enough. I wanted to qualify as a counsellor, and didn't want to be thrown off the course. It wasn't until after qualifying and 'making the grade' that I changed to a supervisor I could trust, and that I felt courageous enough to admit to mistakes, seek help and advice, voice doubts and be truly honest and real, thereby growing as a counsellor.

So, what creates a sense of safety? I believe that developing trust creates a sense of safety, and I

maintain that safety and trust together give our supervisees the courage to be truly themselves.

I wish to draw on what Carl Rogers called the 'Core Conditions' which he believed were necessary for therapeutic growth to occur. The title of one of his books, *On Becoming a Person*, reflects and summarises his aim of therapy, which is to help someone become themselves. I believe that in order for supervisees to grow as counsellors/therapists, the same conditions are needed in the supervisory relationship. These are:

- 1 Unconditional Positive Regard (UPR)
- 2 Congruence
- 3 Empathy

When I have experienced UPR, I have known that irrespective of what I say or do or express, I will still be seen as an 'OK' person by the other – not that they will necessarily agree with me or like what I say or do, but that they will still find me acceptable; they won't judge or criticise me but will continue in a positive relationship with me. As such, I will be able to relax and freely share my 'self' with them without having to use defensive behaviours or hide parts of me.

When I am being congruent, I am being truly myself, not hiding behind a professional persona, for instance, or pretending to be or feel something I'm not. To allow myself to be congruent, I need to be fully accepting of myself, offer myself UPR, and by doing so, model congruence to my supervisees and, hopefully, create an atmosphere of safety and trust. In my experience of groups, people often wait for someone else to open up before they venture to do so themselves.

Perhaps sometimes, courage is needed before safety and trust are established, in order for that safety and trust to be experienced. I would say that this is what happened on that diploma day on 13

July. A significant contributing factor was the ethos of the two leaders, a married couple whom I had experienced as being congruent, respectful, accepting and empathic.

Empathy is often mistaken for compassion, caring or sympathy. These are certainly qualities one would expect to find in a therapist, but I believe empathy is a much deeper quality. Empathy says, 'I have stepped into your world and seen it through your eyes, and I understand or can imagine how you feel and why you feel it'. I know that when I am feeling empathic, I cannot also feel critical or judgemental; it's as if empathy cancels out both of these, and I believe clients and supervisees alike can sense this.

I have described above the conditions which create 'fertile ground' for growth, development and the courage to be truly and fully ourselves. I have explained the 'what'; the 'how' is something for us as supervisors to apply in our unique and individual way.

About the contributor

Elizabeth's background is in Education, initially in Modern Languages Teaching and then Special Needs. After gaining a qualification in Personnel Management, she worked in Human Resources in both the public and private sectors. She then returned to Education in a Welfare role whilst studying for a counselling qualification which she gained in 1994. Since then, Elizabeth has worked as counsellor in the following services: CRUSE Bereavement Care, the NHS, Local Government, Youth Counselling, Smoking Cessation and School Counselling. Elizabeth is currently supervisor for bereavement counselling services in London and a Youth Counselling Service, and has a private counselling and supervision practice.